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Research Paper

Rethinking Lajjā: Shame, Virtue, and Social Life

Anushka Singh[1], Eshita Kandpal[1], Anushka Raizada[1]*

ABSTRACT

Lajjā, often translated as "shame" or "modesty," is a central yet under-theorized emotion in South Asian contexts. Drawing from classical texts, philosophical traditions, and ethnographic accounts, this article examines lajjā as both an embodied practice and a moral compass. In Hindu philosophical discourse, lajjā emerges as a paradox: excluded from the Nāṭyaśāstra's list of primary emotions yet indispensable in scriptural traditions such as the Bhagavad Gītā and Durgā Saptashatī, where it regulates conduct and affirms dharma. Ethnographic studies from India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh illustrate how lajjā is embodied through modest comportment, caregiving, and relational shame, disproportionately shaping women's experiences while also extending to men's negotiations of sexuality and honor. Feminist critiques highlight its role in policing female bodies and sustaining patriarchal hierarchies, yet other accounts emphasize its ambivalence as both a disciplinary mechanism and a cultural resource for resilience, negotiation, and ethical growth. By synthesizing textual, cultural, and psychological perspectives, this article argues that lajjā is best understood not as a direct equivalent of Western shame but as a dynamic cultural system that regulates moral life and sustains social order in South Asia.

Keywords: *Lajjā, Emotion and Culture, Ethnographic Studies, Indian Psychology, Cultural Psychology*

Emotions are universal features of human life, yet their nature, meaning, and expression are profoundly shaped by the philosophical and cultural frameworks within which they are experienced. In psychology, dominant theories of emotion have often emerged from Western paradigms that foreground the individual self, internal appraisal processes, and neurobiological mechanisms (Ekman, 1973; Lazarus, 1991). While such models have significantly advanced our understanding, they tend to underrepresent perspectives in which emotions are embedded in collective, relational, and spiritual contexts. The Indian tradition offers one such distinct perspective, integrating philosophy, aesthetics, and religious practice into a coherent framework for understanding emotional life (Ramaprasad, 2013; Misra & Ramanathan, 2024).

Indian thought doesn't isolate emotion as mere affect; rather, it situates emotion within the moral structure of the self, where the interplay of ego (ahaṃkāra) and desire serves as both the generator of suffering and a site for ethical cultivation and transformation (Bilimoria, 1995). The Indian philosophical tradition thus frames emotion through the **ego-desire**

[1]Independent Researcher
*Corresponding Author

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dynamic: emotions emerge from the ego's attachment to the world and its inherent sense of incompleteness, triggering desires that birth pleasure or pain. Patanjali, for instance, sees suffering (duḥkha) as a product of ignorance (avidyā) regarding the true Self (ātman), with the ego clinging to the sensory world (Ramaprasad, 2013). Classical texts assert that desires are the root of mental agitation, with unfulfilled desires giving rise to anger (krodha), jealousy (asūyā), and sorrow (duḥkha), while fulfilled desires can foster joy (sukha) but also breed greed (lobha) and attachment (Rao, 2002).

Central to classical Indian aesthetic and emotional theory is **Bharata's concept of rasa**, outlined in the *Nāṭyaśāstra* (circa 200 BCE–200 CE). Rasa transforms emotions into refined aesthetic flavor that are shared and felt communally through artistic and performative act. The Nāṭyaśāstra delineates eight principal emotions, known as sthāyibhāvas ("permanent states"): love (śṛṅgāra), laughter (hāsya), sorrow (karuṇa), anger (raudra), heroism (vīra), fear (bhayānaka), disgust (bībhatsa), and wonder (adbhuta). Later commentators, notably Abhinavagupta, added a ninth: peace (śānta). These are distinguished from vyabhicāribhāvas, or transitory emotions, which serve to modulate and enrich the main emotional state. Ramaprasad (2013) emphasizes that rasa enables the ego to distance itself from mundane concerns, allowing aesthetic relishing to become a means of transformation by elevating emotional experience beyond personal attachment. This transformative potential finds a direct parallel in the domain of **religious devotion**. Through devotional bhāva, the ego's desire is not extinguished but redirected toward the sacred, facilitating spiritual communion. Sri Aurobindo's integral yoga deepens this transformation by refusing to suppress emotions; instead, he advocates their sublimation into spiritual consciousness. Desire and affective life, once aligned with higher consciousness, become drivers of inner evolution reshaped from mundane attachments into spiritual energies.

Emotions and Culture

Across different traditions, the **cultural variability** in understanding emotion stands evident. Indian frameworks challenge the universality posits of Western conceptions by presenting emotion as deeply relational, aesthetic, and moral. Bilimoria and Wenta's edited volume (2020) *Emotions in Indian Thought-Systems* points out how emotions are historically and culturally constructed phenomena, not universal truths.

While certain aspects of emotional expression and recognition may be universal, the conceptualization, regulation, and valuation of emotions are deeply embedded in cultural contexts (Mesquita & Walker, 2003). In much of Asian cultural thought emotions are understood as relational phenomena that arise and are sustained within the network of interpersonal and social relationships (Uchida et al., 2004). This contrasts with dominant Western psychological models, which have historically prioritized individual experience and internal emotional processing (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). This cultural divergence influences both the meaning attributed to emotions and the norms governing their expression.

Cultural psychology moves beyond cross-cultural comparisons to examine how individuals' subjective worlds are shaped by their cultural milieu. Emotions are not simply biological givens but are embedded in culturally specific worldviews, moral systems, and social practices (Shweder et al, 2008). In this sense, the Indian conceptualization of emotions shaped by Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain philosophical traditions cannot be fully understood without reference to concepts such as dharma (duty), karma (action and consequence), and

moksha (liberation). One example of a culturally embedded emotion is ***lajjā***, a term often inadequately translated as "shame" or "modesty."

Menon and Shweder's (1994) ethnographic study in the Indian context revealed that lajja encompasses a range of meanings: knowing one's rightful place in society, conducting oneself with dignity, fulfilling social role obligations, and showing deference to social superiors. Far from being a purely negative or inhibiting emotion, *lajja* functions as a moral and social regulator, promoting harmonious relationships and social order. The complexity of *lajjā* illustrates the limitations of translating culturally specific emotions into Western categories. While Western conceptions of "shame" often emphasize personal failure or social stigma, *lajjā* can be experienced as virtuous and socially valued. Its expression may involve behaviors such as lowering the gaze, remaining silent in the presence of elders, or avoiding self- assertion in certain contexts, actions that would not necessarily be associated with shame in a Western framework.

This article approaches *lajjā* as a multidimensional cultural construct that resists reduction to Western categories of shame and guilt and frames *lajjā* as both an **emotion and a cultural system** which allows for an analysis that is simultaneously philosophical, highlighting *lajjā*'s role in classical discourses on dharma and mokṣa, and ethnographic, tracing how it is embodied, transmitted, and reinterpreted across generations. At the same time, feminist critiques sharpen the analysis by exposing how *lajjā* is implicated in gendered hierarchies while also being strategically mobilized as a resource for resilience and negotiation. By synthesizing these approaches, this article positions *lajjā* as an exemplary case for rethinking the relationship between emotion, morality, and culture.

Lajjā in Classical and Philosophical Tradition

Within the classical and philosophical traditions of India, *lajjā* emerges as a deeply layered construct that intertwines ethical restraint, social responsibility, and spiritual orientation. Far from being reducible to the Western categories of shame or guilt, *lajjā* occupies a distinctive position as both a moral compass and a cultivated virtue. In Sanskrit and Hindi traditions, dictionary meanings and scriptural usages point to its dual internal and external dimensions, synthesizing self-regulation with social responsibility (Bhawuk, 2017). Its centrality is further illuminated in texts like the *Bhagavad Gītā* and the *Durgā Saptashatī*, where *lajjā* is represented as an indispensable guide in discerning what ought to be done and avoided, aligning personal conduct with the pursuit of dharma (Bhawuk, 2017). *lajjā* has been described as a positive moral resource, cultivated through cultural socialization and personal practice, which directs individuals toward what ought to be done while restraining them from actions that ought not to be pursued (Bhawuk, 2023). This dual function, prescriptive and proscriptive illustrates its role as an ethical compass deeply embedded in the Indian worldview.

Scriptural traditions

Scriptural traditions provide a profound insight into the significance of *lajjā* as a moral and spiritual guide. In the *Bhagavad Gītā*, discussions of *karma* (actions that ought to be done), *akarma* (inaction or abstention), and *vikarma* (prohibited actions) present a complex framework for understanding human conduct. These distinctions emphasize the difficulty of discerning what is appropriate, even for the wise, and place moral responsibility at the heart of human life. Within this framework, *lajjā* functions as an internal compass, urging individuals to avoid transgressions and to act in accordance with dharma, thereby enabling wise decision-making and ensuring that one's actions are aligned with a higher moral order

(Bhawuk, 2017). The text makes clear that without such guidance, individuals can become easily confused about the nature of action, and *lajjā* serves as a virtue that curbs desires and fosters equanimity, allowing for the fulfillment of duties without attachment.

The *Durgā Saptashatī* (aka the *Devī Māhātmyam* and embedded within the *Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa)* offers another classical articulation of *lajjā*, situating it in the realm of divine feminine power. Composed between the fourth and sixth centuries CE, the text is among the earliest to depict Ultimate Reality in explicitly feminine terms, where goddesses embody both creative and destructive powers. Within this tradition, *lajjā* is closely associated with restraint and moral responsibility, reflecting the balance of strength and modesty embodied by the goddess (Bhawuk, 2017). In contrast to discourses on *mokṣa*, which emphasize renunciation, the *Durgā Saptashatī* locates *lajjā* firmly within worldly engagement, where it regulates behavior, tempers impulses, and preserves social and cosmic harmony. It is both an internal virtue cultivated through self-regulation and an externalized principle of moral restraint that links human action with divine order (Bhawuk, 2017).

Philosophical Tradition

Yet, the philosophical presence of *lajjā* is marked by a profound paradox. In the *Nāṭya Śāstra*, the canonical treatise on dramaturgy and aesthetics, *lajjā* is conspicuously absent from the list of primary emotions (*rasas*). This omission is striking because *lajjā* holds such a prominent role in moral and social life in Hindu traditions. Scholars have suggested that this absence reveals the text's deeper philosophical orientation toward *mokṣa*, the transcendental goal of liberation, rather than the worldly concerns of moral restraint and social harmony (Menon, 2024). Whereas *rasas* like *śṛṅgāra* (love), *raudra* (anger), and *karuṇa* (compassion) are framed within the aesthetic pursuit of emotional experience that leads ultimately to spiritual insight, *lajjā* is firmly tied to the temporal world. It embodies the regulation of behavior, the curbing of desires, and the preservation of social order, dimensions that are more closely aligned with *dharma* than with transcendence. This philosophical tension underscores a duality at the heart of Hindu thought: the simultaneous validity of *dharma*, which affirms the world through moral responsibility and ethical conduct, and *mokṣa*, which transcends the world through renunciation. *Lajjā* belongs squarely within the sphere of *dharma*. It regulates conduct within the social order, functions as a virtue cultivated in everyday life, and reinforces the interconnectedness of self, community, and cosmic law. Its exclusion from the *Nāṭya Śāstra* thus does not signal insignificance, but rather reflects the treatise's prioritization of the transcendental over the temporal.

At the same time, the very paradox of its omission reveals how Hindu philosophy accommodates plurality. Just as Hindu traditions articulate multiple paths to liberation, *jñāna mārga* (the path of knowledge), *karma mārga* (the path of action), and *bhakti mārga* (the path of devotion) they also recognize the coexistence of worldly affirmation and world renunciation (Menon, 2024). *Lajjā*, though absent from the aesthetic canon, represents a necessary moral emotion that sustains life within the world even as the philosophical tradition points toward liberation beyond it. Its presence in cultural practices, scriptural traditions, and everyday life demonstrates its enduring philosophical relevance as a mediator between human conduct and cosmic order.

Ethnographic Studies of lajjā

Far more than a fleeting emotion, *lajjā* functions as an embodied practice, a relational orientation, and a moral compass that regulates social interaction. Ethnographic studies are particularly valuable in exploring *lajjā* because they capture how individuals and communities live and negotiate this phenomenon in everyday contexts. Unlike abstract philosophical or textual analyses (Bhawuk, 2017, 2023; Menon, 2024), ethnographic accounts situate *lajjā* in lived experiences highlighting how it is embodied, contested, and transmitted across generations. These studies illuminate how *lajjā* operates not merely as an individual emotional state but as a social practice that sustains cultural codes, reinforces gender hierarchies, and provides resources for negotiating stigma.

Across Indian, Sri Lankan, and broader South Asian ethnographies, several key themes emerge regarding the cultural role of *lajjā*. **Embodiment,** consistently performed through bodily comportment, including lowered eyes, subdued gestures, modest dress, and soft speech (Sinha & Chauhan, 2013; Abeyasekera & Marecek, 2019). **Gendered regulation,** women disproportionately bear the responsibility of embodying *lajjā* , positioning their bodies as sites of community honor (Campbell, 2022; Abubakar & Ehsani, 2025). **Relational dynamics**, extending to caregiving roles, family reputation, and interdependent social ties (Campbell, 2022). **Moral- religious anchoring,** *lajjā* as a virtue, gives spiritual legitimacy to its social enforcement (Bhawuk, 2017, 2023; Menon, 2024). **Negotiation and resistance,** women may adopt it to protect themselves or assert dignity, while simultaneously critiquing its restrictive aspects (Lindo, 2013).

Gendered Embodiment of lajjā in Indian Womanhood

Indian ethos consistently emphasizes the centrality of *lajjā* in defining femininity and womanhood. Sinha and Chauhan (2013), through interviews and narrative accounts, demonstrate that lajjā operates as a cultural marker of the "good woman." Modesty in speech, lowered gaze, subdued bodily movement, and careful dress are repeatedly cited by women as expected signs of *lajjā*. These embodied practices signify respectability and serve to distinguish honorable women from those deemed shameless (besharam). Notably, the study highlights the intergenerational negotiations of *lajjā*. Older women often regard *lajjā* as inseparable from female identity, whereas younger women voice ambivalence, at times perceiving it as a constraint on personal autonomy. Yet younger women also report performing *lajjā* strategically in public contexts to safeguard family reputation. It is positively valued, often likened to a "lovely ornament" adorning women or to the *touch-me-not* plant that withdraws gracefully upon contact both metaphors emphasizing modesty, refinement, and self-regulation (Menon & Shweder, 1994). Such metaphors reveal the idealization of *lajjā* as a virtue that sustains civility and collective harmony.

Lindo's (2013) feminist analysis complements these findings by showing that *lajjā* is neither wholly imposed nor wholly resisted. Instead, women navigate its ambivalence: some interpret *lajjā* as protective or dignifying, while others experience it as oppressive. Ethnographically, this duality emerges in accounts of women consciously deploying *lajjā* to deflect male harassment, while simultaneously resenting its restrictive force. Thus, *lajjā* in the Indian context appears as both a disciplinary structure and a cultural resource, shaping women's possibilities of agency within patriarchal norms.

Caregiving and Relational Shame in Sri Lanka

The ethnographic literature on Sri Lanka demonstrates that *lajjā* extends beyond gendered comportment to encompass caregiving, disability, and interdependent social relationships.

Campbell (2022) documents the experiences of Sri Lankan mothers raising children with disabilities. These mothers often encounter social stigma, with neighbors and relatives interpreting disability as evidence of misfortune or karmic burden. In such contexts, *lajjā* is not limited to women's personal comportment but is borne collectively as a moral and social weight. Rather than passively internalizing shame, many mothers reframe *lajjā* by emphasizing caregiving as a duty that brings dignity and honor. Expressive of the relational nature of *lajjā* : mothers experience shame on behalf of their children and extended families, while simultaneously transforming that shame into a moral framework for resilience.

Abeyasekera and Marecek (2019) further extend the Sri Lankan ethnographic focus to young women's everyday practices of *lajjā* . Through observation and interviews, they describe how adolescent girls learn to embody *lajjā* via voice modulation, lowered gaze, modest clothing, and restrained bodily movements. These practices are reinforced not only by families but also by peers and community surveillance. Deviations are often met with gossip and censure, positioning nonconformity as a threat to both individual and family honor. This reveal how *lajjā* in Sri Lanka is profoundly relational and shapes caregiving roles, regulates youthful femininity, and structures the boundaries of acceptable conduct within families and communities.

Linguistic Codifications of Honor and Shame in South Asia

Linguistic research explains how the semantics of *lajjā* itself provides insight into its cultural role. Abubakar and Ehsani (2025), in their comparative study of South Asian languages, demonstrate that words for shame and honor, such as *lajjā, sharam, izzat* carry overlapping meanings that shape behavior. Unlike English, where "shame" denotes an internal feeling, South Asian terms for shame often imply public visibility. Their study, based on interviews and textual analysis, shows that the semantic field of *lajjā* encompasses humility, modesty, and social deference. Importantly, the absence of *lajjā* (besharmi) is linguistically and culturally marked as dishonor, with strong moral connotations.

The evidences indicates that linguistic categories are not neutral descriptors but active cultural scripts guiding behavior, particularly for women, who are positioned as custodians of family honor. This linguistic perspective explains why interviewees often describe *lajjā* in contradictory ways: as a sign of virtue and moral strength, yet simultaneously as a source of restriction. The polyvalence of the term reflects its embeddedness in a larger cultural framework where shame is inseparable from social morality and honor.

Religious and Moral Framings of lajjā in Orissa

An influential account of *lajjā* comes from Orissa, where Menon and Shweder (1994) analyzed the cultural meanings attached to the iconic representation of Goddess Kālī biting her tongue. Based on narratives collected from 92 Oriya informants, their study showed how the gesture of tongue-biting functions as both a facial expression of *lajjā* and an idiomatic apology signaling the recognition of transgression. The mythic story underlying this symbol recounts how Kālī, in a moment of destructive rage, accidentally stepped on Śiva. Realizing the gravity of her act, she restrained herself by biting her tongue, embodying the self-regulation and respectful restraint central to *lajjā*.

The narratives reveal that in the Oriya cultural context, *lajjā* is not merely a private emotion but a moral state and a performative act that sustains social harmony. By using Guttman scaling, Menon and Shweder demonstrated the normative meanings attached to this expression, highlighting how *lajjā* operates as a culturally sanctioned mechanism for

tempering rage, preserving hierarchy, and reaffirming social order. The ethnographic example underscores how a local cultural symbol, deeply embedded in mythology and ritual practice, illuminates the distinctive emotional functioning of *lajjā* in South Asia, emphasizing its positive role in civility and moral life.

Lajjā in Kinship and Marriage Practices

Kinship structures in South Asia position women as bearers of family honor, where *lajjā* functions as a central moral code (Sinha & Chauhan, 2013). For daughters, brides, and wives, modest comportment, controlled speech, and avoidance of overt sexuality are markers of virtue. Married women are expected to demonstrate *lajjā* in relation to their in-laws, particularly in maintaining silence or deference before elders. In North Indian households, *lajjā* emerges as a performative practice, for example, brides entering new households often veil their faces and avoid direct eye contact with male affines, a gesture that signifies both modesty and obedience (Sinha & Chauhan, 2013). This embodiment of *lajjā* affirms kinship hierarchies and reproduces the cultural expectation that a woman's virtue is inseparable from her family's honor.

Marriage ceremonies are often sites where *lajjā* is enacted symbolically and ritually. Bhawuk (2017) emphasizes that *lajjā* is both a personal disposition and a cultural script that structures rites of passage. In Hindu marriage rituals, brides often display coyness, lowered gazes, or hesitant gestures, which are praised as signs of *lajjā* . These performances are not incidental but are socially anticipated and celebrated. Menon (2024), analyzing the Nāṭyaśāstra , notes the absence of *lajjā* as a "basic emotion" in classical dramaturgy, suggesting that lajjā in the Hindu moral code is less about individual psychology and more about sustaining social hierarchies. The bride's modesty is thus not a reflection of inner feeling but a ritualized enactment of morality.

Negotiating Lajjā in Contemporary Marriage

Urban ethos reveal that young women increasingly negotiate *lajjā* within modern marriage markets, balancing traditional expectations with aspirations for autonomy. For instance, the reluctance to engage in open premarital romantic relationships in many Indian families is framed in terms of *lajjā*, where women risk being seen as "shameless" if they deviate from conventional norms (Sinha & Chauhan, 2013). Yet, many women subvert these norms through coded behaviors, suggesting that *lajjā* is not merely imposed but also actively negotiated.

Lajjā and Gender

lajjā holds a unique place in cultural life. Women's lowered gaze, modest attire, and soft speech, are often cited as outward expressions of *lajjā*, yet the phenomenon also extends to men, who may experience shame in relation to sexuality, social belonging, or the preservation of familial honor. Scholars have long recognized that *lajjā* cannot be understood in isolation from gender.

Qamar (2015) argues, in Indian popular culture, *lajjā* is primarily associated with women's honor, positioning their bodies as the symbolic carriers of family respectability. Similarly, Begum and Barn (2019) show how discourses surrounding lingerie and sexuality reproduce rape myths, pointing at the pervasive control of women's bodies under the guise of modesty and shame. For men, however, experiences of *lajjā* have been less documented, though Chakraborty (2017) provides valuable insights into the ways men who have sex with men in India negotiate shame, intimacy, and desire.

Women's Embodiment of Lajjā

One of the most consistent findings across South Asian ethnographies is that *lajjā* is embodied most visibly in women, both in their personal comportment and in the ways it is transmitted across generations. Qamar's (2015) study of Indian popular culture highlights how *laj*—a cognate of *lajjā*—is presented as the defining quality of virtuous womanhood. Popular films, songs, and television serials repeatedly portray the "ideal woman" as one who displays modesty in clothing, speech, and behavior. In this context, *lajjā* functions as a cultural signifier of purity and respectability, reinforcing the association of female honor with family honor. Begum and Barn (2019) extend this analysis by examining consumer practices in postcolonial urban India, showing that women purchasing lingerie often encounter moral suspicion, as such commodities are associated with sexual availability and "shamelessness." This illustrates how *lajjā* extends beyond bodily comportment to shape women's negotiations with modernity, while also sustaining rape myths that rest on assumptions about women's failure to embody modesty.

Other ethnographic accounts reveal the relational and caregiving dimensions of *lajjā*. Campbell's (2022) study in Sri Lanka found that mothers of children with disabilities experienced *lajjā* when their children's conditions were stigmatized as karmic retribution or family misfortune. Yet many mothers reinterpreted this shame as a moral resource, embracing caregiving as a dignified duty. Similarly, Subah's (2021) study in Bangladesh illustrates how women embody *lajjā* in relation to spatial and class hierarchies. Modesty norms regulating female mobility often led women to hesitate in fetching water from public places. At the same time, performances of *lajjā*—such as adopting modest, non-threatening petitionary roles—were strategically mobilized to negotiate with authorities, suggesting that embodiment of *lajjā* is not only about restriction but also about navigating structural inequalities.

These embodiments of *lajjā* are reinforced and transmitted across generations through socialization, media, and everyday practices. Campbell (2022) documents how Sri Lankan mothers instilled modesty and relational shame in their daughters through lowered gaze, soft speech, and restrained bodily movement—practices taught less through explicit instruction than through modeling and correction. Subah (2021) similarly observes how older Bangladeshi women regulate younger women's mobility under the guise of *lajjā*, thereby reinforcing class and gender boundaries. However, younger women often reinterpret these restrictions, strategically adopting modesty as a resource for collective action. Popular culture also plays a role in intergenerational transmission, with Qamar (2015) showing how films and television continue to present the "lajjā-bearing woman" as an ideal, embedding norms of shame into cultural imaginaries for younger audiences.

Male Experiences of Lajjā

Although lajjā is frequently framed as a feminine quality, men also experience shame and modesty in ways that are culturally significant. Abubakar and Ehsani's (2025) linguistic analysis shows that terms for shame (lajjā, sharam, izzat) are not exclusively gendered in South Asian languages; rather, they function as relational categories tied to honor. For men, shame often emerges in contexts of failed provision, sexual transgression, or public humiliation. Unlike women, whose lajjā is performed through embodied modesty, men's shame is frequently tied to social status and ability to uphold familial honor.

Chakraborty's (2017) ethnography of men who have sex with men in India provides rare insights into male experiences of lajjā . In this community, shame is intimately linked with

secrecy, stigma, and the negotiation of desire. Men describe concealing their sexual practices from family and society due to fear of dishonor. Yet, paradoxically, many also experience intimacy and solidarity through shared experiences of shame. Chakraborty highlights how lajjā structures both the repression and the possibility of same-sex desire in India, revealing its ambivalence for men as well as women.

This strand of research underscores that while men may not be subject to the same bodily codes of modesty as women, lajjā still plays a vital role in regulating male sexuality, masculinity, and social belonging. The gendered dynamics differ—men's lajjā is tied more to honor, secrecy, and provision—but the emotional weight of shame remains central to their identities.

Ambivalence of lajjā: Agency vs. Control

Feminist scholars critically interrogates whether *lajjā* serves primarily as a tool of patriarchal control or whether it can also function as a resource for agency and resilience. Qamar (2015) demonstrates how popular cultural representations naturalize women's shame, constructing *lajjā* as an essential feminine trait. This essentialization reinforces patriarchal narratives that equate women's worth with their capacity for modesty and self-restraint. Similarly, Begum and Barn (2019) show how consumer practices around lingerie in postcolonial India are imbued with shame, with women's bodies policed through discourses of sexuality and honor. Their analysis of rape myths further reveals how failure to conform to norms of *lajjā* is weaponized against women in cases of sexual violence, highlighting the systemic victim-blaming sustained by this cultural framework.

Yet, while feminist critiques expose how *lajjā* underwrites gendered hierarchies and entrenches surveillance of women's lives, other scholars points to its ambivalence. Bhawuk (2019) emphasizes that *lajjā* can be "learned, unlearned, and relearned," allowing individuals to reinterpret shame not merely as a disciplinary force but also as a moral compass and relational virtue. This suggests that *lajjā* has transformative potential, functioning as a cultural practice that can foster ethical growth, resilience, and dignity, even while acknowledging its restrictive aspects.

The broader ethnographic and theoretical literature underscores this ambivalence by situating *lajjā* at the intersection of control and agency. On one hand, it clearly operates as a mechanism of control. Women's mobility, consumer practices, and bodily comportment are heavily policed through appeals to modesty (Begum & Barn, 2019; Qamar, 2015), men's sexuality and honor are constrained by secrecy and stigma (Chakraborty, 2017), and intergenerational transmission reinforces patriarchal norms through surveillance of behavior (Campbell, 2022; Subah, 2021). On the other hand, *lajjā* can also be mobilized strategically as a form of agency. Campbell (2022) documents how mothers of disabled children in Sri Lanka reframed stigma into resilience, transforming shame into moral dignity, while Subah (2021) shows how Bangladeshi women used modesty as a negotiation tool when demanding access to water. Bhawuk (2019) likewise highlights shame's potential as a catalyst for ethical development, and even Chakraborty (2017) notes how shared shame can foster solidarity and intimacy among marginalized men. Agency and control are thus not mutually exclusive but coexist within the lived realities of *lajjā*.

Lajjā and Western Shame

Western shame is typically described as a painful, self-evaluative emotion triggered by personal failure, humiliation, and a threat to self-esteem (Tangney & Dearing, 2002). It is

often experienced as a private, internal sense of inadequacy that motivates avoidance or withdrawal (e.g., "I feel ashamed of my mistake") (Sedighimornani, 2018). In contrast, the Sri Lankan concept of *lajjā* (also spelled *læjja-baya*) is culturally valorized as modesty, dignity, and moral awareness rather than merely a negative effect. Empirical work on Sri Lankan women shows that *lajjā* denotes "modesty, purity, innocence, and self-effacement" and is linked to socially approved behaviour (Abeyasekera, 2019).

lajjā also functions as a regulatory mechanism within "shame cultures," where external sanctions and communal expectations shape emotional expression (Benedict, 1946). A motivational-theoretic account of shame argues that the emotion begins with behavioral inhibition (withdrawal) and can shift to activation (restorative actions) depending on relational phenomenology; this dynamic is evident in *lajja*-driven reparative practices such as public apologies or ritual purification (Sheikh, 2014).

Cross-cultural affective research shows that collectivist societies (e.g., South Asia) value low-arousal emotions and view modesty as socially desirable, whereas individualist Western cultures prize high-arousal, self-assertive emotions (differences in emotional arousal level between the East and the West) (Lim, 2016). Consequently, *lajjā* is embedded in low-arousal, relational norms that emphasise group harmony, while Western shame aligns with high-arousal self-focus.

Research on adolescent girls in Sri Lanka demonstrates that *lajja* functions as a mechanism of social control: accusations of violating propriety trigger severe reputational damage, sometimes leading to self-harm, because shame is tied to family honour and marriageability (Abeyasekera, 2019). Unmarried women facing single motherhood describe "shame-fear" (*lajja-baya*) as internalised from childhood, influencing decisions about disclosure, adoption, or employment (Jordal M., 2013). These findings illustrate that lajja operates both as a valued virtue and as a potent source of coercive pressure, making direct translation to the Western notion of shame inadequate for cross-cultural psychology.

lajjā can be expressed proactively as a sign of respect; it does not require a preceding failure. This proactive display aligns with the broader notion of "shame cultures" in which external sanctions and communal expectations shape emotional expression (Benedict, 1946). Such cultures treat shame as a regulatory tool that reinforces social norms, whereas "guilt cultures" (typical of many Western societies) rely on internal conscience (Benedict, 1946).

The translation gap is highlighted by studies comparing English "shame" with its Spanish (*vergüenza*) and Malayalam (*nanakedu*) equivalents, which reveal that Western speaker's associate shame more strongly with guilt than speakers of other languages (Kollareth, Fernandez-Dols, & Russell, 2018). These findings underscore that a literal translation of *lajjā* as "shame" obscures its positive, relational dimensions and can lead to misinterpretations in cross-cultural psychology as well as the linguistic, behavioural, and motivational distinctions demonstrate why translating lajja simply as "shame" obscures its positive, relational dimensions and can lead to misinterpretation in cross-cultural psychology.

SUMMARY

Far from being reducible to Western notions of shame or guilt, *lajjā* emerges as a multidimensional construct that intertwines morality, social order, and spiritual orientation. In scriptural traditions such as the *Bhagavad Gītā* and *Durgā Saptashatī*, *lajjā* operates as a

moral compass aligned with dharma, while its absence from the *Nāṭyaśāstra* reflects a philosophical tension between worldly affirmation and transcendental liberation. Ethnographic studies reveal how *lajjā* is embodied in women's modest comportment, caregiving, and relational negotiations, yet also extends to men's experiences of sexuality and honor. Feminist critiques points at its disciplinary power, showing how it sustains patriarchal hierarchies. At the same time, ethnographic evidence highlights its ambivalence. This coexistence of agency and control demonstrates that *lajjā* is best understood not as a static emotion but as a dynamic cultural practice that disciplines, enables, and transforms.

By foregrounding *lajjā* as both a moral virtue and a cultural inheritance, this article contributes to broader debates in cultural psychology and anthropology of emotion. It challenges universalist models by showing how indigenous concepts articulate alternative moral frameworks, emphasizing relational ethics, communal responsibility, and embodied restraint. Ultimately, *lajjā* exemplifies the ambivalence of emotions, offering a critical lens for rethinking how emotions shape identities, hierarchies, and moral life in South Asia.

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Conflict of Interest

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