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## **The Micro-Politics of Respect: Gendered Incivility, Relational Ethics, and Future-Ready Institutions in India**

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### **Abstract**

In the discourse surrounding India's developmental trajectory toward becoming a "future-ready" nation, mainstream paradigms consistently prioritize tangible metrics such as gross domestic product (GDP) growth, technological infrastructure, and macro-level educational enrollment data. However, this chapter argues that structural advancement remains fundamentally incomplete without a simultaneous evolution in institutional ethics and human values. Grounded in political science, feminist organizational theory, and post-colonial sociological literature, this study explores the phenomenon of gendered incivility within Indian professional and academic institutions. It conceptualizes incivility not as isolated interpersonal friction, but as a deliberate, covert mechanism of micro-political power designed to enforce traditional hierarchies. Unlike overt harassment, workplace incivility operates through low-intensity, ambiguous behaviors such as systemic exclusion, epistemic invalidation, tone-policing, and the devaluation of authority which grant perpetrators plausible deniability while establishing a "chilly climate" for women. By incorporating Lilia Cortina's selective incivility framework with Carol Gilligan's ethics of care and Miranda Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice, this theoretical chapter deconstructs how deeply rooted patriarchal norms intersect with caste-based stratifications in India to police gender boundaries and enact "status correction" against women. Furthermore, the analysis critiques current institutional reliance on purely legalistic, rule-based compliance mechanisms, particularly the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (POSH) framework, demonstrating their structural inadequacy in addressing the everyday erosion of dignity. Ultimately, this chapter proposes a paradigm shift toward a structural model of "relational dignity" and inclusive ethics, explicitly operationalizing the equity mandates of the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. It provides a conceptual blueprint for building active, non-co-optable civility architectures, arguing that safeguarding psychological safety and intersectional gender equity is not a secondary policy goal, but a primary ethical imperative for sustainable nation-building.

**Keywords:** Gendered Incivility, Organizational Politics, Relational Dignity, Chilly Climate, Inclusive Ethics.

## **Introduction**

### **The Macro-Paradigm Shift in Future-Ready India**

The contemporary discourse surrounding the vision of "Building a Future-Ready India" is predominantly defined by an enthusiastic focus on techno-economic transformations. National policy frameworks, most notably the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020, place significant emphasis on fostering innovation ecosystems, digitizing the economy, upgrading future skills, and enhancing the global employability of the Indian workforce (Ministry of Human Resource Development [MHRD], 2020). While these infrastructural and macroeconomic frameworks are vital for developmental acceleration, they frequently operate beneath a critical, systemic blind spot: the internal cultural and ethical health of the very institutions tasked with executing this grand vision. A nation's readiness for the future cannot be measured solely by its digital public infrastructure or market indices; it is fundamentally and inextricably rooted in the ethical architecture of its social and professional spaces.

True, sustainable development requires a rigorous alignment with core human values, chief among which is the preservation of human dignity, equity, and social justice. In the context of India's rapidly evolving workforce and academic landscape, the increasing participation of women represents a historic and vital demographic shift. The narrative of progress suggests a linear trajectory of empowerment through inclusion. Yet, empirical realities suggest a more complex picture. As women enter professional and academic spaces in unprecedented numbers, they frequently encounter deeply entrenched structural resistances. These resistances manifest not only as overt, legally recognizable discrimination but, more pervasively and insidiously, as subtle, everyday behavioral hostility.

This chapter situates itself at the intersection of gender politics and institutional ethics. It focuses on the micro-politics of organizational spaces, specifically examining the phenomenon of gendered incivility. In scholarly literature, workplace incivility is defined as low-intensity deviant behavior with an ambiguous intent to harm, acting in violation of established organizational norms of mutual respect (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). Because it operates beneath the threshold of legal misconduct or actionable HR violations, it functions as an invisible, silent drain on India's human capital. When female researchers, academics, and professionals are subjected to a continuous stream of subtle exclusions, conversational interruptions, and micro-aggressions, their capacity to innovate, lead, and contribute effectively to nation-building is systematically undermined.

By framing psychological safety, epistemic respect, and interpersonal dignity as core ethical imperatives, this analysis moves beyond standard bureaucratic metrics of success. The central thesis posits that an ethically mature, future-ready India cannot be realized through mere rule-based compliance; instead, it demands a

radical paradigm shift toward a framework of relational dignity that actively dismantles the micro-politics of gendered marginalization.

### **Conceptualizing Incivility as Micro-Political Action**

- **The Architecture of Ambiguity**

The defining characteristic of incivility is its low intensity and its characteristically ambiguous intent (Andersson & Pearson, 1999). It is precisely this structural ambiguity that renders incivility such a potent and difficult-to-eradicate mechanism of gender politics. Unlike overt acts of sexual harassment or explicit gender discrimination which are bounded by clear legal definitions and trigger punitive mechanisms, incivility leaves ample room for plausible deniability. Perpetrators can easily and convincingly dismiss their behavior as a joke, a temporary oversight, a matter of miscommunication, or even "constructive criticism," thereby shifting the burden of discomfort and paranoia onto the victim. This ambiguity protects the instigator while slowly exhausting the target.

- **Selective Incivility and the Chilly Climate**

When analyzing this behavioral phenomenon through a gendered lens, the research of Cortina (2008) introduces the vital and transformative framework of "selective incivility." Cortina's theoretical model argues that workplace incivility is rarely a random occurrence of stress-induced bad behavior; rather, it is systematically targeted at marginalized groups, particularly women and racial or caste minorities. In this view, selective incivility serves as a modern, covert vehicle for bias. In societies transitioning between traditional social hierarchies and modern professional expectations, selective incivility functions as an informal, highly effective gatekeeping mechanism.

It manifests through subtle, repetitive behavioral patterns. In academic and corporate settings, this includes consistently interrupting female colleagues during meetings (often termed 'maninterrupting'), addressing them with patronizing or overly familiar language while using formal titles for male peers, micro-managing their tasks while granting broad autonomy to male colleagues, or systematically excluding them from informal professional networks such as post-meeting discussions or social gatherings where crucial institutional knowledge and alliances are formed (Lim & Cortina, 2005).

Cumulatively, these low-intensity behaviors interact to produce what feminist scholars and organizational sociologists term a "chilly climate" within academic and professional institutions (Maranto & Griffin, 2011). A chilly climate does not announce itself through singular, explosive corporate scandals; rather, it is built incrementally through the daily erosion of a woman's professional confidence and sense of belonging. For women navigating these environments, the psychological and professional cost is severe. The constant cognitive effort required to decode

ambiguous behavior, determine intent, and manage workplace hostility results in cognitive depletion, increased burnout rates, decreased job satisfaction, and ultimately, psychological or physical withdrawal from the organization (Cortina et al., 2001; Miner et al., 2012).

- **Incivility as Covert Power Negotiation**

From a political science perspective, this dynamic must be recognized fundamentally as an exercise of micro-politics. Power within modern organizations is negotiated not only through formal organizational charts, administrative hierarchies, and policy mandates but also through the minutiae of daily interactions and spatial dominance. By subjecting women to persistent, low-level incivility, dominant groups within an institution effectively police organizational boundaries. The subtle, continuous messaging communicates to women that their presence in these spaces is conditional, their authority is inherently suspect, and their status remains peripheral to the core functioning of the institution. Consequently, incivility acts as an invisible barrier to long-term retention and leadership succession, neutralizing the progressive objectives of national gender-inclusion initiatives long before women can ascend to primary decision-making positions.

### **The Indian Institutional Context: Patriarchy, Power, and the Transitioning Workplace**

- **The Clash of Scripts: Tradition vs. Professional Authority**

The manifestation of gendered incivility within Indian professional and academic institutions cannot be analyzed in a vacuum; it is inextricably bound to the unique cultural, historical, and sociological matrices of the region. Indian organizations represent a complex intersection where modern corporate or bureaucratic structures are superimposed upon deeply rooted, traditional patriarchal and highly stratified social frameworks. This dual reality creates a distinct institutional environment where modern concepts of professional equality and meritocracy frequently clash with deeply internalized, unspoken expectations regarding gender roles and social hierarchy (John, 2008).

In many Indian workspaces and higher education institutions, traditional social norms dictate that women should embody traits of docility, deference, emotional nurturance, and domesticity. When women step into roles of professional authority, conduct independent, aggressive research, or assume leadership positions that require assertiveness and direct confrontation, they disrupt these deeply ingrained traditional scripts.

This disruption is rarely met with neutral acceptance. Instead, it frequently triggers a subconscious or conscious reactionary response from the institutional environment, manifesting as what social psychologists term "status correction" or "backlash" (Rudman & Fairchild, 2004). Incivility becomes the primary, safest

instrument for this correction. Because open hostility or explicit discriminatory blocking would violate modern organizational codes of conduct and risk public censure, actors rely on subtle behavioral policing to restore the traditional hierarchy. For example, a female department head or project manager who exerts legitimate authority or enforces deadlines may quickly be labeled as "difficult," "overly emotional," "bossy," or "aggressive" classic formulations of gendered tone-policing. These labels seek to diminish her professional standing, undermine her authority among subordinates, and force a return to compliant, less threatening gender roles.

- **The Feudal Matrix and the Caste-Gender Nexus**

Furthermore, Indian institutional structures, particularly in higher education and the public sector, are intensely hierarchical, frequently mirroring feudal power dynamics where deference to seniority and position is absolute and unquestioned. When gender intersects with this rigid hierarchy, young female professionals and researchers find themselves doubly marginalized and exceptionally vulnerable. However, a critical post-colonial analysis requires acknowledging that the deployment of incivility within Indian institutions does not operate on a monolithic, singular axis of gender. Rather, it is deeply mediated by the structural mechanics of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Rege, 1998).

In the Indian context, the baseline of patriarchy is structurally fused with caste-based stratifications. Everyday organizational incivility, micro-aggressions, and informal exclusions target women differentially based on their intersecting social coordinates. While a dominant-caste (*Savarna*) woman may face gendered tone-policing regarding her assertiveness, historically marginalized women specifically *Dalit*, *Bahujan*, and Adivasi women encounter a compounded matrix of hostility. For these women, selective incivility often manifests as subtle but regular questionings of their intellectual merit, micro-invalidations disguised as institutional curiosity, and deep social exclusion from informal networks that operate along caste-aligned, homosocial lines (Guru, 2009). The vulnerability is particularly acute in academic environments, where research scholars depend heavily on the approvals, recommendations, and goodwill of senior gatekeepers who predominantly reflect historical demographics of privilege.

This theoretical framework is firmly anchored in Indian empirical realities. The *All-India Survey on Higher Education* (AISHE) report published by the Ministry of Education highlights a significant paradox: while female student enrollment in higher education has reached record highs, achieving near parity at 47-49% across various levels, this numeric visibility drastically tapers off within the higher echelons of institutional governance. Women represent less than 20% of senior professors, directors, and vice-chancellors across public universities (Ministry of Education [MoE], 2023). This vertical segregation is further validated by the *Periodic Labour Force Survey* (PLFS), which consistently demonstrates a stagnant or depressed

Female Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) in urban areas, hovering around 22-24% despite soaring numbers of highly qualified female graduates (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation [MoSPI], 2023).

These macro-level structural bottlenecks are directly manufactured by micro-level institutional behaviors. The constant friction of daily incivility forms an invisible glass ceiling that pushes women out of the talent pipeline. Senior colleagues or administrators may employ micro-aggressions, casual condescension, intellectual appropriation, or deliberate, unexplained administrative delays as a routine method of asserting dominance. This dynamic is webbed with what Fricker (2007) terms "epistemic injustice" specifically, *testimonial injustice*, where a speaker's word is given less credibility due to prejudice against their identity. In Indian academia, a female scholar's ideas, theoretical contributions, or empirical findings may be consistently undervalued or appropriated without acknowledgment, representing a profound ethical failure that stymies innovation.

### **The Failure of Procedural Ethics and Legalistic Frameworks**

- **The Limits of POSH**

Following necessary statutory mandates, Indian institutions have established Internal Committees (IC) under the landmark Prevention of Sexual Harassment (POSH) Act of 2013. While the POSH framework represents a monumental and indispensable legislative achievement for securing women's physical safety and providing a mechanism against gross exploitation, it is structurally bounded. By design, it addresses severe, recognizable forms of sexual harassment, including explicit sexual misconduct and quid pro quo harassment. It was not intended to address the subtle, non-sexual, low-intensity behaviours that characterize workplace incivility, such as persistent exclusion, condescension, or interpersonal disrespect (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Cortina, 2008).

This reliance on purely procedural ethics creates a massive and dangerous regulatory gap. Because everyday incivility (tone-policing, exclusion, condescension) does not meet the high legal threshold of "harassment," targets are left without formal recourse, and institutions are absolved of the responsibility to intervene. This mismatch between legal compliance and ethical reality demonstrates that procedural frameworks alone cannot foster genuine human values. Procedural ethics merely formalize institutional self-protection. They treat ethical violations as isolated, individual incidents perpetrated by a few "bad apples," completely ignoring the fact that persistent incivility is a structural outcome of an unhealthy, unequal institutional culture.

- **Institutionalized Silence and the Reporting Trap**

The inadequacy of the procedural model goes beyond its legal definitions; it actively manufactures a culture of organizational silence (Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

Because incivility is low-intensity and operates with an inherently ambiguous intent, targets are trapped in a cognitive loop of self-doubt and fear. If a female junior researcher attempts to report incidents of persistent conversational exclusion, tone-policing, or subtle administrative delays to a formal committee, the institutional response is almost universally dismissive. The target is frequently told she is being "hypersensitive," "overly emotional," or unable to take constructive criticism.

Consequently, the fear of retaliation and professional isolation forces targets into absolute silence. In highly dependent academic and corporate structures, complaining about a senior colleague's minor rudeness can lead to immediate, devastating backlashes: delayed thesis evaluations, negative performance reviews, or exclusion from critical laboratory funding and corporate networks. The victim quickly realizes that the social and professional cost of reporting incivility far outweighs the cost of silent endurance. This systemic silence acts as an institutional shield, ensuring that perpetrators retain absolute plausible deniability while the institutional culture remains toxic and frozen.

### **Toward a Paradigm of Relational Dignity and Inclusive Ethics**

- **Defining Relational Dignity**

To build institutions that genuinely reflect advanced human values and are capable of sustaining high-level innovation and human capital, organizational theory and policy in India must transition toward a comprehensive framework of Relational Dignity. Relational dignity shifts the analytical and policy focus away from rigid rules and legal minimums, focusing instead on the qualitative nature of daily human interactions within a given space. It asserts that an institution's true ethical standing is not determined by its policy handbook, but by how safely, freely, and equitably its most vulnerable or marginalized members can navigate its spaces on a daily basis.

This concept is deeply grounded in the philosophical traditions of the "Ethics of Care," pioneered by feminist scholars such as Carol Gilligan (1982) and Joan Tronto (1993). In stark contrast to traditional organizational ethics (which prioritize justice, rules, and contractual obligations), relational ethics posit that human beings are fundamentally interconnected. Consequently, institutions have a profound moral obligation to foster and sustain relationships characterized by mutual respect, empathy, active support, and the mitigation of vulnerability.

- **Shifting the Burden of Adaptation**

When applied specifically to gender politics and workplace incivility, a framework of relational dignity fundamentally revolutionizes how organizational friction is understood and addressed. Crucially, it removes the burden of adaptation from the individual woman. Under the dominant neo-liberal, procedural model, the standard institutional solution to workplace hostility is to offer "resilience training," "leadership development," or "assertiveness workshops" for women. This approach is inherently

flawed; it effectively pathologizes the target, telling women they must develop thicker skins, change their behavior, or learn to navigate a toxic environment better.

Relational dignity completely reverses this logic. It identifies the *environment itself* as the object requiring immediate intervention and transformation. It demands that institutions recognize psychological safety, epistemic justice, and freedom from identity-based incivility as fundamental human rights within the workplace, rather than optional perks or secondary goals. By shifting the conversation from what is strictly legally actionable to what is ethically acceptable and conducive to human flourishing, relational dignity sets a much higher, transformative standard for institutional health. It views the daily preservation of a professional's dignity as an essential, non-negotiable prerequisite for collective development.

### **Building Active Civility Architectures: A Policy Blueprint**

Transitioning from a superficial culture of legal compliance to a deep-rooted culture of relational dignity requires concrete, operational structural innovations. India cannot afford to wait passively for deeply entrenched patriarchal mindsets to dissolve organically over generations; the cost to human capital and innovation is too high. Institutions must actively design and enforce spaces that make incivility difficult to sustain and where respect is the enforced baseline standard. This necessitates the implementation of what can be termed Civility Architectures, systemic, proactive policy structures that embed ethical values directly into the governance and operational mechanisms of organizations and universities.

- **The Institutional Civility Code**

The foundational step in constructing a civility architecture is the formalization and adoption of a comprehensive Institutional Civility Code. This code must exist parallel to, but distinctly independent of, statutory sexual harassment policies. A robust Civility Code must explicitly define, codify, and penalize behaviors associated with systemic incivility. This includes explicitly addressing persistent conversational bullying, public demeaning of colleagues, gendered tone-policing, chronic unwarranted interruptions, and deliberate professional exclusion.

By giving these specific, low-intensity behaviors an official name and a designated, legitimate reporting pathway, the institution effectively strips perpetrators of their primary weapon: plausible deniability. Metrics related to team climate and civility must be explicitly integrated into annual performance evaluations, tenure reviews, and promotional criteria. Leaders, department heads, and senior administrators must be evaluated and compensated not only on their research output, financial targets, or enrollment numbers, but also actively on the ethical climate, psychological safety, and retention rates of women—particularly intersectionally marginalized women within their respective spheres of influence (Pearson et al., 2000).

- **Operational Autonomy and Combating Administrative Co-optation**

A critical challenge in implementing these structures within highly stratified Indian organizations is the risk of institutional co-optation. In a rigid hierarchy, internal committees and local ombudspersons are frequently subjected to intense vertical pressure from senior administrative gatekeepers, potentially turning civility frameworks into tools for suppressing dissent or penalizing lower-status whistleblowers.

To prevent this co-optation, the governance of active civility architectures must be designed with autonomous checks and balances. Ombudsperson networks must be structurally independent of the executive leadership of the institution, reporting directly to an external, decentralized regional academic council or an independent civil society panel. Furthermore, reporting mechanisms must utilize secure, anonymous intake channels to protect user identity during initial reporting phases. Case resolutions regarding systemic incivility must undergo blind peer-review by external institutional representatives to strip local biases and localized networks of privilege from the adjudication process. By removing the final disciplinary or evaluative authority from immediate institutional gatekeepers, the civility architecture maintains its structural integrity and remains a safe space for marginalized members.

- **Operationalizing NEP 2020: Curricular and Institutional Equity Mandates**

This operational blueprint directly addresses and fills the execution framework for the macro-level mandates established by the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020. The NEP 2020 explicitly positions "Equity and Inclusion" as the bedrock of a future-ready educational ecosystem, explicitly directing institutions to implement institutional development plans that address the unique drop-out and attrition dynamics of Socio-Economically Disadvantaged Groups (SEDGs), including gender and caste minorities (MHRD, 2020). However, the policy relies on institutions to construct the cultural mechanics required to achieve these milestones.

The model of *Relational Dignity* and *Civility Architectures* provides the precise behavioral mechanism needed to operationalize these national mandates. Institutions can leverage the proposed Gender Inclusion Funds (GIF) outlined in the NEP to explicitly finance the establishment of autonomous ombudsperson networks, specialized intersectional bias training for institutional leaders, and localized research studies into institutional micro-politics. Furthermore, higher education institutions must integrate relational ethics directly into their core curricula, leadership training, and research methodology programs. If the next generation of Indian professionals is trained to view ethical collaboration, epistemic respect, and intersectional gender equity as foundational professional competencies rather than annoying compliance

hurdles, the internal culture of Indian workspaces will undergo a profound, sustainable evolution, fulfilling the transformative spirit of national policy.

### The Conceptual Architecture of Institutional Marginalization

To visually map the analytical framework developed in this chapter, the model below traces how macro-level patriarchal and hierarchical structures manifest behaviorally as everyday incivility. This structural pipeline ultimately demonstrates how low-intensity, unactionable misconduct bypasses standard legal compliance grids to systematically erode human capital, innovation, and psychological safety.

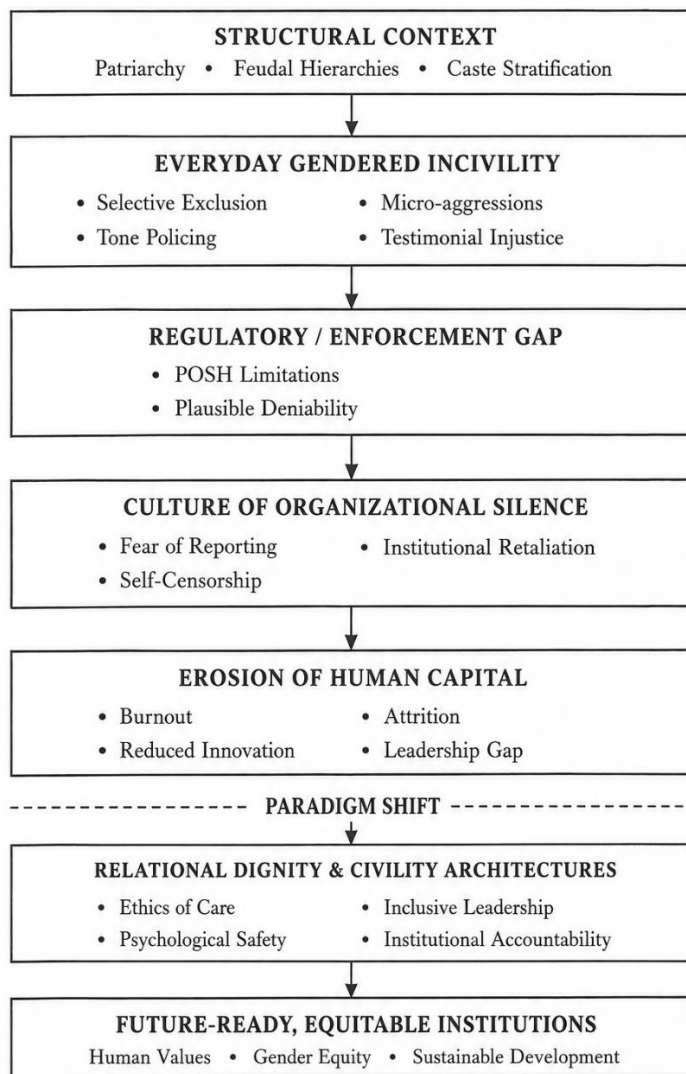


Figure 1: From Incivility to Institutional Transformation – A Conceptual Framework

## **Conclusion: Ethical Development as the Anchor of Nation-Building**

As India boldly positions itself on the global stage as a powerhouse of innovation, a hub for future skills, and a model for sustainable growth, the very definition of "national readiness" must be rigorously expanded and critically examined. Economic resilience, digital proliferation, and technological prowess are undeniably powerful engines of progress. However, they are fundamentally unsustainable and ultimately hollow if the internal mechanics of the institutions driving this growth remain deeply compromised by archaic gender politics, power imbalances, and ethical apathy.

Everyday gendered incivility is not a trivial matter of workplace interpersonal friction or individual hypersensitivity; it is a systematic, highly effective depletion of human potential. It disproportionately targets women, particularly intersectionally marginalized women, alienating them from the very spaces designed to foster excellence and drive national progress.

This chapter has demonstrated theoretically that purely legalistic, procedural approaches to organizational ethics are structurally inadequate for capturing, let alone correcting, these low-intensity, highly damaging behaviors. To build a genuinely future-ready nation, India must anchor its institutional frameworks deeply in the values of relational dignity and an inclusive ethics of care. Recognizing that the preservation of human dignity within the minutiae of daily professional interactions is a non-negotiable metric of national development allows us to move beyond the illusion of superficial compliance.

The implementation of robust, active, and autonomous civility architectures within our universities, corporate sectors, and administrative systems is no longer an idealistic pursuit; it is an urgent, pragmatic necessity. True innovation cannot thrive in a chilly climate, and sustainable, equitable development cannot be achieved when half the population must expend significant cognitive and emotional energy navigating subtle, systemic hostility. By committing to the structural cultivation of respect, psychological safety, and intersectional gender justice, India can ensure that its journey toward the future is defined by true, holistic advancement. It is through these micro-political changes that a society is established where technological and economic progress is guided by enduring human values, and where every citizen is empowered to contribute with uncompromised dignity to the monumental process of nation-building.

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