

## Legacy and Sustainability: Dr. Harisingh Gour's Role in Shaping Development that Lasts

**Mohd Shahrukh\***

Research Scholar, Department of Sociology and Social Work, Dr. Harisingh Gour Vishwavidyalaya, Sagar, MP, India.

\*Corresponding Author: moshah1686@gmail.com

*Citation: Shahrukh, M. (2025). Legacy and Sustainability: Dr. Harisingh Gour's Role in Shaping Development that Lasts. International Journal of Education, Modern Management, Applied Science & Social Science, 07(04(III)), 69–77.*

### ABSTRACT

*This paper presents the works of Dr. Harisingh Gour (1870-1949) in the theoretical framework of sustainable development; specifically, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Gour was a jurist, educationist, and social reformer in colonial and post-colonial India, whose legal reform, higher education, and gender equality work anticipated important social sustainability ideals. This study, based on a mixed-method approach comprising of historical research of the archival materials, such as parliamentary debates, his legal writings as well as institutional records and a qualitative survey of 40 respondents (academics, students, and activists) today, makes Gour a pioneer of reforms aligned with SDGs 4 (Quality Education), 5 (Gender Equality), and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions). The results demonstrate that there are high perceptions among the respondents that the view of equity, inclusion, and institutional integrity of Gour remains important in shaping sustainable practices in contemporary India. The paper comes up with the conclusion that Gour left a legacy that provides a native, historically-based approach to sustainable development, in opposition to Western-centric paradigms, and emphasizes the necessity to incorporate reformist traditions into the discourse of global sustainability.*

**Keywords:** Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Social Sustainability, Dr. Harisingh Gour, Educational Reform, Legal Empowerment, Gender Equality, Historical Analysis, India.

### Introduction

#### The Modern Day Sustainable Imperative

Sustainable development has proven to be the global paradigm of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and it has been best outlined in the 2030 Agenda of Sustainable Development and 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (United Nations, 2015). This framework is a holistic effort to ensure there is a balance between economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection, but more specifically, no one is left behind. Social aspect of sustainability which includes equity, justice, empowerment and participatory governance has been attracting more appreciation as a pillar in sustainable development (Colantonio, 2011; Dempsey et al., 2011).

#### Dr. Harisingh Gour: An Early Sustainability Reformer.

Dr. Harisingh Gour is one of these individuals who have not been studied extensively on the sustainability topic despite being an important figure. Gour was born in 1870 in Sagar, Madhya Pradesh, but grew up in a very poor family (Singh, 2010). Even now, Gour is considered to be one of the greatest legal scholars in India, an influential educationist, social reformer, and a philanthropist. His career was varied and he contributed to the late colonial and early independence years and during this period, he

significantly contributed to legal education, penal reform, higher education infrastructure and gender equality. He institutionalized his idea about education as a tool of social mobility and regional progress as the first Vice-Chancellor of Nagpur University and as the founder of Sagar University (now Dr. Harisingh Gour University) (Sharma, 2018).

Gour was a leading legal thinker, whose legal work, especially his seminal work *The Penal Law of India* (1940) promoted liberal and humanistic legal ideals, and whose interest in the rights and access to justice by women was special. His acts of philanthropy such as giving away huge amounts of personal wealth to education causes was an indication of his concern with the legacy of the institution and social justice. All these activities are the elements of a consistent vision of a social change that envisages the major traits of the contemporary sustainability agenda.

### **Research Gap and Question**

The current research on Dr. Gour has mostly focused within the disciplinary limits of his scholarship: legal historians have discussed his jurisprudence (Rao, 2015), educationalists have written about his institution-building (Sharma, 2018), and social historians have written about his gender reformist approach (Sen, 2017). Nevertheless, a considerable gap in literatures on his work in terms of an inter-disciplinary approach to sustainable development is still present. There is no significant research that has been done to conduct a systematic examination of how holistic reformist agenda of Gour can be congruent with and enrich the modern sustainability frameworks, in this case, SDGs.

The proposed study fills this gap, by posing the following question: How do the educational, legal, and social reforms of Dr. Harisingh Gour relate and inform the current sustainable development goals, especially the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals?

### **Objectives and Significance**

The primary objectives of this research are:

- To analyze Dr. Harisingh Gour's multidimensional contributions as a social reformer through the theoretical framework of sustainability.
- To examine the specific impact of his educational and legal reforms on equity, inclusion, and justice.
- To evaluate contemporary perceptions of his legacy among scholars, students, and activists regarding its relevance to sustainability.
- To establish explicit connections between his reformist efforts and current SDGs, particularly Goals 4, 5, and 16.

### **Structure of the Paper**

Section 2 gives a comprehensive historical background of the life of Dr. Gour and his work following this introduction. Section 3 creates the conceptual framework that connects social sustainability theory and SDGs with historical reform. Section 4 examines literature on the topic. Section 5 provides the methodology of the study. The analysis and results are given in section 6. Section 7 presents findings, whereas Section 8 summarizes the study and gives implications and suggestions to the future research.

### **The History of Dr. Harisingh Gour.**

#### **• Biography and Childhood and Shaping Influences.**

Harisingh Gour was born on 26 November 1870 in the city of Sagar in the central part of the Indian region which is today known as Madhya Pradesh (Singh, 2010). He was born in a family of a moderate income, and his initial education was done in Sagar before proceeding to Allahabad where he pursued higher education. His brilliance in academics saw him secure a scholarship to attend the Cambridge University where he graduated with his Tripos in 1892 and subsequently obtained a Doctor of Laws (LL.D.) degree which was a rare prerogative of an Indian at that time (Gupta, 2002). This cross-cultural educational experience made him exposed to Western liberal arguments, and the social issues that were pressing at colonial India and formed his life-long dedication to reform using education and law.

#### **• Legal Scholarship and Reformist Jurisprudence**

The greatest legacy of Dr. Gour to Indian jurisprudence is this book on the Penal law of India; it was first published in 1919 and later updated and revised to the final edition published in 1940 (Gour, 1940). This was a monumental work, in several volumes, not only a commentary to the Indian Penal

Code (IPC) of 1860, but a critical, reform-minded one. Gour did not just treat penal law as a technical subject but a value in the society and a means of social justice.

Gour did not just make contributions in the area of penal law. He was a member of the Indian Jail Reform Committee (1919-1920) and took part in deliberations to make constitutional reforms in the run up to the independence of India. He was a legal scholar who strongly believed in the power of law as a tool of social change, but he was also a profoundly learned individual, his views on the SDG 16 agenda of eradicating injustice, fostering peaceful and inclusive societies, and a strong institution make him resonate with that.

- **Building and Philanthropy of educational institutions.**

In line with his work in law, Gour worked towards changing the educational face of India. He was made the first Vice-Chancellor of Nagpur University, which was occupied by him until 1926 (Sharma, 2018).

The establishing of the Sagar University marked the achievement of the educational dream of Gour.

Gour philosophy of education has been based on inclusivity, regional relevance and integration of knowledge to social responsibility. He also thought that universities were not to be ivory towers but engines of regional development and social mobility. This was envisaged decades ago in this vision the present-day focus of SDG 4 that focuses on quality education and lifelong learning opportunities which are both inclusive and equitable to all.

- **Push-pull Strategy of Gender Equality and Social Reform**

His reformist position was a comprehensive one: he acknowledged the necessity of the legal reform being supported by educational opportunities and change in social attitudes. This is a combined gender justice approach which is more than impressive in consistency with the holistic attitude, SDG 5, which aims at the realization of gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls by using a series of intertwined interventions.

- **The Reform Integrated Vision**

The only difference between Gour and most of his contemporaries is the complementary character of his reformist vision. He never perceived law, education, and social advocacy as individual spheres but as parts of a holistic project of social change. His educational philosophy was based on his legal scholarship, his educational work was the preconditions of legal literacy and empowerment, and his social activism was the ethical framework of both. This systemic view predicts such multidimensional approach of the SDGs that sustainable development must be advanced simultaneously both in social, economic, and institutional spheres.

### **Theoretical Framework: Connections between Reform and Sustainability**

- **Social Sustainability: Theory and Dimensions**

The social sustainability theory offers an important perspective of the historical reform movements since it emphasizes the institutions and relationships of sustainable development. Social sustainability is directly related to reforms that lead to greater equity, the creation of more inclusive institutions, the advancement of justice, and the empowerment of marginalized groups, even though the advocates of these reforms did not employ this terminology.

- **The Sustainable Development Goals as an Analytical Framework**

The 2030 Agenda of the United Nations describing 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets is the most comprehensive global framework of sustainable development (United Nations, 2015). Although each SDG is related, three are especially important in terms of the analysis of the legacy of Gour:

The SDG 4 Quality Education is geared towards achieving inclusive and equitable quality education, as well as encouraging all people to have access to lifelong learning. Some of the goals that will apply to the work of Gour are the construction of inclusive educational centers (Target 4.a), provision of more scholarships to disadvantaged groups (Target 4.b), and the equal access to all levels of education (Target 4.5).

SDG 5: Gender Equality tries to ensure that gender equality is attained and all women and girls are empowered. It should be mentioned that such targets as ending discrimination (Target 5.1), ending

violence (Target 5.2), participation and leadership opportunities (Target 5.5) and reform of discriminatory laws (Target 5.c) are relevant.

SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions encourages peaceful and inclusive societies to achieve sustainable development, avail access to justice to everyone and establish effective, accountable and inclusive institutions of all levels. The main ones are the reduction of violence (Target 16.1), rule of law (Target 16.3), development of effective institutions (Target 16.6), and inclusive decision-making (Target 16.7).

- **Reform History as Pre-Sustainability Practice**

The gap between historical analysis and sustainability studies needs to acknowledge the fact that even before sustainability principles were theorized, they were practiced. The main concepts of sustainability, as Grober (2012) suggests in *Sustainability: A Cultural History*, have their roots in many cultural and philosophical traditions. Equity, justice, and responsible stewardship as an idea is found in ancient books and has been reformulated in the past with the help of social reformers who lived in ancient times (Kumar, 2014).

The work of Gour is an indigenous custom of construction of institutions and social reform, which reflects the idea of sustainability in a uniquely Indian manner.

- **Conceptual Framework of the present study**

The conceptual framework adopted in this research establishes the reforms of Gour at the crossroads of three spheres, which include legal empowerment, education access, and gender equality. The theoretical frameworks to analyze these areas are social sustainability and SDGs 4, 5, and 16 targets in particular. The framework acknowledges these areas to be interrelated the reforms in law establish the conditions of educational equity, education establishes the power of people to assert lawful rights and gender equality demands both legal and educational changes.

The framework also includes the aspect of institutional legacy, which looks into how the focus of Gour on the creation of sustainable institutions (universities, legal order) is an important, yet all-too-little-explored dimension of sustainability. Generational institutions offer the institutional frameworks to support the ongoing social transformation, a view that is stressed in social sustainability theory (Colantonio, 2011) and SDG 16.

## **Review of Literature**

- **Doctrine about Dr. Harisingh Gour**

The literature about Dr. Gour can be divided into three spheres: the legal, educational, and social reform advocacy.

- **Legal Contributions:** Legal work on the work of Gour has mostly been centered on. In the book *Legal Reforms and Social Change in Colonial India*, Rao (2015) makes Gour one of the main representatives of the modernization of Indian jurisprudence in the late colonial era.
- **Reforms in Education:** Gour has an institutional history and regional studies that have recorded his contribution to the field of education. In *History of Higher Education in Central India*, Sharma (2018) gives the most detailed description of the role Gour played in the founding of Sagar University and his rule at Nagpur University. Sharma underlines that Gour saw higher education as the means of regional growth and social mobility.
- **Gender Equality Advocacy:** Newer scholarship has started to take a closer look at the work that Gour had to offer to the field of gender equality. In the chapter *Reformers and Sustainability: Linking Past to Present*, Sen (2017) evaluates Gour in terms of his argument in support of education and rights of women, where he is placed in the same category as other social activists in India who fought against patriarchal values.

- **The Research Gap**

Despite this body of literature, significant gaps remain. First, most studies of Gour examine his contributions within discrete disciplinary boundaries, missing the integrated nature of his reformist vision. Second, no study has systematically analyzed his work through the lens of sustainable development or the SDGs. Third, while some scholarship mentions Gour's relevance to contemporary issues, there has

been no empirical investigation of how his legacy is perceived by contemporary stakeholders in relation to sustainability.

This study addresses these gaps by: (1) examining Gour's work through an interdisciplinary lens that connects law, education, and social reform; (2) applying the specific analytical framework of the SDGs; and (3) incorporating contemporary perceptions through empirical research with academics, students, and activists.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This mixed-methods study uses historical analysis and qualitative research. This method follows Tosh (2015)'s definition of "historical sociology"—using historical data to answer theoretical problems and examine how the past is understood now. Through deep historical research and contemporary views, the mixed-methods design provides a more complete understanding of Gour's influence on sustainability.

### **Data Sources**

The study draws on two primary categories of data:

Historical and Archival Sources:

- The Penal Law of India (1940 edition) and Gour's Legislative Assembly speeches (1921-1934 legislative debates) are primary texts.
- Institutional Records: Sagar University foundational documents (1946), UGC reports (1950-1960), and Nagpur University archives.
- Gour's life and work are documented in biographies (Singh, 2010), regional histories (Sharma, 2018), and legal history (Rao, 2015).
- Current policy documents: UN SDG reports (2015–present), Indian education and gender equality policies.

A purposive sample of 40 respondents was selected to represent different stakeholder groups with knowledge relevant to assessing Gour's legacy:

- 15 Central India university sociology, law, education, and gender studies academics (Dr. Harisingh Gour University, Nagpur University, University of Delhi).
- 15 postgraduate sociology, law, and development students.
- 10 social activists in Madhya Pradesh and neighbouring states promoting education, gender justice, and legislative reform.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection occurred in two phases from January to June 2023:

#### **Phase 1: Historical Analysis**

- Detailed analysis of Gour's writings on education, gender, justice, and institutional development.
- Analysing Gour's parliamentary debates to find legislative themes.
- Review of Sagar University's inception and early development histories and archives.

#### **Phase 2: Contemporary Perceptions**

- Semi-structured interviews were done with all 40 respondents in person or by video conference.
- Interviews were guided with open-ended questions about:
  - Understanding Dr. Gour's achievements.
  - How his work relates to equity, justice, and sustainability today.
  - Specific links between his changes and SDGs 4, 5, and 16.
  - His institutional legacy evaluation.
- Interviews lasted 45-60 minutes and were audio-recorded with consent, then transcribed for analysis.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis was integrated.

- **Historical Data:** Content analysis identified sustainability themes in Gour's publications and speeches. These topics were coded by SDG aim alignment.
- **Current Interview Data:** Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) revealed respondents' Gour legacy interpretations. This involved:
  - Familiarization with transcripts.
  - Generating initial codes.
  - Searching for themes.
  - Reviewing themes.
  - Defining and naming themes.
  - Producing the analysis.

## Analysis and Results

### • Educational Reforms and SDG 4: Quality Education

**Documentary Evidence:** In 1946, Gour said in his speech on the opening of Sagar University that the university would be no longer just an intellectual elite school but a school of the sons and daughters of the soil who had been deprived of opportunity. It will be a tool of development of this region and people (Sagar University Foundation Proceedings, 1946, p. 12). The principle of leaving no one behind in SDG 4 that is reflected by this statement is the elimination of disparities in education in Target 4.5.

The charter that Gour helped to draft also contained clauses about scholarships to the disadvantaged students, evening courses to the working students and outreach to the rural regions—novel features in Indian higher education at that time (University Grants Commission, 1950). These provisions envisaged SDG 4 aims on inclusive amenities (4.a) and scholarships (4.b).

**Modern Impressions:** Survey participants greatly affirmed the correspondence of the educational vision of Gour with SDG 4. 78% of the survey participants (31 out of 40) had an explicit linkage of his work with the modern sustainability ambitions in education. A sociology professor noted:

Here Dr. Gour realized the kind of purpose of education which we refer to as the transformative. He did not think of universities as mere graduation mills but as making active citizens and combating inequalities in regions. That is what SDG 4 describes, education transforming the societies, not only the individuals.

### • Legal Reforms and SDG 16: Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions

The evaluation of the legal writings and legislative interventions by Gour indicates that he is always focused on the principles that form the core of SDG 16: just and humane systems of justice, institutional integrity, and legal empowerment of the marginalized populations.

**Documentary Evidence:** In The Penal Law of India (1940), Gour proposed changes in the law that would allow the justice system to become more accessible and fair.

Although the activists focused on legal empowerment emphasized the advantages of Gour, they also pointed to his weaknesses. One activist observed:

There was also an intriguing generational difference in impressions, with the older respondents (professors) more inclined to discuss the technical legal input of Gour, whereas the younger respondents (students) more commonly linked his work to social justice movements in general and the demands to change the legal system today.

### • Gender Equality Advocacy and SDG 5

The history proves that Gour was one of the more liberal voices concerning issues of gender in his era, but his campaign worked within the limits of the colonial and patriarchal institution.

**Documentary Evidence:** Gour was practical and philosophical at the same time in supporting women education. He has given grants that are targeted at scholarships of women in Sagar University and he also supported co-editing where he stated that the development of the society should not be based on the education of any specific member which does not include a sex difference (Singh, 2010, p.



157). He advocated the reforms in the legal area, as he defended the increase of age of consent, better property rights of women and domestic violence- the stands which were not popular in those times.

Modern perceptions: Sixty-six percent (26/40) of respondents identified high correspondence between the gender advocacy of Gour and SDG 5. The respondents liked the way he was progressive considering his historical situation but saw the weakness of his view as per the modern day context.

Women were more prone to condemn the constraints of the gender advocacy of Gour, but still consider it important in the history. One student activist noted:

We need to appreciate innovators such as Gour, but we should also want to know what his vision of women entailed. Most likely, women with middle to upper classes. SDG 5 now demands that we confront intersectional inequalities, such as caste, class, religion, sexuality, that Gour did not actually interact with.

- **Consolidated Tradition: Stakeholder Group perceptions**

The study found that there are some specific perceptions of the legacy of Gour that differ and overlap in the three groups of respondents:

Professors (15 respondents): This group focused on the intellectual and institutional legacy of Gour. 87% (13 of 15) regarded him as an initiator of equity in education and legal reform principally. They appreciated his rigour and legacy of building higher education institutions, and tend to relate his work to current academic arguments on access and excellence in higher education.

Students (15 respondents): This group was most likely to show interest in the SDG framework, with 80 percent (12 of 15) specifically applying SDG terminology to explain the relevance of Gour. They were especially keen on how past personalities such as Gour could be used to spur modern activism and policy change. As one student remarked: Learning about Gour makes us realize that sustainability is not a new agenda of the UN, but it is what the reformers have been striving to achieve over the decades.

Activists (10 respondents): This faction provided the most negative views where 70% (7 of 10) provided recognition of the efforts of Gour, but stated that the agenda of reform was incomplete. They associated his work with current battles of educational justice, legal empowerment and gender equality. Activists would most probably talk of the implementation lapse between the progressive thoughts of Gour and the modern realities.

Even though they did not agree on everything, all the groups chose to acknowledge Gour as an important figure who had a combined approach to reform, including law, education, and social advocacy, which was of a great use in the present sustainability activities. According to one of the professors, Gour did not subscribe to the SDG framework, but he was interested in integrative development. He realized that education, law and social reform must be looked upon as one. It is precisely what the SDGs inform us nowadays.

- **Hypothesis Testing**

The results can be used to evaluate the initial hypotheses of the study:

- H01:** No statistically significant correlation between the educational reforms of Dr. Gour and the modern sustainable development practices exists. This is a null hypothesis that is rejected. The historical analysis, as well as the current perception, reveals that Gour educational philosophy/institution-building and SDG 4 principles of inclusive, equitable quality education are closely aligned.
- H02:** The legal input of Dr. Gour does not have any long-lasting impact on the Indian social justice systems. This is a null hypothesis that is rejected. Gour remains a source of reference in the modern discussions on justice reform and his legal scholarship and advocacy work is still referred to, and respondents found a strong perception of the links between his work and SDG 16 goals.
- H03:** The attitude towards the legacy of Dr. Gour among scholars and activists does not signal their adherence to the sustainability goals. This is a null hypothesis that is rejected. In all groups of respondents, strong majorities pointed to obvious links between the reforms of Gour and modern sustainability objectives, especially SDGs 4, 5 and 16.

## Discussion

### • **The Legacy of Gour as an Early Proto-Sustainability Practice.**

The evidence of the reformist work of Dr. Harisingh Gour drawn in this paper is a solid argument that it can be considered what can be called as the proto-sustainability practice- historical action that is bequeathed with principles that are currently codified in sustainability models. The multidimensional, interconnected nature of the Sustainable Development Goals was predetermined by the integrated approach of Gour to social transformation, which encompassed legal reform, establishment of educational institutions, and promotion of gender equality.

The research also emphasizes the role of institution-building to sustainability- another aspect that is at times not considered as visible as a policy or technological intervention. The fact that Gour focused on establishing ongoing educational and legal institutions that would survive beyond his lifetime is congruent with what Ostrom (1990) defined as important prerequisites of sustainable governance: rules and institutions that are localized, created through participatory mechanisms, and designed to last.

### • **Comparative Approaches: Gour in Indian Reform History.**

Placing Gour in the broader context of the Indian social reform emphasizes unique input and common interests. Similar to Mahatma Gandhi, Gour stressed that social change had moral and ethical aspects, but where Gandhi operated more on the movement-based approach, Gour operated more on the formal institutional approach. Limitations are also seen in the comparative perspective. Gour was a progressive reformist who worked within colonialist institutions and the high society. His social change vision was not revolutionary but evolutionary in nature and aimed at revising existing institutions instead of altering the basis of power. In the modern vision of sustainability that focuses on complete overhaul of unsustainable systems (Raworth, 2017), the strategy of Gour could be considered inadequate. Nevertheless, as the respondents noted, past leaders should be evaluated in their contexts, and the work of Gour has significant backgrounds, on which many radical changes can be made.

## Conclusion

This study showed that Dr. Harisingh Gour's diverse reformist work in late colonial and early independent India prefigured modern sustainable development, particularly the UN Sustainable Development Goals. The research has linked Gour's legacy to SDGs 4 (Quality Education), 5 (Gender Equality), and 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) through historical analysis of his writings, institutional foundations, and legislative interventions and contemporary perceptions from academics, students, and activists.

This study calls Gour's integrated vision—combining legal scholarship, educational institution-building, and gender equality advocacy—“proto-sustainability practice”: historical activity that embraces contemporary global principles. He established Sagar University to promote regional parity, made progressive legal reforms to promote justice and accessibility, and championed women's education and rights, all of which support modern sustainability goals.

Multiple scholarly conversations benefit from the research. It shows how historical approaches anchor global frameworks in localised cultural and historical contexts in sustainability studies. It provides a cohesive examination of a reformer frequently studied in silos in Indian historiography. This historically-rooted approach of integrated, institution-focused development is relevant to modern difficulties in development practice.

Perhaps most importantly, Gour's legacy reminds us that sustainability is a matter of principles, institutions, and long-term commitment, not technology or policy. His life represented the SDGs' goal of a society where equity, justice, and opportunity are permanent foundations for human flourishing. One survey responder, a social activist, stated that Gour's work demonstrates that sustainability goes beyond saving the world for future generations. Build a fair, educated, just society worth saving. He built that society then. The SDGs advise us to continue that work.”

Studying historical figures like Gour is not just an academic exercise, but a way to connect contemporary sustainability efforts to longer traditions of social transformation, reminding us that building a sustainable world has deep roots and that today's efforts build on earlier reformers' foundations.



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