

Spirit-work: Reclaiming dignity in the face of material scarcity

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Cite as:

Mohapatra Sarthak, Singh Ramendra, Venugopal Srinivas (2025), Spirit-work: Reclaiming dignity in the face of material scarcity. *Proceedings of the European Marketing Academy*, 54th, (124822)

Paper from the 54th Annual EMAC Conference, Madrid, Spain, May 25-30, 2025



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Abstract

Modern capitalist society was envisaged to witness the systems of rationality and logic supplant the old order of magic and mysticism — a prophecy famously labeled as the ‘disenchantment of the world’ by Max Weber. While dignity in a disenchanted world is asserted by reliance on the socio-material realm of human rights, legal frameworks, social ties, and so on, it is unclear how enchanted communities affirm dignity when the material realm falls deficit or is inaccessible. This raises a crucial question – how do enchanted communities assert dignity in the face of material scarcity? Following an inductive qualitative approach, we initiated an immersive ethnographic with 20 Adivasi consumer-merchants, who are located at the nexus of spiritual enchantment and material deprivation. We theorize spirit-work as the practice of invoking spiritual forces that transcend immediate material concerns, offering a means to frame dignifying conditions and reclaim agency over circumstances. Further, we found this consumption of spirituality to materialize into three analytically distinct forms of agencies that enable dignifying conditions— existential agency, determinative agency, and moral agency.

Keywords – Spirit-work, Dignity, Spirituality

Track – Social Responsibility & Ethics