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Coastal Militarization and Fishing Livelihoods in India (2018–2025)

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Abstract: ***The intensification of coastal militarization in India between 2018 and 2025 reflects a broader transformation in ocean governance shaped by geopolitical competition, economic restructuring also including environmental pressures. While the expansion of maritime surveillance and security infrastructure is justified in terms of safeguarding sovereignty, combating illegal fishing, and ensuring maritime order, it has produced uneven and often exclusionary outcomes for small-scale fishing communities. This paper argues that coastal militarization functions as a mechanism of control over marine commons, restructuring access, authority, and legitimacy in ways that marginalize artisanal fishers. Drawing upon political ecology (Bryant & Bailey, 1997), commons theory (Ostrom, 2011), and the governability framework (Bavinck et al., 2018), the study conceptualizes fisheries as contested socio-political spaces characterized by "social struggle" (Bavinck, Jentoft, & Scholtens, 2018). Integrating a human rights-based approach (OHCHR, 2006; FAO, 2015) and the concept of Blue Justice (UN SDGs, 2019), the paper demonstrates how securitization contributes to the criminalization, dispossession, and socio-economic precarity of small-scale fishers. It concludes by advocating for a reconfiguration of coastal governance that reconciles security imperatives with principles of equity, sustainability, and participatory justice.***

Keywords: Coastal Militarization, Small-Scale Fisheries, Blue Justice, Marine Commons Governance, Criminalization of Fishers.

I. INTRODUCTION

India's coastal and marine ecosystems constitute a critical socio-economic and ecological frontier. Supporting over four million livelihoods and contributing significantly to national food security, small-scale fisheries represent a vital component of India's coastal economy (Béné et al., 2016). These fisheries are embedded within complex socio-cultural systems characterized by customary rights, collective norms, and localized ecological knowledge (Bavinck, 2001). Historically, governance of these systems has relied on informal and community-based institutions that regulate access, resolve conflicts, and ensure sustainability.

However, since 2018, India's coastal governance landscape has undergone a profound transformation marked by increasing securitization and militarization. This shift is closely linked to the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a strategic geopolitical arena, where maritime security, trade routes, and resource competition intersect (Medcalf, 2013; Medcalf, 2020). The Indian state has responded by expanding naval presence, strengthening surveillance systems such as the Integrated Coastal Surveillance System, and introducing regulatory frameworks aimed at enhancing control over maritime spaces (Government of India, 2022).

At the same time, global discourses on the "blue economy" and sustainable development have promoted the commercialization and industrialization of marine resources, further intensifying pressures on coastal ecosystems and communities (OECD, 2022; FAO, 2022). These developments have reconfigured coastal spaces as sites of strategic, economic, and environmental governance, often at the expense of traditional users. This paper argues that coastal militarization in India represents a form of **"marine enclosure"**, where state and market forces redefine. This process is not merely administrative but deeply political, reflecting broader dynamics of power, inequality, and resource competition. By examining the intersection of militarization, governance, and livelihoods, the paper highlights the contradictions and challenges inherent in contemporary coastal governance.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Political ecology provides a critical view for understanding how environmental governance is shaped or made by power relations, economic interests and social inequalities as well (Bryant & Bailey, 1997). It challenges technocratic and apolitical approaches to resource management by emphasizing that environmental policies are inherently political and integrated within larger frameworks of authority. Rather than treating environmental issues as neutral or purely scientific concerns, political ecology situates them within the dynamics of state control, economic dynamics, and societal structures.

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In the context of coastal India, this perspective reveals that the increasing militarization of marine spaces is not solely a response to security threats but also reflects the convergence of strategic, economic, and political interests. The expansion of surveillance systems, regulatory frameworks, and enforcement mechanisms enables the state to exert greater control over marine resources and maritime spaces, often aligning with broader economic objectives such as the promotion of export-oriented fisheries and the blue economy. In this process, policies frequently prioritize the interests of state institutions and corporate actors; while marginalizing fishing communities whose livelihoods rely on flexible and customary access to the sea. Political ecology also highlights how such interventions can exacerbate existing inequalities, as vulnerable groups bear the disproportionate costs of restricted access. Bavinck, Jentoft, and Scholtens (2018) conceptualize fisheries as arenas of "social struggle," where competing actors negotiate access, authority, and legitimacy. Coastal militarization intensifies these struggles by reinforcing centralized power and limiting the agency of local communities, transforming the sea from a shared livelihood space into a contested and controlled environment.

At the same time, commons theory offers an important counterpoint to centralized and top-down governance models. Elinor Ostrom's (2011) Institutional Analysis and Development framework demonstrates that communities are capable of sustainably managing common-pool resources through collective action, shared norms, and locally adapted institutions. In coastal India, traditional fisheries governance systems reflect these principles, with community-based arrangements regulating access, resolving conflicts, and ensuring ecological sustainability over generations (Bavinck, 2001). These systems are often characterized by flexibility, contextual sensitivity, and a deep understanding of ecological dynamics, enabling them to adapt to transforming environmental conditions. However, the increasing complexity of contemporary fisheries governance, shaped by globalization, technological change, and environmental pressures, requires a more nuanced analytical approach. Bavinck et al. (2018) extend commons theory through the concept of "governability," which emphasizes the interaction between governing systems and the socio-ecological systems they seek to regulate. Governability depends on the capacity of institutions to accommodate diversity, respond to complexity, and maintain legitimacy among stakeholders. It recognizes that fisheries are not static systems but dynamic and contested spaces where ecological uncertainty and social diversity intersect. Within this framework, coastal militarization poses significant challenges by imposing rigid and centralized control mechanisms that undermine institutional diversity and local adaptability. The prioritization of surveillance and enforcement over participation and collaboration reduces the capacity of governance systems to respond effectively to local conditions. Furthermore, the marginalization of local knowledge and exclusion of fishing communities from decision-making processes weaken the legitimacy of governance structures, leading to increased conflict and reduced effectiveness in managing socio-ecological systems.

Complementing these perspectives, the Human Rights-Based Approach provides a normative framework for rethinking fisheries governance in terms of justice, equity, and human dignity (OHCHR, 2006). It emphasizes that development and governance processes must not only achieve economic and environmental objectives but also respect, protect, and perform their fundamental human rights. In the fisheries sector, this includes the right to livelihood, the right to food, and the right to participate in decision-making processes, all of which are particularly relevant for small-scale fishing communities. The FAO's Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (2015) operationalize these principles by advocating for inclusive governance, tenure security, gender equality, and social protection. Similarly, the UN Human Rights Council (2016) underscores the critical role of fisheries in ensuring food security and highlights the need to protect the rights of vulnerable populations. Despite these normative commitments, the implementation of rights-based approaches remains uneven, particularly in contexts where security and economic priorities dominate policy agendas. In this regard, the concept of Blue Justice emerges as a critical extension of the Human Rights-Based Approach, addressing the inequalities associated with the expansion of the blue economy (UN SDGs, 2019). While the blue economy is often framed as a pathway to sustainable development, it can also lead to the exclusion and marginalization of small-scale fishers if governance frameworks fail to account for issues of equity and access. Blue Justice emphasizes the need for fair distribution of benefits, recognition of customary rights, and meaningful participation of backward communities in governance processes. In the context of coastal militarization, it provides a powerful lens for evaluating the justice and inclusiveness of governance practices, challenging dominant narratives that prioritize security and economic growth over social equity. Together, these theoretical perspectives highlight the complex and contested nature of coastal governance, underscoring the need for approaches that integrate power, participation, and rights in order to achieve sustainable and equitable outcomes.

III. FISHING IN A MILITARISED SEASCAPE

The militarization of India's coastal zones reflects a broader global trend of maritime securitization driven by geopolitical competition, strategic anxieties, and the need to secure economic interests in the Indo-Pacific region (Medcalf, 2020). Over the past decade, and notably since 2018, India has considerably increased its naval infrastructure, coastal surveillance networks, and

regulatory frameworks, therefore converting coastal and marine regions into highly monitored and regulated places. This shift marks a transition from relatively open and community-oriented seascapes to tightly regulated zones governed by state-centric security logics. While such measures are often justified in terms of combating illegal fishing, smuggling, and maritime threats, they also fundamentally alter the relationship between coastal communities and the marine environment.

One of the most significant consequences of this transformation is the spatial reconfiguration of the sea. Militarization redefines marine spaces through the demarcation of restricted zones, the expansion of surveillance infrastructures, and the regulation of movement and access. Areas that were previously governed through customary practices and community norms are increasingly brought under formal state control. This process can be understood as a form of "enclosure of the commons," wherein shared resources are appropriated and regulated by centralized authorities (Bavinck et al., 2018; Ostrom, 2011). Such enclosures disrupt traditional patterns of mobility and access that are essential for small-scale fisheries, thereby undermining long-standing socio-ecological relationships.

The growing reliance on technological surveillance further intensifies this transformation. The deployment of vessel tracking systems, radar networks, and digital monitoring platforms represents a shift toward data-driven governance, where control is exercised through continuous observation and regulation. While these technologies enhance the state's capacity to monitor maritime activities, they also introduce new forms of inequality and exclusion. Small-scale fishers often lack the financial and technical resources required to comply with these systems, placing them at a disadvantage compared to larger, mechanized operators. Moreover, the asymmetry of information and power created by surveillance technologies reduces the autonomy and flexibility of fishing communities, subjecting them to constant scrutiny and control (ICSF, 2020; Government of India, 2022).

The socio-economic impacts of militarization are particularly severe for small-scale fishers. Restrictions on access to fishing grounds limit their ability to sustain livelihoods, while compliance with regulatory requirements increases operational costs. These challenges are compounded by broader structural vulnerabilities, including limited access to credit, markets, and social protection. As a result, militarization not only disrupts traditional livelihoods but also undermines the resilience of coastal communities, making them more susceptible to economic shocks and environmental changes (Béné et al., 2016; Down To Earth, 2023). In many cases, fishers are forced to either operate under increasingly precarious conditions or exit the sector altogether, leading to long-term socio-economic dislocation.

The intersection of conservation and security further complicates this landscape. In ecologically sensitive regions such as the Gulf of Mannar, conservation measures aimed at protecting biodiversity overlap with security-driven restrictions, creating a "double burden" for fishing communities (Menon & Sathish, 2020). Environmental laws and security procedures that restrict fishers' access to resources and raise the possibility of conflicts with authorities at the same time place them under restrictions. The necessity for more inclusive and participatory governance models that strike a balance between livelihood security and environmental sustainability is brought into focus by the convergence of military and conservation efforts.

IV. HUMAN RIGHTS-BASED APPROACHES AND BLUE JUSTICE

Despite the rising acknowledgment of small-scale fisheries in international policy frameworks, there is still a huge mismatch between normative commitments and ground realities in India. The FAO's Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (2015) f inclusive focuses on governance, tenure security and social equity, while the Human Rights-Based Approach underscores the significance of protecting livelihoods, ensuring food security, and enabling participation (OHCHR, 2006). However, the implementation of these principles within India's coastal governance framework has been uneven and often limited in scope. Policies continue to be shaped by technocratic and security-oriented priorities, with insufficient attention to the socio-economic realities of fishing communities.

Empirical research reveals that small-scale fishermen are frequently excluded from decision-making processes, with few opportunities to influence policies that directly affect their livelihoods (ICSF, 2020; 2022). Customary rights and traditional governance systems are often inadequately recognized, leading to the erosion of local institutions that have historically managed resources effectively. Furthermore, social protection mechanisms remain weak, leaving fishers vulnerable to economic shocks, environmental changes, and regulatory disruptions. This disconnects between policy and practice reflects a broader challenge in translating international norms into context-specific governance frameworks.

The neglect of human well-being in conservation and development initiatives further exacerbates these challenges. Bennett et al. (2021) contend that efficient government must consider many aspects of well-being, such as cultural identity, social inclusion, and income security.

For fishing communities, livelihoods are inextricably linked to social ties, cultural traditions, and identities rather than simply economic endeavours. If these aspects are not considered by governance frameworks, there is a chance that they will have unintended effects like displacement, cultural heritage loss, and poverty exacerbation.

In this setting, the notion of Blue Justice emerges as a revolutionary paradigm for resolving the disparities linked with coastal governance. Blue Justice asks for the equal allocation of resources and opportunity, recognition of excluded groups, and meaningful involvement in decision-making processes (UN SDGs, 2019). It challenges dominant narratives that prioritize economic growth and security over social equity, advocating instead for governance systems that are inclusive, rights-based, and socially just. In the context of coastal militarization, Blue Justice provides a key perspective for analyzing whether governance methods serve the interests of all stakeholders or unfairly favour powerful actors at the expense of vulnerable people.

V. CRIMINALISATION OF SMALL-SCALE FISHING COMMUNITIES

The criminalization of small-scale fishing communities represents all the most significant and visible consequences of coastal militarization. As maritime governance becomes increasingly securitized, fishers are subjected to stricter enforcement of boundaries, surveillance systems, and legal frameworks that prioritize security concerns over livelihood considerations. These measures often fail to account for the realities of small-scale fishing and fishing communities, where limited access to navigation technologies and formal documentation makes compliance challenging (ICSF, 2016).

The impacts of criminalization are profound and multifaceted. Fishers who inadvertently cross maritime boundaries or violate regulatory requirements face arrest, detention, and confiscation of equipment, resulting in significant economic losses. Beyond material impacts, criminalization also carries social and psychological consequences, including stigma, marginalization, and heightened insecurity (ICSF, 2022). Families and communities are affected as well, as the loss of income and social standing disrupts household stability and community cohesion.

At a broader level, the criminalization of fishers reflects a discursive shift in how they are perceived within governance frameworks. Rather than being recognized as legitimate resource users and custodians of marine ecosystems, fishers are increasingly framed as “illegal” or “threatening” actors. This transformation in discourse legitimizes restrictive policies and obscures the structural factors that contribute to regulatory non-compliance. It also reinforces power asymmetries between the state and local communities, further entrenching patterns of exclusion and marginalization.

VI. POLITICAL ECONOMY OF INDIAN COASTAL GOVERNANCE

The political economy of India’s fisheries sector is shaped by processes of globalization, market integration, and technological change. Over the past few decades, the sector has increasingly shifted toward export-oriented production, driven by rising global demand for seafood and the integration of domestic markets into global value chains (Kurien, 2005; OECD, 2022). While this transformation has contributed to economic growth and increased productivity, it has also generated new forms of inequality and exclusion.

The rise of mechanized fishing and private investment has created significant disparities between large-scale and small-scale operators. Capital-intensive technologies enable industrial fishers to access deeper waters and harvest larger quantities of fish, often at the expense of artisanal fishers who rely on traditional methods. This process of capitalization not only exacerbates inequalities but also contributes to the marginalization of small-scale fishers within policy frameworks, which tend to favour efficiency and productivity over equity (Bavinck et al., 2018).

Environmental degradation further complicates this landscape. Unsustainable practices, including light fishing and overexploitation of marine resources, have led to declining fish stocks and increased competition among fishers (Down To Earth, 2023; FAO, 2022). These ecological pressures intersect with socio-economic inequalities, intensifying conflicts and undermining the sustainability of the fisheries sector.

Within this context, fisheries can be understood as arenas of social struggle, where competing interests state, market, and community, interact and negotiate outcomes (Bavinck, Jentoft, & Scholtens, 2018). The militarization of coastal areas exacerbates these conflicts by strengthening the authority of government and business players, which alters the distribution of resources and power in the industry.

VII. FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA AND POLICY DIRECTIONS

The complexities of coastal militarization and fisheries governance highlight the need for a more comprehensive and interdisciplinary research agenda that bridges gaps between policy, practice, and lived realities.

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There is a particular need for localized and ethnographic studies that capture the everyday experiences, coping strategies, and adaptive practices of fishing communities, which are often overlooked in macro-level analyses. Such approaches can provide deeper insights into how governance interventions are experienced on the ground. Additionally, gender-sensitive analyses are essential to understand how the impacts of militarization and resource restrictions are unevenly distributed across different social groups, particularly affecting women engaged in post-harvest and allied activities. Furthermore, the intersection of climate change and fisheries governance remains underexplored, despite its increasing relevance in shaping resource availability, migration patterns, and livelihood vulnerabilities in coastal regions.

From a policy perspective, there is an urgent need to rebalance security and livelihood concerns within coastal governance frameworks. This requires moving beyond narrowly defined security paradigms toward more integrated approaches that recognize the interdependence of ecological sustainability and human well-being. Integrating participatory governance systems that actively include fishing communities in decision-making processes can boost both the legitimacy and efficacy of programs (Ostrom, 2011). The implementation of human rights-based frameworks, as indicated in the FAO recommendations and UN principles, may further guarantee that governance systems respect, protect, and fulfil the rights of small-scale fishermen (FAO, 2015; OHCHR, 2006). At the same time, promoting sustainable fisheries management through ecosystem-based approaches can help address environmental degradation while maintaining livelihood security (FAO, 2022; OECD, 2022). Finally, strengthening regional cooperation and dialogue in maritime governance is crucial for managing shared resources, reducing cross-border conflicts, and fostering more equitable and collaborative outcomes in the increasingly contested marine spaces of the Indo-Pacific (Medcalf, 2020).

VIII. CONCLUSION

Coastal militarization in India reflects a broader transformation in ocean governance driven by the convergence of security imperatives, economic interests, and environmental challenges. While these developments aim to enhance maritime control and sustainability, they have disproportionately affected small-scale fishing communities, leading to restricted access, criminalization, and growing socio-economic marginalization. The shift toward securitized governance has redefined marine spaces as zones of surveillance and regulation, often undermining traditional systems of resource management and eroding the rights and agency of local communities.

By drawing on political ecology, commons theory, and human rights-based approaches, this paper highlights that coastal governance is deeply political and contested. The notion of Blue Justice offers a fundamental framework to overcome these disparities by stressing fairness, participation, and acknowledgment in governance processes. Moving forward, achieving sustainability in India's coastal regions will require balancing security with social justice through more inclusive, participatory, and rights-based approaches. In addition, there is a pressing need to strengthen institutional accountability, integrate local knowledge systems into policy frameworks, and ensure that development initiatives do not come at the cost of vulnerable communities. Addressing these challenges requires not only policy reform but also a shift in perspective from viewing fishers as subjects of control to recognizing them as key stakeholders and custodians of marine ecosystems. Ensuring that the voices and livelihoods of small-scale fishers remain integral to government is vital for establishing a resilient, egalitarian, and sustainable coastal future.

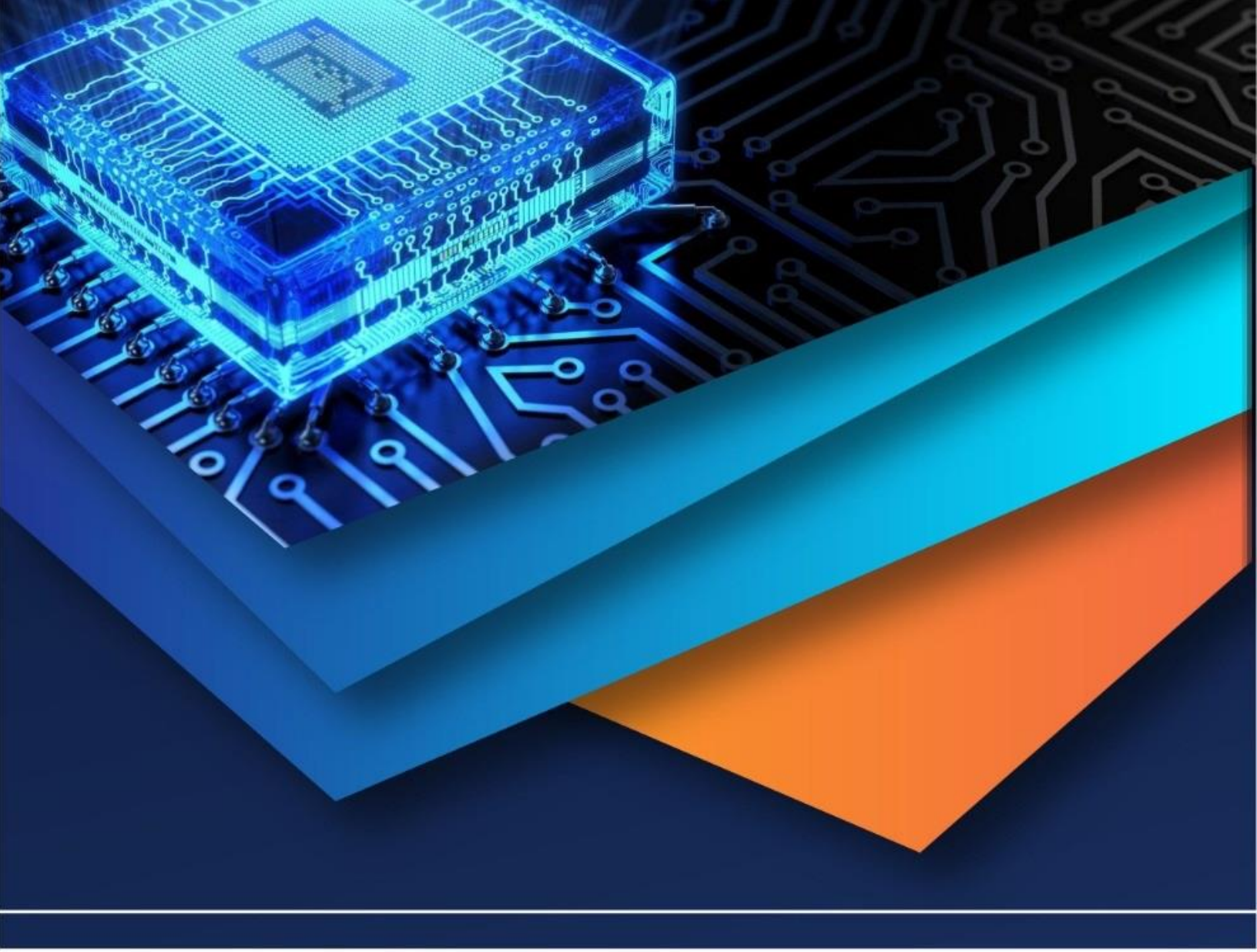
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