



## A CASE STUDY ANALYSIS OF WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN RURAL GOVERNANCE IN INDIA

**Dr.B.Venkateswa Reddy,**

Associate professor of political science

SR&BGNR Government Arts and Science College (A), Khammam

### **Abstract**

*Rural women play a catalytic role towards achievement of transformational economic, social and environmental changes required for sustainable development of society. The active participation of women on equal terms with men, at all levels of decision making and political involvement is essential to the achievement of equality, rural development, peace and democracy and the inclusion of their perspective and experiences into the decision making process. The leadership and participation of rural women in shaping laws, strategies, policies and programmes on all issues that affects their lives. It is possible through political participation of rural women at local and national level. Political empowerment helps rural women to claim their rights to land, leadership, opportunities and choices to participate in shaping laws, regulations, policies and programmes. In India when the process of decentralization was established through 73rd Amendment Act, it tried to redistribute power in favour of women through reservation of seats for them in the Panchayats. This step ensured political space for them but it did not translate into 'substantive participation' for it ignored the complex social realities operating through caste, class and gender in the society. Trying to rectify the gaps I try to present an alternative model where women would be given voices along with space. The process of gender budgeting which has been started and allocates a sum for women development works.*

**Keywords:** political involvement, leadership. Panchayats women,

### **LIFE OF INDIAN WOMEN**

India is a country of contradictions. On the one hand, women are worshipped as deities, without whose blessings, work cannot be initiated. On the other hand, crimes against women and girls are increasing day by day in India. It is sad that in many cases, the perpetrators are known to the victims. The perpetrators could be among relatives, neighbors, friends etc. This increasing mistrust can create havoc in the Indian societal pattern. The patriarchal norms are so entrenched in the Indian society that it is very difficult to pull oneself out of this conundrum. When girls are born in most Indian families, they are not welcome, at times, even by their mothers. They lament that a son could have been a real asset for the family. Upbringing of girls is an expensive affair, where there is only loss as the girl gets married off and will serve the grooms' family throughout her life. In India, the life of a woman changes a lot after marriage. She leaves her parents' house after marriage and starts living with the groom's family. Since childhood, she is socialized into thinking that she has to take up the food habits, dress, rituals etc of the new family. So, happily or grudgingly, she evolves her identity according to the demands of the groom's family and the groom.

In rural India, very few women have ownership over land or productive assets. This proves to be a road block in institutional credit. Majority of the agricultural laborers are women. They mainly assigned manual labour. Men perform operations involving machinery. (Kurukshetra, 2003) Agriculture which is the mainstay of the rural Indian economy is sustained for the most part by the female workforce. They are the invisible life line of the agrarian rural community life. Rural women from childhood days have to bear the burden of taking care of younger siblings, cooking, engaging in domestic chores, looking after the fodder of the domestic

animals in their parents' house. They are married off at a very early age. Indian women are condemned to a life of serfdom, anonymity, facelessness. At the root is the 'gender insensitive' society. (Singh, 2004) According to UNICEF, child marriage is a violation of child rights. Child brides are often forced to drop out of schools, are subject to the risks of early pregnancy and are more likely to be exposed to violence and isolation. Approximately, twenty-three million girls in India face this reality. Among them, majority of them are from the rural areas.

### **Rural governance in India and women's participation**

Independent India adopted a state system based on welfare model or Nehruvian state. Due to this a centralized structure was created to keep ethnic, religion, language, caste differences at bay. In order to travel the path leading to development and becoming a modern state a pool of professional cadres and bureaucrats were created. Lack of accountability and centralized power gave unchecked power to this professional cadre. It resulted in pursuance of one's own self interest keeping nation's interest aside. As a result development process received a setback and nexus with politician and bourgeoisie resulted in erosion of legitimacy of state institutions. It was now that civil society groups arose and started questioning the state apparatus. During the time of national movement itself Gandhi had relied the importance of Panchayats in the Indian state but due to host of other problems being faced by Indian state immediately after Independence, Panchayats were incorporated in the chapter on Directive principles of state policy. Since this provision was not enforceable in the courts it was left on the state whether to implement it or not. With the adoption of Nehruvian model of state and practical difficulties faced by central government various committees like Balwant Rai Mehta Committee and Ashok Mehta committee had suggested the need for Panchayats and had enumerated the functioning of panchayats. With India entering the globalized world through process of liberalization, globalization and privatization, the need for decentralization became imperative thus the process of decentralization was started in the wake of adoption of new path to development. Integration of Indian economy with the world contributed to rapid urbanization but development of rural areas was stalled. This lop-sided development in which a large number of rural masses were left out resulted in policy-makers embarking on the process of 'rural development'. The adoption of new ways of development brought citizens to the center-stage as participatory governance was adopted. It also installed 'Good-Governance' where accountability of state institutions become important. For all these, decentralization was selected as a new tool. In India democratic decentralization through top-down approach was adopted. While democratizing the decentralization India gave 33 percent reservation to the women.

### **Types or dimensions of women empowerment**

There are six types or dimensions of women empowerment namely; psychological, community, organizational, economic, social and cultural.

**Psychological empowerment** enhances individual's consciousness, belief in self-efficacy, awareness and knowledge of problems and solutions and of how individuals can address problems that harm their quality of life. This dimension aims to create self-confidence and give women the skills to acquire knowledge.

**Community empowerment** focuses on enhancing the community through leadership development, improving communication, and creating a network of support to mobilize the community to address concerns.

**Organizational empowerment** aims to create a base of resources for a community, including voluntary organizations, unions and associations that aim to protect, promote and advocate for the powerless.

**Economic empowerment** teaches entrepreneurial skills, how to take ownership of their assets and how to have income security.

**Social empowerment** teaches women about social inclusion and literacy as well as helping women find the resources to be proactive in their communities.

**Cultural empowerment** aims to recreate cultural practices and redefine cultural rules and norms for women.

### **Women and empowerment**

It's not that credit does not create impact in the lives of women, in fact for many it's a boon, especially independent farmers and entrepreneurs. Similarly, income in the hands of women does have an impact on the confidence of women. But access to income and credit is a step towards realizing equality. It alone is not a sufficient condition for empowerment. Nevertheless most of our programmes revolve around these two aspects without hitting the social structures we are in.

Another short sighted view is that empowerment is largely treated as an end goal in itself. It generally leads to a frail strategy where creating one kind of benefit-driven programme is thought to be empowering. Hence in most cases, policy makers and workers consider affirmative action as empowering for women.

### **Women's economic empowerment**

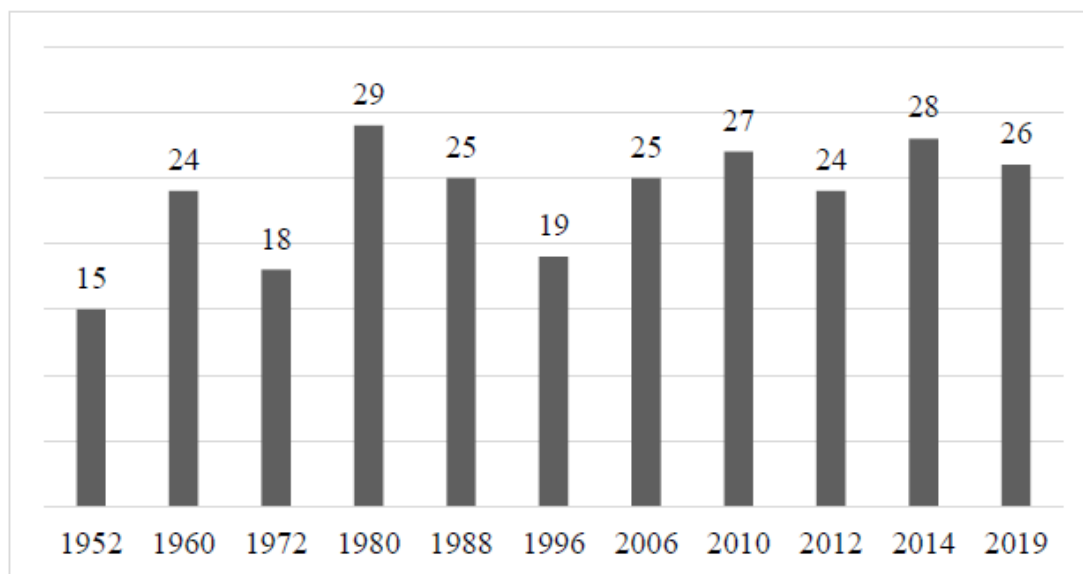
Empowering women economically is a critical component in the overall process of realizing gender equality. As well as being a matter of human rights and equity, women's economic empowerment is fundamental to the sustainable socioeconomic development of local communities and entire countries. According to the "smart economics" argument, women's economic empowerment is critical to economic growth and prosperity—for individual women, their families, their communities and their countries. Empowering women economically involves improving their economic status, power and agency. As stated by Golla, Malhotra, Nanda and Mehra, "A woman is economically empowered when she has both the ability to succeed and advance economically and the power to make and act on economic decisions. To succeed and advance economically, women need the skills and resources to compete in markets, as well as fair and equal access to economic institutions. To have the power and agency to benefit from economic activities, women need to have the ability to make and act on decisions and control resources and profits."

Thus, fostering women's economic empowerment involves creating "enabling environments" that eliminate the barriers women encounter and provide supportive frameworks for their engagement in the economic realm. Common barriers encountered by women, relative to men, include limited formal education and training; absence from decision-making bodies; poor infrastructure; constraints on access to finance and business development services, and both sociocultural and structural restrictions to their mobility. Comprehensive public policies

and service provision, along with the creation of economically empowering opportunities and the abolition of discriminatory sociocultural norms, are required to redress this situation. Within the holistic approach to women's economic empowerment, this publication considers two specific areas of intervention: gender budgeting and women's economic participation. The case studies described in this publication are illustrative—not exhaustive—of the initiatives that can be undertaken to empower women economically. No single initiative can address all aspects of women's economic empowerment or is flawless. What the case studies offer are examples of strategies that have empowered women; which practitioners may find helpful when devising and implementing policies, strategies or programmes of their own.

### **Women in Indian Politics**

Irrespective of the fact that women's political empowerment is perceived as the core for all other advancements in any society, it experiences many obstacles, notably in developing nations, including India. While in developed countries, females have more possibilities and liberty to engage actively in political lives, however, in the developing world, owing to deeply integrated cultural, religious and social beliefs about the position of females in a culture, it generates many constraints for females to be a component of decision-making in developing nations. Therefore, women's participation in the power structure and their political empowerment is still not adequate enough to analyze women's position in a political system. In order to improve their involvement at the political stage, it is essential to empower females through multiple programs and through the action scheme at the local, national, and societal levels.



**Figure: Number of women members in Rajya Sabha**

Above Figure shows the percentage of women in the Indian Parliament. However, the introduction and implementation of the Panchayat Raj institutions act did not bring significant improvement and political participation at the national level. This is mainly due to the patriarchal mindset and the hindrance towards women in the northern part of India, which leads to the overall percentage decline of women in Parliament, which is the main reason for not showing a significant statistical difference in the pre- and post-implementation of the Panchayat Raj institutions. By the 1980s, researchers and social activists started to highlight

the issue of women empowerment, and by the 20th-century research and debates on women's freedoms and gender equality began to be discussed in the Indian political arena. Political participation involves the right to vote, the right to compete, the right to stand for candidacy, and their position as campaigners and the members of the legislature.

### CONCLUSION

Political participation and empowerment of Rural Women provide ample space for the building confidence, develop leadership qualities and aware their legal and political rights. Women leadership is also imperative for their communities particularly other women and adolescent girls. Efforts related with female literacy and quality education, better health care, recognition of their status and political empowerment needs to continue for ensuring better access for socio-economic development of the district. Indian Constitution had not given the right to work as a justiciable right. But, it was in 2005 that the Indian Parliament passed the law on Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) to provide the right to work to Indian citizens of rural areas. Rural Indian women are stepping out of their private space and making a contribution in building infrastructure in the village, other than empowering themselves. The Government of India has provided an opportunity to rural women to live with dignity and honor and equal footing with the rural man. Earlier, the contribution of the rural women was invisible to the people with patriarchal mindsets.

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