



## GOVERNMENT, ECONOMIC INDEPENDENCE AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

State is one of the significant predetermined factors in the context of women empowerment. Taking other parameters constant, this factor alone has the capacity to decide the fate of her women citizens both in progressive or regressive manner like Turkey in Kamal Pasha regime or the modern Saudi or Iran in conservative regime. However, the constitution of India neither discriminates its womenfolk on any grounds of law (if there is some positive discrimination like reservation of seats for women in panchayat election) nor it supports any differentiating practices in the name of tradition or else but the statistics reflecting the status of women is alarming and we are far behind the developed regions in all sense and our government programmes are sometimes not at all inclusive, particularly in the context of gender. However, the situation has been changing gradually over time and the state has accepted women as active agents rather than a passive recipient in development programmes and schemes. Against this backdrop, this study seeks to investigate the mainstreaming process of women through government interventions. First the study analyzes the relationship between state and gender and then it goes through different government programmes and clubs them in different categories.



**KEYWORDS :** Gender, State, Government Policies.

### I. INTRODUCTION:

Indian Planning Commission started operating on the 1st of April, 1950 to assess the need of the country for human capital and material resources and to formulate economic plans for their balanced and effective utilization. The first plan commenced in 1950-51 and was followed by a series of plans. The first five year plan expressed clearly the long term objectives or goals of economic planning as follows: "Maximum production, full employment, the attainment of economic equality and social justice which constitute the accepted objectives of planning under present-day conditions are not really so many different ideas but a series of related aims which the country must work for" (Chapter 2, 1st Five Year Plan). Keeping with these objectives, 'Rural Development' always remains as the key agenda of Indian planning. The ultimate objectives of rural development were the eradication of poverty and improving the quality of the masses. In this process of development, initially, the gender aspect found little or no significance. The present paper will try to locate the changes in the status of women in mainstream programmes over time.

### II. GENDER AND STATE:

In a developing country, which is trying to raise the average standard of living of the women citizens along with their male counterpart, the state necessarily has to play a big role. Well-designed policies have the capacity to upshot more equitable distribution of opportunities and hinder inter-generation transmission of inequality particularly in the context of gender. But to reach the target, these policies could face some challenges. One of the major challenges of government policies in India is the existence of chronic intra-state

and inter-state regional disparities in terms of human development. There are some regions (mainly, the northern region) within India where the life expectancy, literacy or other basic living conditions are as poor as most deprived countries. On the other extreme, there are Kerala and Tamil Nadu having much higher level of development perhaps equivalent to first world countries (Census, 2011). Now, if the actors in advantageous region control the assets, decision making or policy making processes the catching up of disadvantaged regions could be more difficult. According to Agarwal (2000), the government policies hold on male perception and fallacious assumptions of womanhood and family. The formal definition of family as accepted by the Government of India provides the following view of intra-family gender relations as pointed out by her are: -- “(i) men are the appropriate representatives of the family in public decision making forum, ii) men are the primary producers and thus the legitimate claimants to productive resources, such as land, iii) women are largely dependents and this dependent status is unproblematic, and even desirable....”. Agarwal (2000). These fallacious definitions very often served as the basis of land allocation in resettlement schemes, social security schemes, and cash compensations in rehabilitation projects (*ibid*). For this reason, the mainstream programmes were also insensitive to women’s participation. Lastly, and most importantly, the government policies have to face acute demand deficiency in the field of public goods such as education and health in less developed regions and among women. Very often women have the gendered beliefs about their socio-economic roles and may be reluctant to adopt prescribed behavioural change by the government. Hence, the government interventions need to be well designed towards the needs and well implemented and it could lessen the socio-economic factors responsible for the lower status of women. However, there are other factors too which influence the fulfillment of the specified objectives. In this context the empowerment status of women of the household may prove to be pertinent.

### III. GENDER AND MAINSTREAM GOVERNMENT PROGRAMMES AFTER INDEPENDENCE:

Before 1971, the government of newly independent country was busy with reconstructing the economy with agricultural and industrial sector reforms, and protecting it from internal and external shocks like low harvest, war and oil price down. Poverty, as a social challenge, was first recognized by the slogan “*Garibi Hatao*” that was raised during the parliamentary election of 1971 which later became the key tone of fifth five year plan. The approach paper of fifth five year plan clearly stated that “employment is the surest way to enable the vast numbers, living below the poverty line to raise above it. Conventional fiscal measures for redistribution of income cannot by themselves make a significant impact”. Keeping with this view a range of employment generating programmes were initiated in subsequent plans. To name a few, Small Farmers Development Agency- SFDA and adjoined scheme Marginal Framers and Agricultural Laborers Development Agency –MAFALDA (started operation in 1971-72), Employment Guarantee Scheme- EGS (came into existence in 1972-73) etc. However, those programmes were not at all concerned with gender issues. None of the programmes did mention specific reservations for women or acknowledge their problems. The focus was on caste and specific underprivileged sections of the community. These employment programmes could be called the First Generation Programme of its kind.

The second wave came with the introduction of Integrated Rural Development Programme- IRDP (launched in financial year 1978 and extended in all Blocks of the country by 1980) and National Rural Employment Programme- NREP (launched in 1980 and became a regular Plan programme from April, 1981) in sixth five year plans. The basic strategy of IRDP was to transferring productive assets to the poor and the NREP aimed to provide wage employment to fill the periods of seasonal and sporadic unemployment. These two programmes took definite shift from welfare to development. It recognized women’s lack of access to resources as a critical impeding their growth but both of these programmes did not stipulate any quota for women. It was also observed that the stream of financial assistance is often bypasses women as a beneficiary and that imposes more burden of their financial distress. Therefore, this group had been entitled to certain benefits under the IRDP. With this end in view, Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas (DWCRA) was introduced as a sub-scheme of IRDP on a pilot basis in September 1982. There were two

criteria for choosing the districts- Low-female literacy and high infant mortality rates prevailed in those districts. It was proposed to cover all the districts in the country under the scheme by the end of VII<sup>th</sup> plan. Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme-**RLEGP** which was introduced in 1983, tried to mitigate the poverty gap by providing guarantee of employment to at least one member of every landless household up to 100 days in a year. The focus was to create real assets and infrastructure development. Setting up particular quota for women was first introduced in *Jawahar Rozgar Yojna- JRY* (launched in 1989 by amalgamating two programmes namely National Rural Employment Programme and Rural Landless Employment Guarantee Programme). The focal point was to provide additional gainful employment for unemployed and under employed men and women in rural areas through formation of rural economic infrastructure, community and social assets. In JRY also the government committed 30% employment to women under the scheme. With this programmes, the state has accepted women as active agents rather than a passive recipient in development programmes and schemes. However, the participation was not satisfactory. Training of Rural Youth for Self Employment (TRYSEM) was introduced in 1979 as a national scheme for training of rural youth for self-employment. The rationale for launching the programme was to curb the huge backlog of unemployment and under employment prevailing amongst the rural youth.

As per the guideline of the scheme, 40 p.c. of the candidates should be women. In this scheme, technical and entrepreneurial assistance and knowhow are afforded to the rural poor in the age group of 18-35 years to take up income generating activities for self as well as wage employment. The scheme was merged into Swarnajayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojana (SGSY) from April, 1999. These programmes may be called as the Second Generation Programmes which are mainly development projects by nature.

In the Ninth (1998-2002) and Tenth (2002-2007) Plans, the empowerment approach of women came forward that resulted in a trend to incorporate gender aspects in government initiatives mandatorily. Swarnajayanti Gram Swarojgar Yojana (SGSY) was the forerunner of this changing environment. This programme was not merely a development project rather it was an empowering model. Self-Help Groups created under the programme help the poor, particularly women; obtain credit that would empower them economically. In respect of land reforms, the government is now keen to confer joint *patta* (ownership right for both husband and wife) in place of single *patta* (usually endowed in the name of the husband). The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) that declared at least one hundred days of wage employment in a financial year also calls for 33 percent participation of women. The scheme aimed at creating durable assets such as roads, canals, ponds, wells etc within the rural economy. As per its guideline; employment has to be provided within 5 km of an applicant's residence, and minimum wages has to be paid. The applicants under the scheme are entitled to an unemployment allowance if work is not provided within 15 days of applying. In that sense, NREGS was the "largest and most ambitious social security and public works programme" in the entire plan period.

All these programmes may be called the third generation programme.

In the following subsection we will see to what extent those programmes cover women as beneficiary.

#### IV. PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN MAINSTREAM PROGRAMMES.

After independence Indian planning had done a great deal of experiments in designing policies and there exists a good range of programmes to be analyzed for. But dealing with them at a single study is an enormous task; so, we take two representative programmes from each generation delineated above.

**Table 1: Women's participation in First Generation Programmes**

Mainstream Programmes	Participation of Women to total beneficiary (%)
Community Development Programme	17.0
Employment Guarantee Scheme	9.0

Source: Misra and Puri (2010).

The first generation programme which was basically welfare oriented and considered women as recipients of development programmes didn't integrate them much. As a result, the number of women beneficiaries in such programmes is not at all commanding. As we can see in Community Development Programme after being introduced in 1952 aiming toward transforming the social and economic life of village community incorporated only 17 p.c. of women as beneficiaries. Again, under the Employment Guarantee Scheme merely 9 p.c. of beneficiaries belong to women.

**Table 2: Women's participation in Second Generation Programmes**

Mainstream Programmes	Participation of Women to total beneficiary (%)			
	1985-86	86-87	87-88	88-89
IRDP	9.89	15.13	19.38	22.48
TRYSEM	39.8	42.3	41.0	42.01

Source: Annual Reports of Ministry of Rural Development.

During the second generation programmes targeted toward development aspects of rural society, IRDP was the most comprehensive programme. The participation of women into IRDP was only around 10 p.c. during the early years of inception. However, women get into the programme increasingly in the subsequent years. TRYSEM, a wage/self-employment programme for unemployed rural youth, incorporated nearly 40 p.c. of women as its beneficiaries which actually conforms to its programme guideline.

**Table 3: Women's participation in Third Generation Programmes**

Mainstream Programmes	Participation of Women to total beneficiary (%)			
	2006-07	2008-09	2010-11	2011-12
SGSY	61.60	70.77	68.21	65.73
NREGS	40.65	47.88	47.73	49.26

Source: Annual Reports of Ministry of Rural Development and <http://www.nrega.nic.in>

The third generation programmes are mostly participatory in nature for women as opposed to the programmes of previous generations. The SGSY- National Rural Livelihood Mission (Aajeevika) was launched as a programme for self-employment of the rural poor integrating a host of social security programmes. SGSY being an anti-poverty programme in intervention and women empowerment in vision, prescribed quotas for women 40 p.c. among the eligible poor and also mandated that 50 p.c. of self-help groups formed in community development blocks should be of women's SHGs. Thus, SGSY was an endeavour to lift rural women from low-income households into market-oriented entrepreneur. SGSY is a participatory approach of development for women; since its inception in April- 1999, nearly two-third of total beneficiaries belongs to women.

NREGS is also a government scheme in which women participate in a significant extent. One of salient features of NREGS is that at least one-third of beneficiaries should be women who have registered under the scheme. From the all India data delineated in table 3 it is seen that the participation of women in NREGS is 40 p.c. or more and their extent of participation is ever increasing over the years. Since 2011-12, men and women almost equally exert their labour under this scheme.

## V. CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, it could be said that we are on a cross-road. The policies now have growing importance at the local level across caste, gender and religion. This scenario is unlike the previous situation when women are either unaware or least aware about the government policies and failed to include themselves as beneficiaries of mainstream policies. This attitude is complemented by the gender sensitive

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government policies. The need of this hour is not only to improve the status of rural women as users of social and economic goods but also to promote programmes to elevate themselves as 'human capital'.

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