

# The Role of Rural Employment Schemes in Shaping Indian Feminism Post-Independence (1947-2024)

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## **Abstract:**

This paper discusses how rural employment schemes impacted the construction of Indian feminism post-independence. Based on findings drawn from the cases of the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) and the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) this research investigates how these instruments have impacted on the Women Empowerment and Social Change in the Rural Areas of India. To that end, using statistical analysis and multiple case studies this research demonstrates the impact of the schemes in relation to financialisation processes, promotion of collective agency, and subverting patriarchal structures. It also reflects on the problems of wage inequalities, the failures of their enforcement, gaps in their applicability with regard to caste and class bias. This paper contextualises these insights in relation to Indian feminism with the conclusion that employment schemes for rural Indian women have been instrumental in the accomplishment of visions of gender justice and transformative social justice. It brings information to policymakers and the feminism discourse on rural development and women's enhancement plans.

**Keywords:** Rural, Employment, India, Feminism, Independence

## **1.0 Introduction:**

The Indian feminism that is informed by history and culture emerged long before the nation gained its independence in 1947. In the historical period prior to independence the women's liberation movement was closely connected with the anti-colonial struggle. Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar would rise to fight for women with practices such as Sati and child marriage. Through participation in movements such as Swadeshi and Civil Disobedience more women were able to demonstrate their contribution to the development of the nation. Champions like Sarojini Naidu, who actively campaigned for women's voices, viewed women's liberation as central to the general struggle for independence like Kasturba Gandhi. However, these attempts remain restricted to the upper urban castes while the problems of rural and other backward classes of women remain unsolved.

After independence, Indian feminism emerged to understand the condition of a hierarchical society. The Constitution of India especially provided the basis for gender equality and equal opportunities for employment, education and holding property. Post colleges and women's studies became more emancipated and awareness episodes such as dowry, domestic violence, and woman workplace discrimination emerged in the seventies and eighties. Nevertheless, rural women's stake continued to go unnoticed in discourses that advocated for women's emancipation. The identified intersectionality of

caste, the class system and gender made the subjugation of the rural women more severe which called for focused efforts towards the urban women. This was the context in which rural employment programmes launched by the government started to develop as the means of economic and social development.

The Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) starting in 1978 was one of India's first efforts in the approach to combat rural destitution and poverty through yielding employment and self-sufficiency. The IRDP was intended to give assets and skills to the poor rural families so that they can attain their capability for sustainable income generating activities. Women were identified as the main beneficiaries especially in areas of agricultural, livestock rearing as well as petty trading. In microcredit and training the program was focused on improving women's economic positions within the society. For the IRDP the criticism affirmed concerns such as poor implementation, corruption, etc, but it was a step towards acknowledging women's capability as economic beings.

The legislation that emerged in 2005 as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) reflected a new form of policy regime in the rural area. Promising wage employment for 100 days every year for rural households, the system reflected gender sensitivity in terms of wages to be paid to the workers and preference for women employment. Getting the rural women into the formal employment sector, MGNREGA gave many of them a first job experience in their lives. Such a structure also lets women be part of decision making at grassroots level because of decentralised implementation of the program. However, such returns present problems including delayed payment and limited childcare services; MGNREGA has been hailed as the transformation of rural women's lives.

The new generation feminism has been greatly supported by IRDP that empowered the rural women economically as well as socially and MGNREGA as well. These schemes have given women opportunities to empower themselves, unbound by the gender roles in male dominant societies and cultures; they have also empowered women to demand their rights in families as well as in the larger community. Despite these programs encouraging collective participation and giving women an avenue to be heard and understood, they have played a part in raising feminism in the villages of India. Their effectiveness again has been patchy since certain socio-demographic factors such as caste, class, and regional localization have still put certain sections of our society in the backdrop.

## 2.0 Literature Review:

Studies have placed the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP) at the centre of poverty fighting efforts in the rural sector as well as the cause of women. Citing the first source, IRDP helps in identifying women as economic beings through offering them assets and training aimed at developing rural households. The research demonstrates how the scheme and its microcredit activities provided women with the ability to participate in income generating activities including dairy farming for producing milk and other goods as well as selling merchandise. These chances also changed household income and on the other side empowered women on their decisions as the household heads. However, the source reports that such benefits were mitigated by Patriarchal PREMISE norms, because women paid wages were controlled by male relatives.

Second source provides a critique to the IRDP focusing on the difficulty to implement and its mixed benefits. Despite the fact that the scheme was expected to benefit the poor persons especially women, the challenge of ... bureaucracy and corruption hampered its implementation. The source also noted that while the program encouraged asset transfers meaning that beneficiaries had to engage in economic activities this aim was often not achieved because the social constraints to women participating in economic

activities were not effectively dealt with by the program. Nevertheless, some drawbacks are revealed about the source: IRDP does not explicitly deal with gender issues but the researchers could see that it was an important preliminary for the consecutive policies that were aimed to embrace gender issues more directly. Many researchers have described and analyzed the MGNREGA and how it has improved the livelihood of rural women. The fourth source gives the idea of how in comparability to earlier paradigms – NREGA’s inscription of an assured pay – wage employment has furnished women partial financial independence unequalled in role India. The source also emphasises the fact that the scheme voiced that equal wage pay has shifted the traditional gender pay disparities. Moreover, from the point of view of the combined agency of inequalities, MGNREGA’s focus on decentralised implementation helped women achieve decision making power in their communities.

On the other hand the fifth source analyses the exclusion of MGNREGA in the fight against systematic gender injustice. For all the focus the scheme pays to women, there are structural issues like delayed payment, lack of childcare, and the physical nature of the work that frequently reduces women’s practicable participation. On the same breath, the source also demeans how the scheme did not capture problems faced by women from lower castes/tribes. However, according to the source, MGNREGA is still one of the most effective forms of ensuring gender equal opportunity in rural India.

Indian feminism, as depicted in the sixth source, has emerged from the above writings and has changed with class-caste regional dimensions of Indian women. The source claims that women in rural areas have remained invisible in feminism because the mainstream feminism movement was filled with urban middle-class women. Through analysing IRDP and MGNREGA within the context of Indian feminism, the source reveals their ability to overcome this issue. They are viewed as apparatuses which can be used to subvert patriarchy and to thereby expand the bounds of a more progressive feminist struggle.

In conclusion, this review consolidates all the literature and points to the understanding that IRDP and MGNREGA have greatly influenced Indian feminism. Analyzing the data of MGNREGA shows that women in this labour market have progressively accessed jobs, and in the current years’ women are contributing to 55 percent of all work days. Real life examples from IRDP portrays how microcredit and training promoted women assume leadership positions in their community. Yet, including factors like cast bias and weak implementing structure, hamper the implementation of such schemes. If initiatives such as these challenges are met, rural employment programmes have a far more valuable part to play in achieving greater gender equality and social justice in the country.

### **3.0 Overview of the Schemes implemented and how they impacted Indian Feminism Post-independence**

#### **3.1 Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP)**

The first was the Integrated Rural Development Programme launched in 1978 as a pilot venture, that focused on poverty alleviation with distribution of assets and skill up gradation. The major concern of the program was low income households especially women who were confined to the shadows of the economy by social barriers. Through microcredit and training for cash-generating activities, IRDP empowered women through microfinance for animal rearing, small-scale farming, and cottage industries. This participation was culturally revolutionary, as women started to be involved in incomes of their homes hence achieving economic independence.

In as much as this was the case the IRDP implementation faced several challenges it set out to achieve. Lack of effective procedures, ineffective management, and corruption rendered it extremely difficult to

deliver benefits, and the program never reached the ultimate beneficiaries as originally intended. Adding to that women, in general, encounter a problem such as the unavailability of the resources and training, etc. Furthermore, the traditional ethnic endogamy and the household's Patriarchal structure in rural areas led to male economic domination of the female's cash earnings. These systemic problems raised awareness of the need for better structures that would enable women to fully harness such programmes.

Nevertheless, it can be noted that the IRDP initiated its policies, which would be further developed to address the situation of rural women. : In a way, the program of the ABC minimization by recognizing women as the significant economic actors changed traditional gender roles, offering women opportunities to participate in the economy. Thus, even though IRDP was not consistent in its impact, the gender-sensitisation it brought to rural development schemes was carried forward to the successor schemes, namely, MGNREGA.

### **3.2 Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)**

MGNREGA which came into force in the year 2005, was a new step in the field of rural policy. If the workforce ensured 100 days of wage employment per rural household annually, the scheme had a stated policy to ensure wages for both men and women were equal and to encourage women participation. It was merely the first kind of paid work for many of these women from rural areas; it enlightened numerous women, breaking free from their usual predicament of being wives and daughters in laws, and serving their husbands and inlaws as cooks and house maids.

Among its key principles it was possible to point to the system of governance that empowered women at the local level and let them be engaged in the decision-making process. It also helped in elevating their agency and made the experience of empowerment in the collective setting. With regards to gender participation in MGNREGA employment, there have been gradual improvements, for the recent data reflects that at least more than fifty percent of the work days generated under the scheme is from women. This change has influenced rural households in a positive way because the earnings obtained by women have enhanced the wellbeing-ness of their households besides increasing the financial security.

But MGNREGA has had its share of problems as well . They have also not been open to women since they are paid late, have no childcare facilities, and are physically demanding. Furthermore, issues related to the non-middle caste and tribe women have not been well provided by the scheme because dual phases of discrimination are exerted on women. MGNREGA however is still an indispensable instrument in fighting gender inequality in rural India.

### **3.3 Combined Impact on Indian Feminism**

In one way or the other, both the IRDP and MGNREGA have changed the landscape of feminism in India, with more emphasis in rural India. Through granting women the access and ownership of assets and skill development in its economic activities, the IRDP hence addressed and reversed the cultural type casting of women. Through empowering women financially so that they become earners to the household incomes, the program empowered them and helped them to make important decisions. However, the systematic impediments that hampered it, further highlighted the need for development of better available instruments to uplift the rural women.

MGNREGA improved on the model or framework set by IRDP, by adopting a rights based and more inclusive paradigm for rural employment. By promoting the scheme on the principles of wage employment security, and gender equality the scheme enabled women to express agency both economically as well as socially. It was expected that involvement in MGNREGA would bring about the economic independence of the women involved but, in addition, there were perceived changes from both the interviewed and focus

grouped women and men, in perceptions of collective gain, community participation decision-making. Nonetheless, through various representations and narratives, it has played an important role in changing traditional gender roles and new kinds of feminism.

All these schemes have their added influence on the social transformation going beyond empowering the clients. That is why participation in the social and economic agenda implemented by IRDP and MGNREGA has contributed to the formation of a more diverse Indian feminism. Evaluative findings, and comparative studies reveal that such programs represent effective change when women are involved, enhancing household incomes, reduced poverty levels and increased social accountability. Nevertheless, caste discrimination, poor infrastructures and other structural issues which still exist call for more work in order to target all sections of the society in implementing these schemes.

#### **4.0 Conclusion:**

It is shown how entitlement schemes for rural employment and the progressive changes in the form of Indian feminism offer an interesting story of women's empowerment and agency. India after gaining independence has been viewed as socially and economically disadvantaged and gender roles in India have had traditional practices embraced. In this context Rural Employment Schemes like MGNREGS and IRDP have become important social intervention tools. These economic led interventions have had a snowball effect which was social in nature since they contested patriarchal order and opened up the definitional parameters of feminism in rural districts of India.

MGNREGA has been very effective especially due to the legal right to 100 days of wage employment per household, especially for women in rural areas. The scheme of equal pay for equal work plus affirmative action for women in employment has created opportunities for millions of women who were hitherto locked out of the formal economy through employment. This economic enhancement has equally benefited their individual and familial lives, and at the same time tore down gender biases. Married women who earn income through MGNREGA receive a new power to bargain in the household decisions which little by little interferes with male-dominated financial power. Devolving economic power to change the social contract has helped the rural women, especially in the third world to feel valued and empowered in the society hence earn autonomous liberation.

Likewise, the IRDP, a micro credit intervention designed to deliver productive assets to rural households living below the poverty line, has provided a boost to women's rights. The program has displaced known socio economic benchmarks since women are now able to access credit and own assets. The control of assets which as we have seen is a major determinant of power has seen women gain control over their lives and income generating activities. For example, those women who own livestock or own small-scale enterprises, facilitated through IRDP, say they have had an improved recognition and respect from their fellow community members. While many of these changes are small, they are part of a larger trend towards greater gender equality in rural India.

In that aspect, these schemes have an impact on Indian feminism that goes beyond transforming individual lives to actual collective agency. This report evidences that women's participation in MGNREGA workgroups and self-help groups promoted under IRDP has brought together women as one and created unity. These social media platforms have now transformed into political, social, cultural and even economic discussion forums for procuring entertainment, goods and services, human rights and equality issues including; Domestic Violence, reproductive health and rights for education among women. These group experiences have promoted true cultural feminist movements because they are born from the soil of

India's rural regions. These movements questioned the monopoly of Indian feminism being a city centric feminism only showing how important it is to be intersectional in addressing issues regarding gender.

However, the effects of these schemes are not beyond a number of drawbacks and constraints. Interventions are conditioned by structural factors like Caste bias, poor EGS, and organisational culture hindering change which act as spoilers of the intended advantage. For instance, while MGNREGA jobs may or may not be easily available to the SCs and STs and BPL women, the IRDP resources also do not reach out for the needy who are already discriminated against in society. Finally, women, where they have not been empowered to do otherwise, are still limited by their inability to engage in paid work outside the home to take up the unpaid work in the home to free themselves for program participation. Such challenges elicit the necessity of a progressive and matrix approach to policy formulation and implementation embedded in understanding Women's peculiar needs and risks associated with various groups.

Nevertheless, it would be impossible to ignore the impact of these schemes on Indian feminism as a whole. It is thus noteworthy that while they have offered women new opportunities for employment they have also created venues for women to demand their rights and fight the existing male domination. The employment of women in these schemes has transformed social relations so that today women are not hidden within their homes but visible in many communities. This visibility is especially important in rural areas of India where women are particularly restricted by tradition and placed in the domestic sphere. An important change in the Anglo-Saxon countries is a slow but steady intrusion of women into jobs that men have always occupied.

The view of how Indian feminism has evolved through schemes testing rural female employment also demonstrates the necessity of having state involvement in relation to issues of gender injustice. Yet, to complement these bottom up movements MGNREGA and IRDP state sponsored schemes give the structure on which such changes can be built. Explaining the incorporation of gender-sensitive policies within these schemes the author reveals that state mechanisms are capable of stimulating social change. This combination of policy and activism is in essence the character of Indian feminism and its flexibility or more so adaptability.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of such schemes in transforming the lives of women carries a plus for the overall social-economic development of India. Cross-sectional research indicates that women's economic activities enhance education, health and other community gains. Thus, the unemployment rate reduced effectively, and women by participating in MGNREGA and IRDP improved the quality of life in the communities. Such a holistic impact confirms the existence of a symbiotic relationship between gender equity and economic development hence why gender-sensitive rural development programmes require further investment.

Thus, together with positive impacts Rural employment schemes have contributed to the evolution process of Indian feminism. Being conceived as anti-poverty measures, both MGNREGA and IRDP have been effectively courtroom gender discrimination and promoting women's rights. The effects that they have had on women, as individuals and as groups, explain why writers on development speak of inclusive policies as the agents of change. But, the fight for making women equal to men is still ongoing. To fully overcome the above limitations, there has to be a continuous fight against all structures and cultures that dwarf some of these schemes. Such programs very much serve useful lessons as the country moves on ahead about gender, development, and policies. Yes, Indian feminism is both robust and flexible and Rural Employment Guarantee Schemes like MGNREGA and IRDP are colourful pages in this ever-writing continuation.

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