



"Inclusion of Rural Women in the Development Process: A Study of Ganjam District in Odisha"

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Abstract:-

The development of rural women plays a pivotal role in shaping the socio-economic progress of any region, and Ganjam district of Odisha is no exception. Home to a predominantly agrarian and rural population, Ganjam has witnessed gradual yet significant transformations in the lives of its women. Traditionally confined to domestic roles, rural women in the district are increasingly participating in education, self-help groups (SHGs), agriculture, micro-enterprises, and local governance. This shift is the result of targeted development initiatives by the government, NGOs, and community-based organizations aiming to empower women socially, economically, and politically. Despite persistent challenges such as poverty, illiteracy, and gender inequality, the women of Ganjam are steadily becoming agents of change within their communities. This paper explores the ongoing development processes, key drivers of change, and the impact on the lives of rural women in Ganjam district.

This study is motivated by the need to critically examine the level of participation of rural women in development processes in Ganjam district. It aims to understand whether rural women are truly being empowered or are merely passive beneficiaries of top-down development agendas. Addressing this gap is essential to ensuring that development is inclusive, sustainable, and reflective of the needs and voices of rural women.

Keywords: - Rural women, Inclusive development, gender equality, SHG, PRIs,

Introduction

The inclusion of women in the development process has emerged as a crucial factor in achieving equitable and sustainable growth, especially in developing countries like India. Rural women, who constitute a significant portion of the population, play vital roles in agriculture, household management, and local economies. Despite their contributions, they often remain marginalized in decision-making processes and face systemic barriers in accessing education, healthcare, employment, and governance structures.

In India, efforts to empower women have been integrated into various development schemes and policies. However, the impact of these initiatives varies across regions due to differences in socio-economic conditions, cultural norms, and administrative effectiveness. Odisha, a state with a predominantly rural population, presents a complex landscape where traditional practices coexist with modern development programs. Within this context, Ganjam district stands out as a region with both challenges and opportunities in promoting rural women's participation in the development process.

Ganjam district, located in southern Odisha, has a diverse demographic profile and is known for its active Self-Help Group (SHG) movement, grassroots institutions, and agricultural economy. While there has been noticeable progress in sectors like education and health, gender disparities persist in areas such as economic participation, political representation, and access to resources. This study seeks to explore the level and nature of rural women's inclusion in the development process in Ganjam district. It aims to identify the barriers they face, evaluate the effectiveness of current initiatives, and suggest strategies for deeper and more meaningful integration of women into the development framework.

Statement of the Problem: Despite numerous government initiatives and policy interventions aimed at women's empowerment and rural development, a significant portion of rural women in India continue to face socio-economic exclusion. In particular, rural women in Odisha often struggle with limited access to education, healthcare, property rights, financial resources, and decision-making platforms. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms, gender-based discrimination, and poverty further hinder their active participation in the development process.

Ganjam district, though relatively developed in comparison to other districts in Odisha, reflects these challenges in various forms. While programs such as Self-Help Groups (SHGs), livelihood missions, and women-focused schemes have been introduced, the actual inclusion of women in planning, implementing, and benefiting from development initiatives remains inconsistent and inadequate. There exists a gap between policy intent and ground-level reality.

Objectives of the Study

To assess the socio-economic status of rural women in Ganjam district

To examine the extent of their participation in development programs and governance

To identify barriers hindering their inclusion in the development process

To recommend measures for enhancing their role in rural development

Review of Literature

The role of women in rural development has been widely recognized as a key factor for achieving inclusive and sustainable growth. Numerous studies have explored the intersection of gender and development, focusing on how social structures, policies, and cultural norms influence women's participation in the development process.

Women in Rural Development

According to Boserup (1970), the contributions of women in agricultural economies have often been overlooked in development planning. Her work emphasized the need for gender-sensitive development approaches. (Kabeer, 1999; Chant, 2008) argue that empowering women is not only a matter of equity but also enhances the effectiveness of development interventions.

Gender and Development in India

In the Indian context, several researchers (Desai & Thakkar, 2007; Rao, 2012) have highlighted the persistent gender disparities in education, employment, health, and political participation. Despite progressive policies such as reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) and the introduction of schemes like Mahila Samakhya and National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), the actual inclusion of women in development has been slow and uneven.

Women's Participation in Governance and SHGs

Panchayati Raj has been a transformative platform for rural women, especially after the 73rd Constitutional Amendment. Studies (Panda, 2008; Behera, 2013) note that while participation has increased quantitatively, challenges related to capacity, caste dynamics, and male dominance persist. The rise of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) under programs like Mission Shakti in Odisha has also been widely studied (Mohanty, 2011), showing positive outcomes in financial inclusion and social capital among rural women.

RESEARCH GAP:-Most existing studies either focus on program outcomes or macro-level data, with limited micro-level assessments of women's lived experiences and agency in the development process. Moreover, there is a lack of district-specific empirical studies in Ganjam that analyze both policy impacts and grassroots realities from a gender lens.

Methodology

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis to gain a comprehensive understanding of the inclusion of rural women in the development process in Ganjam district, Odisha.

Structured Questionnaires were used to collect quantitative data on demographic details, income, education, participation in programs, etc

Secondary Data from government reports, census data, Books, Journals and program records were also used for background analysis

Study Area

The research was conducted in selected rural blocks of Ganjam district, like chatrapur, ganjam, khallikote. which is located in the southern part of Odisha. The district has a significant rural population dependent on agriculture and informal labor, with a large number of women engaged in household and economic activities. Areas with active women's Self-Help Groups (SHGs), Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), and development programs were prioritized.

Causes Hindering Inclusion of Rural Women in the Development Process

Despite various development initiatives and schemes targeted at empowering women, several underlying causes continue to obstruct the full and meaningful inclusion of rural women in Ganjam district. These causes can be broadly categorized as follows:

4.1 Socio-Cultural Barriers

Patriarchal Mindset: Deep-rooted gender norms discourage women from participating in public and economic life.

Early Marriage and Childbearing: Many girls are married off young, limiting their access to education and employment.

Restrictions on Mobility: Social norms often prevent women from moving freely, thereby excluding them from training programs and community meetings.

4.2 Educational Constraints

Low Literacy Rates: Although improving, female literacy in rural areas is still relatively low, restricting awareness of rights and opportunities.

Lack of Skill Development: Limited access to vocational training and digital literacy hampers women's participation in modern economic activities.

4.3 Economic Dependence

Limited Access to Resources: Women often do not own land or property, which affects their ability to access credit or participate in livelihood programs.

Unpaid Labor: A significant portion of women's work in agriculture and households is unpaid and unrecognized.

Employment Barriers: Formal employment opportunities for rural women are scarce, and wage gaps persist.

Role and status

The study on the inclusion of rural women in the development process in Ganjam district revealed several important insights based on field data, interviews, and secondary sources. The findings highlight both progress and persisting challenges across various domains:

- **Socio-Economic Status**

A significant number of rural women are engaged in agriculture and informal labor, but their work is often unpaid or underpaid.

Most women have limited control over financial resources, and land ownership among women is rare.

The literacy rate among women has improved, but many older women still lack basic education and awareness of their rights.

Participation in Development Programs

Many women are members of SHGs, and Mission Shakti has had a visible impact on their economic confidence.

However, the utilization of government schemes (e.g., MGNREGS, housing, health, and nutrition) varies widely depending on awareness levels and administrative efficiency.

Women often depend on local male leaders or SHG coordinators to access benefits, indicating a lack of autonomy.

- **Role in Governance and Leadership**

The reservation policy has increased the numerical participation of women in Panchayati Raj Institutions, but real decision-making is often male-dominated.

Many women representatives face challenges due to lack of education, training, and social pressure, limiting their effectiveness.

- **Barriers to Inclusion**

Cultural norms and patriarchal attitudes remain the most persistent barriers, restricting mobility, voice, and choices.

Lack of transportation, digital connectivity, and child care facilities prevent women from engaging fully in livelihood or training activities.

Incidents of gender-based violence and harassment, though underreported, contribute to fear and withdrawal from public spaces.

- **Institutional and NGO Support**

Active involvement of NGOs has been effective in mobilizing women and raising awareness, especially in areas where government outreach is weak.

Major Initiatives to Enhance System Coverage for the Development Process of Rural Women

To ensure a more comprehensive and effective development process for rural women, several government, non-governmental, and grassroots initiatives have been implemented across India, and more specifically in Odisha and Ganjam district. These initiatives aim to address barriers, empower women, and ensure systemic inclusion of rural women in socio-economic growth. The following are major initiatives that can enhance system coverage and create a more inclusive development process for rural women:

Mission Shakti (Odisha)

Mission Shakti is Odisha's flagship program aimed at empowering rural women through Self-Help Groups (SHGs). This initiative focuses on the economic upliftment of women by providing them access to microfinance, training, and income-generating activities. It also includes capacity-building programs that enable women to take leadership roles in their communities, fostering social capital and financial independence. Strengthening SHGs through better access to government schemes and training in entrepreneurship can significantly enhance the system's coverage of rural women's development.

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS)

MGNREGS is a nationwide initiative that guarantees 100 days of wage employment to rural households. It provides a crucial safety net for rural women who participate in labor-intensive work such as road construction, water conservation, and afforestation. Increasing female participation in MGNREGS, ensuring equal wages, and improving worksite conditions will enhance women's economic empowerment. MGNREGS can also be leveraged to integrate gender-responsive planning, ensuring that more women benefit from these opportunities.

Women's Reservation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs)

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment mandated 33% reservation for women in local governance, which has significantly increased women's participation in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). However, while representation has increased, challenges such as male-dominated decision-making and lack of capacity-building remain. To ensure that women have a more meaningful role, there needs to be continuous leadership training, mentorship programs, and awareness campaigns to break the barriers of patriarchal control.

Odisha Livelihoods Mission (OLM)

The Odisha Livelihoods Mission focuses on improving the livelihoods of rural women through skill development, entrepreneurship training, and market linkages. By promoting activities like organic farming, handicrafts, and small-scale industries, OLM aims to create sustainable income sources for rural women. Expansion and strengthening of rural infrastructure (like roads, electricity, and internet access) are necessary to enhance the system coverage of this initiative.

Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY)

The Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY) aims to provide affordable housing for the rural poor, with a significant focus on women-headed households. Ensuring that women have the legal right to property and inheritance can help improve their socio-economic status. A robust system of monitoring and reducing delays in project execution can ensure that rural women benefit from housing initiatives.

Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP)

Launched by the Government of India, the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (BBBP) program focuses on addressing issues related to girl child education, health, and gender bias. Through campaigns and community mobilization, the program aims to improve the status of the girl child, reduce female infanticide, and increase enrollment in schools. This program helps build the foundation for long-term empowerment of rural women by ensuring equal opportunities for education and health.

National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM)

The National Rural Livelihoods Mission (NRLM) works to alleviate poverty and promote livelihood diversification through the formation of SHGs and federations. The NRLM promotes social inclusion, particularly targeting women in marginalized communities (such as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes). Systemic coverage can be enhanced by improving access to credit facilities, capacity-building for entrepreneurial activities, and greater linkages to markets.

Digital Financial Inclusion

Digital financial inclusion programs, such as those under Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY), aim to provide rural women with bank accounts and access to financial services. With greater digital literacy and access to mobile banking, rural women can participate in the modern economy, manage their finances, and improve their livelihoods. Extending these initiatives with mobile banking kiosks and training on digital transactions will enhance their reach and effectiveness.

Health and Nutrition Programs

The National Health Mission (NHM) and Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) play a crucial role in improving the health and nutrition of rural women. These programs focus on maternal health, childcare, and nutrition support. By increasing awareness and improving access to health services, rural women can better manage their well-being, which is critical for their ability to participate in development activities. Additionally, improving sanitation and clean drinking water will reduce health burdens on women.

Gender-Based Violence Prevention Initiatives

Programs addressing gender-based violence (GBV), such as One-Stop Centers and Women Helplines, provide vital support to women in crisis. Strengthening legal protection, increasing awareness, and establishing safe spaces in rural areas will help reduce violence and harassment, encouraging more women to participate in economic and social activities without fear.

Community-Based Monitoring and Evaluation

To enhance system coverage, it is critical to establish community-based monitoring and evaluation (CME) frameworks that allow rural women to have a say in the design, implementation, and evaluation of development programs. This would ensure that women's needs and perspectives are directly incorporated into the development process.

Findings

However, the findings also show that empowerment initiatives such as SHGs, women's leadership training, and livelihood programs have had tangible impacts on women's lives, improving their financial independence, social status, and political engagement. Institutional support, particularly through NGOs, has been vital in filling gaps where government services are limited or inaccessible.

For a more inclusive and equitable development process, it is essential that future initiatives build on the existing strengths and address the systemic barriers that rural women face. This can be achieved by improving education, ensuring gender-sensitive policies, enhancing economic opportunities, and fostering a culture of gender equality at the grassroots level.

Ultimately, inclusive development is not just a matter of economic growth but also of achieving social justice, where rural women have an equal voice, equal opportunities, and the freedom to shape their futures. Only through comprehensive, coordinated, and sustained efforts at all levels of governance and society can the goal of inclusive development for rural women in Ganjam and beyond be realized.

Conclusion

The study on the inclusion of rural women in the development process in Ganjam district highlights both the strides made and the persistent challenges in empowering rural women. While various government programs and initiatives, such as Mission Shakti, MGNREGS, and the Odisha Livelihoods Mission, have shown positive outcomes in promoting economic, political, and social empowerment for women, several systemic barriers still hinder the full participation of rural women in development processes.

Key challenges such as socio-cultural constraints, limited access to education, economic dependence, and gender-based violence continue to limit women's ability to make independent decisions and engage meaningfully in the development process. Additionally, while women have gained political representation through Panchayati Raj institutions, their real influence in decision-making remains curtailed by societal norms and institutional challenges.

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