**RURAL WOMEN ENTREPRENEURSHIP : AN EMERGING TREND IN INDIA**

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**ABSTRACT**

Woman Entrepreneurs are “women who arrange and operate an enterprise, accepts tough role with an inner desire to be economically independent individually and simultaneously provide employment opportunities to others”. Indian society is changing drastically after urbanisation and globalisation. The economic growth of a country no doubt, depends on the participation of women in the rural development of a country**.** Despite their efforts and expertise, women entrepreneurs often struggle a lot more than their male counterparts to make it big and gain recognition within the business community. Therefore, rural entrepreneurship amongst women has been affected greatly by socio-economic barriers and has raised serious concern all over the world, more so in India. In India, there are around eight million women entrepreneurs, with Tamil Nadu having the highest share.

This research paper is mainly concerned with the women entrepreneurship situation in rural India. This is based on secondary data from books, journals, articles, web sites and government reports. The study highlights the current status of women entrepreneurs and their invaluable contributions towards sustainable economic growth in rural India. This paper also focuses on the future prospects of women entrepreneurs and the role of government in building a passionate, empowered and inspiring women entrepreneurs. This study also aims to reveal some important strategies for empowering rural women in India.

**Introduction**

***“There is no tool for development more effective than the empowerment of women.”- Kofi Annan***

Indian women now, have made a significant increase in their participation in the country’s workforce and have achieved marked positions in various fields, including politics, science, etc. Women have made their remarkable contributions in the corporate sector too, both as job searchers and as job creators. In the context of economic liberalisation and globalisation, women entrepreneurship is becoming more prevalent both in urban as well as in rural front. Rural women who build their businesses are better able to make decisions, improve their financial situations, and get respect from their peers and the community.

India is a diverse country with a rich cultural heritage. The social scenario in India is fast changing. From a time when women were not allowed to venture out of their homes, women, now a days have achieved education standards and are participating in social and political activities with equal enthusiasm as men. Historically, Indian women like Gargi, Brahmi, Damyanti, Laxmi Bai & Razia Sultana were powerful and significant decision makers. At present, there is a revolution in the role and status of women, throughout the world. Women worldwide are breaking away from traditional and stereotypic roles and are entering into the conventional male dominated roles and are successfully doing justice to their new found roles. Hence in this era of social change and evolution, it is essential to study women entrepreneurship and how it can be encouraged and boosted further. It is found that those countries practicing gender equality and provision of equal opportunity, in such countries there is greater wealth, social development and development of organization.

Hence, the role of women in modern organizations and as entrepreneurs is of great academic interest. Government of India has defined women enterprise as “an enterprise which is owned and controlled by females, with a minimum 51 per cent of the capital, and working with at least 51 per cent female’s employees”.

**Objectives of the study:**

* To find the issues and challenges faced by rural women entrepreneurs in India.
* To find the factors responsible for influence rural women to become entrepreneurs.
* To study the effective support of the government on women entrepreneurship.

**Challenges faced by rural women entrepreneurs in India:**

The following are some of the challenges faced by rural women entrepreneurs in their entrepreneurship journey:

**Lack of education:** Many rural Indian women entrepreneurs lack formal education, which limits their access to market data, financial resources, and networking opportunities. This restricts their capacity to launch and manage prosperous firms.

**Financial limitations:** It is common for rural women business owners to lack the funding necessary to launch and expand their enterprises. They can have trouble getting credit, especially if they don't have any assets to put up as security or a credit history.

**Lack of market information:** Rural women company owners sometimes don't have access to market data, which makes it difficult for them to recognize and seize business possibilities.

**Limited access to technology:** Lack of access to technology prevents many rural Indian women entrepreneurs from effectively marketing their goods and services, carrying out business transactions, and gaining access to information.

**Cultural and societal norms:** Rural women business owners frequently encounter cultural and societal norms that restrict their capacity to launch and manage firms. They might experience prejudice because of their gender, caste, or religion, for instance**.**

**Inadequate infrastructure:** Rural women business owners sometimes suffer a lack of transportation, energy, and water supply, which makes it difficult for them to run their enterprises.

**Strategies to Overcome these Challenges:**

The following are the important strategies to overcome the above challenges listed by the rural women entrepreneurs:

* **Increasing Education levels**: It is important to work on raising the educational levels of rural women, especially in the fields of technology, business management, and financial literacy.
* **Offering financial assistance**: It's important to make it easier for rural women entrepreneurs to access financial aid like grants and microcredit. This could be accomplished by setting up specific funds and initiatives that cater to rural women business owners.
* **Improving access to market information**: Efforts should be made to enhance rural women entrepreneurs' access to market information. This could be accomplished by developing online resources that offer data on market conditions, costs, and commercial prospects.
* **Enhancing access to technology**: Efforts should be made to increase rural women entrepreneurs' access to technology. This could be accomplished by developing mobile apps that offer

**Findings of the study:**

The study revealed the fact that, that lack of access to finance and credit is one of the major challenges faced by rural women entrepreneurs. Women entrepreneurs face difficulties in obtaining loans from banks and financial institutions due to various reasons, including lack of collateral, low creditworthiness, and limited financial literacy. Another significant challenge faced by rural women entrepreneurs is the lack of access to market information and resources. This includes information about market trends, demand for products, pricing, and distribution channels. Due to this, many women entrepreneurs are unable to identify potential markets and expand their businesses.

The study also found that social and cultural barriers are significant challenges for women entrepreneurs in rural areas. Women entrepreneurs often face discrimination and bias based on their gender, which affects their ability to access resources, networks, and opportunities. Additionally, inadequate infrastructure and limited availability of resources such as electricity, transportation, and raw materials pose significant challenges to rural women entrepreneurs. This makes it difficult for them to scale up their businesses and compete with other players in the market.

We take great pride in having so many exemplary rural women business owners. A list of the Top 10 Inspiring Rural Women Entrepreneurs in India is made from this.The previously ignored contributions of rural Indian women entrepreneurs are undoubtedly gathering steam and steadily increasing. Here are a few exemplary and accomplished rural women business owners who have been transforming mindsets, shattering stereotypes, and empowering other women in society.

**ANITA DEVI** is one of the most successful women entrepreneurs in India who works magic with growing organic mushrooms. She was trained in growing mushrooms at Dr. Rajendra Prasad Central Agriculture University in Samastipur, Bihar, and G.B. Pant University of Agriculture and Technology in Uttarakhand. Her hard work and success in her venture has been an inspiration and encouragement to dozens of women from her own village and also from neighbouring villages to start mushroom farming as a startup venture.

**CHETNA GALA SINHA** a social entrepreneur who has been working to empower women in rural areas in India by teaching entrepreneurial skills. In 1997 she set up “Mann Deshi Mahila Sahakari Bank”, India’s first Bank for and by rural women. The bank has provided over 50 million US dollars to support women entrepreneurs’ projects of any kind.
She also created a foundation called Mann Deshi foundation which runs Business Schools, a Community Radio and a Chamber of Commerce for rural women micro entrepreneurs. Her contributions have supported over 8,50,000 rural women.

**PREMA GOPALAN** was an Indian social activist and entrepreneur. She was the co-founder of “(SPARC)- Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres”. She has also been the executive director of “Swayam Shikshan Prayog- (SSP)” for over 20 years, supporting poor rural women in entrepreneurial schemes. She was also well known for disaster relief work in Bihar, Gujarat, Kerala, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. Her contributions towards the upliftment of rural women can never be erased from our minds.

**THINLAS CHOROL** an activist and entrepreneur from Ladakh. She founded the “Ladakhi Women’s Travel Company”, the first female owned and operated travel company, with the aim to train more women guides into the field of trekking industry which was otherwise male dominated field. Her company has helped the women in the villages to generate income for themselves.

**NAVALBEN DALSANGBHAI CHAUDHARY** is an entrepreneur who runs a dairy farm at home and sells Rs. 1 crore worth of milk in a year. Her determination and hard work have been an inspiration to many rural women. She has received two Lakshmi Awards and three Best Pashupalak Awards for her achievements in the field of dairy farming in Banaskantha district in Gujarat.

**SOBITA TAMULI** is an innovative entrepreneur who started her own organic manure brand called ‘Seuji’, to empower women in her village in Assam and also improve rural economy. Tamuli’s Aii-Women Self- Help Group manufactures and sells organic, high-quality manure which contains cow dung, banana plant, earthworms, khaar and fallen leaves. All the ingredients are easily available and very economical to use as well. Sobita also ventured into making the traditional Japi as well. Assam’s Japi is one of the most important cultural icons of the state. Her self-help group makes this traditional headgear of all sizes, colours, designs and shapes.

 **PABIBEN RABARI** isthewoman who invented a new embroidery art form called Hari Jari, also known as Pabi Jari, after her own name. She is popularlyknown as to as “The Hard Jari Woman”. She is the first woman from the Rabari community, to own a website, conduct business and take Rabari embroidery to the world. Today, her designs have crossed the borders of Kutch to be featured in Bollywood and Hollywood films, including clients across the globe. Her artisan enterprise offers financial freedom to women of her village in Gujarat and also aims to keep the Rabari embroidery tradition alive.

**GODAVARI SATPUTE** is a woman from Maharashtra, who runs her own paper lamp-making business. She offers employment opportunities to the women in her village. She was awarded Woman Entrepreneur of the year 2013, at the Youth International Business Awards Function. She ensures that every woman employed in her business to have financial independence. She also provides creche and educational facilities for the children of her women employees to help them get a better life.

**ANITA GUPTA** is an Indiansocial entrepreneur, organic farmer and tribal activist. She has organised training sessions for more than 50,000 rural women. In 2017 NITI Aayog, the public policy think tank, gave her a “Women Transforming India Award”. She was also conferred with the prestigious President Award “Nari Shakti Puraskar”, in 2022, which is the highest award for women in India.

**JASWANTIBEN JAMNADAS POPAT** is an Indian business, who is one of the founders of ‘Shri Mahila Griha Udyog Lijjat Papad’, a women’s worker cooperative involved in manufacturing of various fast-moving consumer goods specially the popular ‘Lijjat Papad’. In 2021, the Government of India in 2021, conferred her with India’s fourth highest civilian award the Padma Shri in Trade and Industry category.

**Government Initiatives supporting Women Entrepreneurs**

The Government has initiated several initiatives to make it easier for women to set up their enterprises. The following are some of the Government initiatives to help women entrepreneurs to focus on startups:

* BHARATHIYA MAHILA BANK COMPANY LOAN: The bank gives women company owners loans of up to Rs. 20 crores to launch manufacturing ventures. Collateral is not necessary for loans of less than Rs. 1 crore.
* The MUDRA YOJANA SCHEME is intended to help women who want to start or grow their own businesses. Women entrepreneurs can apply for loans with amounts ranging from Rs. 50,000 to Rs. 10 lakh without providing any security or a guarantor.
* The DENA SHAKTI SCHEME gives women a platform on which to apply for business loans. Loans up to Rs. 20 lakhs, repayable over 7 years, are available to women-owned enterprises with a 0.25% discount on the relevant interest rate. Under the program, a microcredit loan of Rs. 50,000 may also be requested.
* The SBI-sponsored STREE SHAKTI SCHEME is a program designed specifically for female entrepreneurs who are already in business as well as those who intend to do so. Women working in manufacturing, retail, or services are covered by this program. For loans beyond Rs. 2 Lakhs, the relevant interest rates are reduced by 0.5%, and loans up to Rs. 5 Lakhs are exempt from the need for a pledged collateral. The ladies must participate in the EDP sponsored by their respective state governments in order to be eligible for this program.
* An extremely well-liked government program called the ANNAPURNA SCHEME provides women business owners with loans of up to Rs. 50,000 to start food catering businesses. However, the conditions for collateral and guarantors must be met. The mortgage must be repayed within 3 years.
* The UDYOGINI SCHEME was created to assist prospective female business owners in rural and impoverished areas. Women who have an annual household income of less than Rs. 1.5 lakh are eligible for this program. When founding a microbusiness in one of the approved small-scale sectors, loans up to Rs. 3 lakh are available without any interest or collateral requirements. Additionally, a 30% government subsidy is available.
* NITI Aayog and SIDBI have launched the Women Entrepreneurship Platform specifically to help established and aspiring women entrepreneurs. All women-led firms at any level of development can receive support from WEP's incubation and accelerator programs. WEP aids in creating a group of like-minded women who can network and exchange business knowledge.

**Conclusion**

To conclude, it is indeed the high time to acknowledge and recognize the importance of rural women entrepreneurs in India, as the pride of India lies in its villages. Women entrepreneurs need to be inspired and motivated for greater achievements, as they can contribute equally to the society and the nation. Government and the society together should realize the fact that the key component for sustainable development and economic growth depends on the concept of gender equality and women empowerment. Research confirms that by 2030, an estimated 30 million women-owned MSMEs are expected to flourish in India, providing employment to nearly 150 million people. Government and NGOs should therefore act responsibly and invest in the growth and development of women entrepreneurs.