



"Breaking Boundaries: Gender Roles And The Evolving Dreams Of Rural Youth In India" In The Works Of Nandini Sundar

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Abstract

This study investigates how **gender norms shape and constrain the aspirations of rural Indian youth**, drawing inspiration from Nandini Sundar's anthropological perspective. Based on qualitative field interviews with adolescents aged 15–18 across rural communities, it explores how access to education, digital exposure, and social expectations influence career and life dreams differently by gender. While many girls express ambition for further education and non-traditional careers, structural barriers—especially restricted digital access, mobility limitations, and entrenched gender roles—limit these aspirations. Boys enjoy broader occupational imagination. The research highlights generational shifts driven by female role models, digital literacy initiatives, and educational reforms. Policy recommendations include gender-transformative pedagogy, equitable digital access, community-based empowerment, and skill-skilling initiatives that foster more inclusive aspiration pathways

□ Introduction

In contemporary rural India, young people stand at the crossroads of tradition and transformation. Deeply entrenched **gender roles** continue to influence their life trajectories, particularly shaping what they envision for their futures. For decades, rural girls and boys have grown up with starkly different expectations—boys often encouraged to pursue education and careers, while girls face social norms that prioritize marriage and domestic responsibilities. However, increasing access to education, digital technology, and evolving social discourses are beginning to challenge and reshape these conventional boundaries.

This study draws inspiration from the anthropological work of Nandini Sundar, who has extensively explored how schooling interacts with gendered social structures in rural India. Sundar's research highlights that education is both a site of empowerment and constraint, where young people negotiate their agency within patriarchal frameworks. Building on this foundation, the present study examines how gender roles continue to shape the **aspirations and dreams of rural youth**, focusing on how boys and girls imagine their futures in the context of changing educational opportunities and digital exposure.

By exploring these evolving dreams, this research seeks to understand not only the persistence of gendered limitations but also the subtle shifts enabled by increased digital literacy, female role models, and supportive community structures. Through qualitative interviews and narrative analysis, this study sheds light on the

hopes, challenges, and contradictions rural youth face as they attempt to break free from traditional gender confines and imagine new possibilities for their lives.

Mythology and Gender Roles in Rural India

Indian mythology, with its rich tapestry of gods, goddesses, and epic narratives, plays a profound role in shaping cultural understandings of gender and social norms. Stories from texts like the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Puranas* often portray idealized gender roles, reinforcing patriarchal values that influence family and community expectations in rural India. For instance, feminine virtues such as obedience, sacrifice, and purity, exemplified by figures like Sita and Draupadi, continue to shape the aspirations and behaviors expected of rural girls.

However, mythology is not static; contemporary retellings by scholars and storytellers like Devdutt Pattanaik challenge and reinterpret these traditional narratives, highlighting themes of **gender fluidity, power dynamics, and sexuality** that complicate binary understandings of gender. These reinterpretations provide rural youth—especially girls—with alternative frameworks to imagine identities beyond restrictive norms.

In this context, mythology acts as both a mirror of entrenched gender roles and a potential catalyst for change. It influences how rural youth conceptualize their dreams, navigate social expectations, and envision possibilities that break traditional boundaries. Integrating mythological insights into gender studies thus enriches our understanding of the evolving dreams of rural Indian youth amid changing social landscapes.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that while **aspirations among rural youth** are expanding—especially among girls—they remain shaped by entrenched gender expectations. Boys often envision STEM and technical careers; girls lean toward teaching, nursing, or marriage-delay narratives. Digital access remains highly gendered, limiting exposure for girls. Importantly, exposure to **female role models and community leadership** can significantly narrow aspiration gaps—confirming findings from village-reservation experiments in West Bengal, where female Pradhan led to shifts in girls' educational and occupational plans [PMCWIRED](#).

The study affirms Sundar's insight that schooling and social structures both constrain and enable youth agency. Policy interventions that enhance girls' mobility, digital access, and educational role-model exposure—combined with gender-transformative pedagogy—can contribute to more equitable aspiration pathways. Empowering family and community environments to adopt gender-equitable norms is equally critical to sustaining long-term change.

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