



# PERSPECTIVES ON RURAL DEVELOPMENT: SWARAJ AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

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**Abstract:** After more than 70 years of independence, around 70 percent of the Indian population still lives in rural India. This means that rural development remains core to the economic development of the entire nation. Its importance is not limited to the economic arena but has far reaching implications in the social and environmental areas as well. However, the reality of rural India is lack of infrastructure, dilapidated healthcare facilities, poverty, food insecurity, unemployment, and various social issues. These are recurrent issues in the Indian rural scenario and people residing in the villages have been suffering for a reasonably long time. In other words, we can say that the problems of rural India have not changed much since the time of independence. Hence, it would not be wrong to look into the solutions offered by the leaders and thinkers of that time. The primary aim of this research paper is to understand the ideas of great thinkers around rural development and to enquire into the working of these ideas in modern India. The paper focuses on two major policies in constructive programs namely, self sufficiency and women empowerment. Self sufficiency, a timeless concept, has been given a unique touch by Swaraj which has had led the way for the various provision of the village self-government. On the other hand, in the last few years, women's empowerment has become quite a pressing issue. The data used in the study is gathered from existing research on the topic. The study reveals that the ideas of Mahatma Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave, Swami Vivekananda and others are a source of inspiration for modern policymakers. At the same time, these ideas have not been implemented in the manner and spirit as the leaders had envisioned. Various reasons have been suggested for this lack of implementation. This study throws light on the theoretical aspects of the policies on rural development and can be useful for further investigations in the field of policymaking and other educational purposes.

**Index Terms - Rural development, Swaraj, Women empowerment, Independence, Women education, Economy**

## I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of rural development stems from the ever increasing gap between the rural and the urban centers. This gap is apparent in the economic setup of the two landscapes and is simultaneously affected by the social structures present. The rural areas and rural populations find themselves in situations of poverty and are cut off from the process of development. They are neither active nor passive participants of the decision making processes. The result of such a situation is widespread hopelessness coupled with the dismissal of change. The answer to this problem of rural poverty lies in the integration of the rural population into society and making them equal stakeholders in the developmental process.

Rural development is about the planning and development of the rural people through local participation and decentralization. This increases the productivity of the rural areas and ensures the basic standard of living for the rural population. Rural development aims to reduce poverty and create a just and equitable rural society. It has increasingly become tough to find an all inclusive definition of rural development but what is agreed by all definitions is that rural development is more than just about economic development. The above idea of rural development keeps on changing with every thinker's perspective. This is true for Indian rural development as well. The theme of rural development has remained constant since the arrival of British on the Indian soil. Throughout the struggle for independence, thinkers and leaders have felt the need to revive the Indian villages. Their approaches and methods, however, varied over time. Not much has changed in the context of the rural problems from those times. There is still a lack of infrastructure, uneven income, low standard of education, unemployment, etc. While the British Raj promised development to its allies in India, in reality, it only benefitted the company and not the Indians. The condition of the Indian poor deteriorated further with the exploitative land revenue policies of the British and they entered the vicious cycle of poverty.

This is the time when the Indian thinker was on the rise. At a time when higher education was not affordable for everyone and only a few were allowed to taste education. These students were simultaneously introduced to the ideas of nationalism in their curriculum. While the British tried to portray their contribution to the development of India, these students were aware of the reality at home. The ideas of nationalism and the awareness of the independence struggle made these early thinkers side with the idea of Indian development. This list of reformers and thinkers included Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Dayanand Saraswati, Aurobindo Ghosh, Dadabhai Naraoji, Mahatma Gandhi, Jyotirao Phule, Syed Ahmed Khan, Acharya Vinoba Bhave, etc. All of them were mindful of the problems of the Indian population. India at that time was a society deeply stigmatized by differences of caste and gender along with the unequal access to education and other resources, a lack of infrastructure, and innumerable other problems courtesy the

British Raj. These problems ran deep in the society and all these thinkers were of the view that these problems had to be removed from the core of the Indian society. To achieve all this meant starting from the building blocks of the Indian society, its villages.

Rural development became the prime focus of the Indian thinkers and reformers. As the independence struggle continued, these visionary men and women emphasized the need of reforming the rural society first. These calls of reform were multifaceted and focused not just on the economic reforms but social and individual reforms as well. All leaders had their own set of ideas when it came to the upliftment of the rural population. For example, Gandhi believed in Khadi. According to him, working on Khadi broke the barriers of mental and physical work. This ensured that the society which was divided based on what work its people did would slowly start to appreciate all walks of life. The former benefit was beside the benefit of economic independence. Likewise, all other thinkers contributed their theories and practices towards rural development. Their programs varied from the use of a simple coarse cloth to educating and mentoring young individuals to work for the overall development of rural India.

A closer look at policies employed by these thinkers shows that there were various areas of focus. Out of many key areas, two seem to be the general focus. First, is the idea of self sufficiency or what they called Swaraj. Swaraj according to its proponents was about the utilization of local resources by the local population in an effort to decrease unemployment and income gaps. This made the local economies self sufficient and provided opportunities to all sections of the society. Second, was the idea of women empowerment. It was believed then as it is today that a society cannot farewell until its women are educated and independent. Illiteracy was seen as evil by these thinkers and leaders. They believed that a person irrespective of their family background or gender should be allowed access to education. Both men and women worked together for the upliftment of rural women. Therefore, the two indicators of rural development are swaraj and women empowerment.

This paper attempts to analyse the work of leaders and thinkers of rural development in India. Rural development has come a long way and yet some of the problems persist. This paper aims to delve deep into the ideas of early thinkers to understand and appreciate their initiatives for change. Each idea and initiative is elaborated and broken down to understand its components. This helps in identifying the changes that ushered in. Towards the end, these ideas are critically analysed and their impacts are assessed.

## II. SWARAJ

The story of Indian rural underdevelopment is one filled with bitter reality and heart wrenching statistics. It is a vicious cycle of poverty and unemployment. More than 30% of the rural population lives below the poverty line. This means that the majority of the villagers live under food insecurity, lack of education, absence of infrastructure, and therefore are completely dependent on external support for their sustenance. In this regard, there exists a belief that the disregard towards the early thinkers of village development has led to this situation. More than 70 years ago eminent thinkers of India had visualized the Indian villages as the building blocks of Indian development. Their vision was not just economic but a multi-faceted vision, centered on the idea that moral development was essential to any other kind of development. These economic ideas, were governed by moral and ethical concerns. The economic models were more than about economics, they were humanitarian models which could be replicated throughout the world. The calculation of development was not merely in terms of national income, it was rather in the measurement of social order and equal opportunity available to all sections of the society.

Swadeshi was the atomic unit of the gram swaraj policy. Gandhi's words perfectly capture the essence of this idea "Not mass production, but production by the masses". In a decentralized economy, the consumers and suppliers of commodities look after each other's concerns and utilize local resources for manufacturing. Initially, this idea appeared in the writings of Dadabhai Naoroji, M.G. Ranade and Bipin Chandra Pal, however, the idea took shape as a movement in Bengal during its partition in 1905. Dadabhai Naoroji was the person behind the growing calls for Swaraj in this period. A staunch supporter of the British administration in his early years, he had turned into an old radical who called for the Indian revolution. During the partition of Bengal, Dadabhai closely examined the Bengali uprising from London and was satisfied when it was revealed to him that the Indians had realized the importance of self-rule. During his speech to the Indian London Society in 1905, he declared a direct link between protests in Bengal and the agitation needed for self-government. He stated in his speech "[Bengalis] have now broken the ice, they have declared that they will not be governed as slaves" (Patel, 2015). Dadabhai is also said to be in touch with the other radicals of the that time, including Bipin Chandra Pal, while the latter was in London. As the infighting in Congress increased, he became the president who could hold all sides together. It was during his presidency that Swaraj was firmly embedded as one of the objectives of Congress.

The idea of Swaraj was as old as the Indian struggle for independence but it was Mahatma Gandhi who conceptualized this idea through his writings. Mahatma Gandhi was against the concentration of economic powers in the hands of few and therefore his economic policies favored decentralization. What followed was his policy of gram swaraj (village self-rule). This was based on the idea that every village ought to be primarily self-reliant, creating provisions for all the wants of life- food, clothing, clean water, sanitation, housing, education, and then on, as well as government and self defense and every one socially helpful amenities needed by a community (Joshi, 2019). Gandhi preferred cottage industries to large scale industrialized production and manufacturing. This was in stark contrast with British industrialization which was highly centralized and mechanized. Here, gram swaraj was about the self-sufficiency of the village community and then in turn that of the entire Indian nation (Joshi, 2019). His idea was to reduce unemployment by employing the youth for small scale manufacturing. It was for these reasons that Gandhi considered villages so important for India's development and called these the village republics. Gandhi's gram swaraj was the formation of new independent units of villages having a self-sufficient economy and not the resurrection of the old villages. However, it must be put out that by self sufficiency Gandhi never meant self containment. He agreed that every village could not produce all that was needed and that trade was essential for the survival of the economy. Therefore, Gandhi advocated for the interdependence of communities.

Acharya Vinoba Bhave, an ardent follower of Gandhi, followed his ideas of Swaraj and Swadeshi. In the pursuit of the Gandhian ideas, he started the Bhoodan Movement which was dedicated to the upliftment of the masses. Through this movement the rich landowners were motivated to give up their lands in the favour of the poor and landless farmers. This was also the time for land reforms in the country and the basic aim of this movement was to create the right environment for their implementation. In the Bhoodan movement, distribution of land was not the only aim. The goal was also to work on the moral conscience of the people. It was hoped that this will solve the economic difficulties and remove the difference between the educated and the uneducated by making them both to join in common work (Pandey, Rawat & Ahamad, 2015).

These Gandhian thoughts on self sufficiency or swaraj was not limited to the economic arena, it was an idea briefly entwined with other spheres of politics, society and spirituality. At the political level, it was a statement of intent by the colonized Indians against their colonial masters. It was the idea that Indians need not depend on the British for survival and that they were sufficient

to provide for themselves and their people. At the societal level, the barriers of caste and class were broken and people were united in their cause against the common enemy who had become the reason for hunger and poverty for the majority of Indians. In the arena of spirituality, swaraj was all about an individual's development and strengthening of his ability to rise above his needs and think about the community's requirements at large. This swaraj policy on rural development was at various key levels different from the modern economic theory on development. While the aim of both the theories was to reduce poverty and increase production, the modern theory worked on the material level issues which touched the surface problems of the poor and did not delve deeper into it. However, the ideas of Swaraj worked on the core of the problem which was not purely economic but was rather a mix of social and economic issues.

In the present times, a parallel to the ideas of these eminent thinkers can be found in the 73rd amendment act. The amendment calls the village panchayats to come together and discuss their local problems and find solutions to them. The reservation of seats for women and other marginalized communities ensures that the minority voices of development are not overshadowed. Indeed, the lack of meeting of the gram sabhas and passive women participation are major impediments to the entire process. These failures are testimony to the fact that modern Panchayati raj system is far from what our thought leaders had imagined and articulated. It is also a reminder that gram swaraj requires concerted efforts of the people at large and that there is little a power regime can do when such movements lack support from people themselves.

### III. WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Women play a major role in the development of society. Empowerment of women means enabling women to be independent and self-reliant. It also involves making them able to make their own decisions. A nation is like a cart where women and men are like its two wheels. Like a cart cannot function with only one wheel similarly a country cannot function without women's contribution. Women empowerment is necessary for the sustainable development of the country. This is because it improves the quality and quantity of the human resources available for a nation's development. In ancient India, women were considered equal to men. They occupied a significant place in social and religious gatherings. It was from the medieval period that slowly women were discriminated against. They were subjected to child marriage, practices like Sati became rampant and widow remarriage was discouraged. Even after this, we had many great women leaders who carved a niche for themselves in the male dominated society. Many Indian female writers wrote about their miserable life even at a time when women were not educated. Women like Tarabai Shinde and Pandita Ramabai wrote about the miserable life of high-caste Hindu women especially the widows. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein wrote in her novel 'Sultana's dream' about an alternate world where the gender roles were reversed. Women defied their customs and fought against all odds to get educated. There were many other thinkers and nationalist leaders as well who staunchly supported women's empowerment.

Raja Rammohan Roy worked very hard for the upliftment of women. He believed that women were subjected to practices like Sati because of their low position in society. He very strongly advocated for women's rights and supported women's education. His efforts led to the abolition of the practice of Sati. Reformists like Jyotirao Phule strongly supported women's education and is considered the pioneer of it. He devoted his entire life to this cause. He believed that women's education is very important for addressing the issue of social inequality. Not only he encouraged women's education but he also fought against the Sati system and child marriage. He started the revolution of educating women by educating his wife, Savitri Bai Phule. She along with her husband started a school for educating girls. Even though the couple faced strong opposition from the society they continued to educate women. Their efforts bore fruit and they were able to bring a considerable change in society during their time.

Mahatma Gandhi was also one such leader who was a staunch supporter of women empowerment. Gandhi since the beginning was deeply empathetic to the condition of the poor and the weaker sections of society. Gandhi always believed in treating every individual equally irrespective of caste, creed, religion, etc. He had observed in the society that women were not treated equally by men and so he raised a voice against the abuse of women. He believed that both men and women are equal and both are dependent and supplementary to each other. He also opposed the idea of women being inferior and believed that this idea of inferiority is unjustly imposed upon them. Though Gandhi accepted that there existed biological differences between men and women he never agreed to the ill treatment meted out to women because of this. Gandhi believed that women are "naturally entitled to enjoy the equal rights and liberty." He proclaimed equality between men and women by emphasizing the idea that in Vedic times men and women were considered equal in every respect. He believed that women play an important role in society as men and that women help in the building of a nation and contribute towards a peaceful world. Gandhi in many ways relentlessly worked towards improving the status of women in society.

Gandhi also showed various ways for the empowerment of women. He believed that when women become 'sabala' from 'abala' the other helpless people of the society will also become powerful (Sain 2016). Gandhiji's efforts to spread awareness among the masses about women empowerment yielded noteworthy results and this can be seen from the fact that women were able to rise to dignity and self-esteem. As mentioned earlier Mahatma Gandhi believed that women and men are equal and that women possess the same rights as men. He considered it to be very important for women to become self-reliant. This according to him can be done through positive and active intervention in different fields like political, economic, social, etc. which ultimately can help women in gaining confidence. Also, one important factor which helps a woman in becoming confident is economic independence.

Gandhi always regarded illiteracy to be a curse for society and was always a great supporter of spreading education particularly so in the case of women. He believed that the reason for illiteracy amongst women is not "mere laziness and inertia as in the case of men, but a more potent cause is the inferiority which has been unjustly branded upon her by the society." Though Gandhi considered education for women very important he vouched for different education for men and women. This is because he felt both have different spheres of responsibility.

Swami Vivekananda, a person who had greatly inspired Gandhi, also had very strong views about women empowerment. He considered education as a powerful medium which would put women in a position that she would be able to solve her own problems. He worked very hard for the development of women's education. He felt that the main hindrance towards the development of India is neglect towards women. He considered the treatment of women in a country the thermometer to progress (Sindhuja & Murugan 2017). He believed that for the country to develop the condition of women needs to be improved and for this, women need to become educated. Also, the involvement of women in different fields is important.

During the freedom struggle, women participated in many different activities related to it. Women leaders like Sarojini Naidu were greatly influenced by Gandhi's ideas. Women also led struggles against Britishers in the form of picketing liquor shops, foreign



cloth, etc. Several women even took part in the Dandi March. Women were key players in many movements be it the peasant movement or trade union struggles. National struggle paved the way for the rise of women and also enabled them to break free from social taboos. Even after Independence women were given equal rights as men.

But merely giving equal rights does not lead to equality in society. Still, women are bound by the shackles of a patriarchal society. Even in the 21st-century women do not enjoy the same rights as men. Women even today are exploited by social evils like dowry, child marriage, prostitution, etc. Still, the literacy rate among women is quite low with two-thirds of the world's illiterate being women. There remains a need for society to fight these evils. The struggles and methods adopted by the leaders mentioned above are great examples to start.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

India lives in villages or in other words, it is still a predominantly rural country. According to the 2011 census, 68.8 percent population still lives in rural India. This shows that the development of the country depends on the development of rural areas. Many prominent leaders during the freedom struggle had expressed their views and concerns regarding the backwardness of rural India and had provided solutions regarding it. The paper focuses on rural development through swaraj and women empowerment. By studying the ideas of various thinkers from the era of freedom struggle on women empowerment and swaraj it analyzes how these ideas are still relevant and can be used for rural development. The paper studied the views of Gandhiji, Dadabhai Naoroji, Vinoba Bhave, Raja Rammohan Roy, and Jyotirao Phule on self sufficiency or swaraj and women empowerment.

As mentioned above the majority of the Indian population still lives in rural India and so the government has also launched many schemes to develop it. But the best approach according to a recent study is to enable Indian villages to generate self-sustaining livelihoods. Likewise, women are considered as key agents of sustainable development, and their empowerment is important for more holistic and sustainable development. Women in rural India are the main agents of development and they act as catalysts for achieving economic development. Women empowerment can help in achieving self-sufficiency which in turn contributes to rural development. Thus, we can say that the emphasis of Raja Rammohan Roy, Jyotirao Phule, and Mahatma Gandhi on women's education can go a long way in serving the purpose of rural development. Many people and organizations still hold Mahatma Gandhi's concept of gram swaraj as an ideal when working on rural development. In current times the importance given to the development of small-scale and village industries is also an application of Gandhian principles related to self-sufficiency. Women if educated can also contribute to these industries thereby helping the economy and ultimately contributing to rural development.

But even now women lack access to basic rights, education and are still discriminated against. Studies suggest that 40 percent of girls leave school even before reaching the 8th standard, and the overall female literacy as per the 2011 census is 65.46 percent. Also, women experience the brunt of patriarchal society in innumerable instances. Women can be empowered in the true sense only when they are educated and are given equal opportunities as men. These are the things that were advocated by Raja Rammohan Roy, Jyotirao Phule, and Mahatma Gandhi. The deplorable literacy rates suggest that we have failed to follow what these thinkers had taught us.

Similarly, even with the decentralization of power, the local community does not have enough power, and also inclusive development is something that is still absent. Also, women do not participate in the desired numbers. There is a lack of effort from the community as well. Moreover, the planning commission adopted a top-down approach as opposed to the concept of swaraj taught by Gandhi. Even when this concept was adopted the local institutions did not have any power with them. These reasons suggest that the concept of self sufficiency as taught by Dadabhai Naoroji, Vinoba Bhave, and Gandhi was not implemented as desired.

Due to these fallouts, rural India is still not developed. There is still a lack of infrastructure and 26 percent of rural India is poor. The need of the hour is to gradually move towards the concept of self-sufficiency mentioned by these thinkers and also empower women to achieve rural development.

Though the concepts and theories can bring a considerable change in society and many of them are being implemented in one form or the other. There is still a lack of empirical data regarding the impact of women empowerment and the concept of swaraj as envisioned by Gandhi, Dadabhai Naoroji and Vinoba Bhave have on rural development. An established relationship between women empowerment and swaraj and its impact on rural development can help policymakers in making policy and also in adopting a more proper approach for rural development.

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