

Annual Seminar

Centre for Political Studies, JNU & Bharat Krishak Samaj

Academic Partner: IIT Hyderabad

QUEST FOR DIGNITY:

WOMEN, WORK AND MOBILITY IN RURAL INDIA

March 18, 2025

Convention Centre, JNU, New Delhi

CONCEPT NOTE

This seminar aims to discuss challenges to the work, employment and mobility of women in rural India in view of the emerging policy shifts. The seminar will attempt to discuss the impact of various state policies on women's mobility and work conditions in rural India. The question that this seminar attempts to engage with is: In what manner has the emerging model of welfare impacted the socio-economic conditions of rural women? Does the emerging paradigm address the problem of gender discrimination and inequality? In what ways, if it does, the state response to these issues can be seen as a progressive measure.

Usually, the discussion on women in the workplace is seen as more of an urban-centric phenomenon. Moving out of rural settings and looking for employment opportunities outside rural spaces is seen as an option for women regarding the question of safety and security in the workplace. However, with the recent surge of women in the workforce in rural areas, it is pertinent to ask how better work conditions can be ensured for women within rural areas. This seminar attempts to place this question—through a multidisciplinary lens—at the intersection of political, economic, and sociological determinants instead of focusing merely on the economic reasoning of this phenomenon.

Various issues are involved regarding women's mobility questions while joining the workforce. There are social issues which play a key role in this. The existing patriarchal norms associated with women's role as caregivers, caste discrimination, middle-class and upper-class social mindset of not allowing women to go out to work, infrastructural constraints, and above lack of state policy and support for women workers are some of the issues.

Politically, women have emerged as a significant political and economic constituency in India recently. Various electoral analyses demonstrate that women voters are crucial in determining electoral outcomes. In the current era of political populism, this has resulted in the introduction women-centric programs and schemes based on the direct benefit transfer model. Such welfare schemes have become popular due to their possible electoral dividends. It has been argued that in a few states, the BJP was able to minimize anti-incumbency by floating cash transfer schemes for women right before the

election eve. The Ladli Behna scheme for Madhya Pradesh is a case in point. The Maharashtra government has also announced a similar scheme for women in the state.

However, an indirect effect of these schemes may be the withdrawal of women from the workforce. This may further result in women's roles being confined to domestic work, caregiving and social reproduction. Even though the electoral impact of such schemes is yet to be seen, a pertinent question that needs further explanation is how do such schemes contribute to the overall wellbeing of the rural women. Such schemes do lead to income enhancement in one sense. Do they facilitate access to an independent agency to women or on the contrary such schemes further solidify the confines of boundaries of home. Such an income enhancement may contribute to women's ability to spend but does this spending culminate into their upward mobility in the society or in the economic sense. But, do they open up any opportunities for decent work and employment in the rural sector, where a majority of women are engaged in agriculture? In other words, can such schemes be a replacement for work and employment, and a better working environment for women? If not, in what ways further state intervention is required to integrate women in the economy as workers, and politically as independent decision makers?

The recent PFLS data shows that the rural women workforce has suddenly grown. There has been an increase in the women's labour force participation rate post-Covid in rural India. It has seen a rise in the FLFP rate (for all ages) from 18.2% in 2017-18 to 30.5% in 2022-23 (PLFS 2022/23). In other words, there may be a lagged effect of women joining the labourforce after the COVID-19 shocks. Women in the age group of 15-29 have witnessed a significant jump in FLFP rates; in 2021-22, it was 22.3 %, which went up by 7% and touched 30.8 % in 2023-24. The female labour participation ratio for women 15 and above has witnessed a similar jump, from 36.6 % in 2021-22 to 47.6 % in 2023-24. The women's workforce consists of women with primary-level education, the highest employed women. (56.7 %).

In other words, women with low education are involved in agricultural labour or care activities. Educated women are also constrained by the burdens of care and social reproduction, and their mobility for the job market is restricted. Women face multiple restrictions on their mobility and in accessing employment and better work conditions. This includes unsafe public transport, caste barriers, family restrictions, patriarchal norms of their movement, and emphasis on women as caregivers. The return of the male workforce to rural India during the COVID-19 pandemic and the withdrawal of women's labour has also been argued as a reason behind this rise. It has been argued that this surge indicates a distress situation in rural India.

This seminar attempts to explore the social, economic and political dynamics in the changes related to women's work and mobility in rural India. Does the discussion above pertain only economic changes. Can there be political reasons behind it where women are no more permitted to step outside the household? Their role as caregivers as per the customs and traditions is being reasserted. Can this rise to be seen given the reassertion of traditional patriarchal norms as well? If so, what implications does this have for state project of gender equality?

It must be highlighted that there are already serious infrastructural and policy gaps in the workplace for women. Even though a majority of the women's workforce is involved in the agriculture sector, women are largely absent in agricultural markets. The case of APMC is a clear example of a space considered predominantly male, without any imagination of women being active entrepreneurs or business persons. This is true, at least in the northern Indian states.

This seminar attempts to look at the broader question of the development model India is following. Can these emerging shifts in rural women's workforce be seen as an effect of newer policies? Will it contribute positively to the dignity of the rural population in general and women in particular? What implications does this have for women's work and employment in neoliberal India? We aim to discuss some of these while carrying forward our last debate about critically looking at rural dignity going beyond income paradigms. In this case, the question of women's dignity should be seen as a political and sociological question rather than a mere reflection of economic change. We attempt to ask the following question: Can India's contemporary Amrit Kaal be imagined without India's villages offering appropriate employment opportunities for decent work and being safe workspaces for its women? What kind of policy shifts are required to achieve a rural India where women feel secure and confident while being able to access work of their choice?

Coordinators

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