



Assessing The Impact Of Water Governance: Women Empowerment And Viksit Bharat

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Abstract

India aims to become 'Viksit Bharat' – a developed and self-reliant nation by 2047. It envisions creating an equitable and developed society where every individual has equal opportunities and accessibility to resources. By inclusivity, it promotes empowerment of marginalized communities, including women. Whereas water, which is fundamental for living, is still under threat, making effective water governance crucial for sustainable development. To address this, the right to access clean drinking water is protected under the broad framework of the Right to Life guaranteed under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution. Various government programs have been implemented to mitigate the water security challenges. Among them, the Jal Jeevan Mission, launched by the Government of India in 2019, aims to provide functional household tap water connections in every rural household. As there seems to be a gendered division of labour around water, mostly in rural settings which reinforces systemic inequities, making women remain marginalized. The mission not only focuses on the service delivery parameters, but also puts great emphasis on reducing the age-old drudgery of fetching water by women from the remotest villages of India. The initiative has urged women to participate in water governance and take active roles in managing the working of the mission at the community levels. This paper will assess the impact of this flagship programme on inclusive development, with particular emphasis on women empowerment. The study contributes in understanding how a government-led water policy has its impact on bridging gender disparities, which ultimately supports India's broader goal of becoming a developed and self-reliant nation by 2047.

Keywords: Water governance, women empowerment, inclusive development, Viksit Bharat.

1.Introduction

Water governance has emerged as one of the most critical domains of public policy, especially in developing countries like India, where poor management of water resources has been alarming (World Bank, 2019). There are agreements among policy making circles regarding the need for good water governance as the framework for effective water delivery and management to use available water in a more sustainable and equitable manner (NITI Aayog, 2020). The access to clean drinking water has a significant influence on human health, sanitation and hygiene, economic productivity, and social upliftment. In rural India, where there is age-old drudgery of fetching water by women from the distant sources, it deepens the gender inequities. This leads to gender disparities in the fields of education, and socio-economic empowerment (Down to Earth, 2021).

India, with its 1.46 billion people, which is almost 17 % of the world population, only has access to 4% of world's fresh water reserves making the crisis hard to navigate through. The government and the stakeholders in India in cooperation with the international treaties and conventions from time and again has taken several policy measures to combat and navigate the issues pertaining to water insecurity in order to have just and equitable access to water for its people (NITI Aayog, 2020).

Overall, water-governance reforms have measurable improvements in women's empowerment, health outcomes and rural employment, contributing to the Viksit Bharat target of inclusive development (Observer Research Foundation [ORF], 2023). However, persistent barriers, such as social norms, inequitable access and uneven programme reach must be addressed through sustained gender-sensitive capacity building, systematic monitoring, and policies that institutionalise women's leadership across all water-management tiers (India Water Portal, 2021).

2.Statement of the Problem

Water is essential for survival of humans on earth. The access to clean and safe water is associated with living a dignified life. In the present scenario, most of the parts of the world are prone to vulnerabilities induced by water insecurity. The factors leading to water insecurity vary from region to region. Nonetheless, the impacts of water insecurity differs from person to person depending on factors like gender, caste and class. The scarcity of water, inequitable distribution and inadequate infrastructure continue to challenge rural India despite constitutional recognition of the right to clean water. The ultimate burden falls on women and adolescent girls who have to spend hours fetching water from distant sources, compromising their education, health, safety, and income generating opportunities. These reinforce patriarchal structures which limit women's mobility, participation, and decision-making power. To combat such issues, the Government of India launched Jal Jeevan Mission in 2019 by providing functional household tap water connections in the remotest places. Yet, its true impact on women empowerment and inclusive development centered around 'no one is left out' requires thorough assessment. The understanding of this intersection is crucial for evaluating how water governance such as JJM supports the broader goal of Viksit Bharat.

3.Background of the Study

Water is fundamental for the survival of human beings. The insecurity of water is one of the major concerns for the developing countries like India which aims to become self reliant and developed nation by 2047. Although, India is on its journey to celebrate its 100 years of independence with the vision of becoming Viksit Bharat till then, even in 2025 it is lagging far behind in having the basic securities. The lack of equitable distribution of water resources pose water insecurity, affecting the marginalised groups in rural India.

3.1 Water and gender relations in Rural India

Gender is hierarchical, and in patriarchal societies, women and girls are at a disadvantage and suffer oppression and inequality at the hands of men. Many ecofeminists like Vandana Shiva points out that there is a close and intricate relationship of women sharing with nature. In her many works, critiquing development models and arguing how they lead to further marginalisation of women in particular. For instance, in case of water resources, Shiva points out how in India, women from most of the indigenous communities have been managing, collecting and conserving water and have tightly knitted relationships with water systems surrounding them (Shiva, 2016). As water becomes a vulnerable resource, the competition for its supply will leave marginalized groups deprived including the poor and women (India Water Portal, 2021).

3.2 Water Policy Evolution and Jal Jeevan Mission

The initial policies of India related to water primarily focused on enhancing agricultural productivity by ensuring irrigation. The eventual years of liberalisation, globalisation and privatisation saw the emergence of water as a ‘commodity’ for sale. The rapid climate change further led to the formation of National Water Mission in 2008 which focused on sustainable management of water resources, improving efficiency and encouraging conservation practices across varied sectors. The Central Government has launched Accelerated Rural Water Supply Programme (ARWSP) for assisting the states for rural water supply in 1972. In 2009, it was renamed to National Rural Drinking Water Programme (NRDWP) (Ministry of Jal Shakti, 2019). Its objective was to “enable all households to have access to and use safe & adequate drinking water within premises to the extent possible.” In 2019, Jal Jeevan Mission was launched which included many new components not included in earlier programmes. These are providing tap water connection to every rural household, rather than habitation. The unit of coverage has been changed and the service delivery is enhanced to minimum 55 lpcd. It gives more focus on ‘water service delivery rather than mere water supply infrastructure’ (NITI Aayog, 2020). The communities have to contribute 5% of the capital cost in cash and/or kind and/or labour in hilly and forested areas, North East and the Himalayan States and villages having more than 50% SCs and/or STs population, and 10% of the capital cost in other villages. The Gram Panchayats and/ or its sub-committee, i.e. Village Water and Sanitation Committee/ Pani Samitis have to perform the role of a ‘public utility’ at village level. The dovetailing of resources/fund for drinking water source has been strengthening, along with water supply, greywater treatment & re-use, and operation & maintenance for long term sustainability (Press Information Bureau, 2024).

3.3 Water governance and Viksit Bharat

The vision of Viksit Bharat by 2047 is not possible without a water-secure India (NITI Aayog, 2020). Redrafting India’s National Water Policy is imperative to pursue these aspirational goals of water secure India, including the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. The water-governance programmes in India have been deliberately framed to advance gender equity, positioning women’s empowerment as a cornerstone of the “Viksit Bharat” vision. The flagship schemes - Swachh Bharat Mission, Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM), Atal Bhujal Yojana and Jal Shakti Abhiyan include a gender-transformative lens, shifting women from service recipients to decision-makers in water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) governance (ORF, 2023). As the world works towards the Sustainable Development Goals, SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), and SDG 13 (Climate Action), one must recognise that these goals are interconnected. Paris Agreement also highlights gender-responsive action as essential for climate resilience (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, 2015).

4. Research Objectives

The research paper certain objectives to fulfil -

- To examine the relationship between water governance and women empowerment in rural India.
- To explore how improved water accessibility contributes to the broader vision of “Viksit Bharat”.

5. Research Questions

The research paper has the following questions -

- How does water governance impact women’s socio-economic conditions in the rural India ?
- How does improved access to water through the Jal Jeevan Mission contributes India’s vision of Viksit Bharat ?

6.Methodology

The study employs a qualitative and interpretive approach for analysis. The data has been drawn from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources consist the government documents such as reports from the Ministry of Jal Shakti, field visits, etc. The secondary data comprise books, journal articles, think tank publications, newspapers, media reports on Jal Jeevan Mission and Viksit Bharat.

7.Significance of the Study

The effective water governance is fundamental to achieve India's vision of Viksit Bharat, where equitable access to basic resources is the pillar of inclusive development. In many parts of rural India, households are still dependent on natural water sources, such as wells, rivers, ponds, and lakes due to inadequate water supply infrastructure. These unsafe water sources often pose health risks, which highlights the need for safe and adequate drinking water sources. This also reinforces gendered burden, as women are from time immemorial responsible for fetching water, which impact on their physical health, education and socio-economic conditions. The Jal Jeevan Mission, launched by the Government of India in 2019 aims to ensure functional household tap connections in every rural household. The JJM by promoting equity, inclusion, and community participation (Jan Bhagidari) aims to transform water access and support Sustainable Development Goals. Thus, this study assesses how JJM as an water supply infrastructure also helps in bridging the gender disparities by promoting inclusive development, and how the improvements also contribute to women empowerment. The findings help in identifying governance gaps, strengthen policy intervention, and contribute to academic literature on rural development, gender inclusive development, and water governance. In a nutshell, the significance lies in the potential to highlight how effective water governance rather than a mere water supply infrastructure also contributes to women empowerment and pave the way for Viksit Bharat.

8.Analysis of Impact of Jal Jeevan Mission on Women Empowerment and its Pathway to Viksit Bharat

Sarojini Naidu, a big name in the history of women empowerment pioneered advocacy for women's rights, and gender equity. Over the years, India has made tremendous efforts in enhancing access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities for women. Today, women are at the forefront of change by breaking barriers, redefining leadership and gender roles.

Gender Matters in Water Governance

Water governance is the political, social, economic, and administrative systems that shape how water is managed (Ministry of Jal Shakti, 2023). For both men and women, the experience of water challenges is different because of their roles, responsibilities, and access to resources. The limited access to water or decision-making power makes women more vulnerable to health risks and safety, while also limiting the effectiveness of water policies (IBEF, 2024).

The integration of a gender-responsive approach isn't simply about fairness, but it improves results. By intentionally including women in decision-making and project implementation, communities can achieve more sustainable, equitable, and effective water solutions (Ministry of Jal Shakti, 2025). The gender-inclusive water resilience means recognising that women and other marginalised groups not only face disproportionate impacts but also hold valuable knowledge and skills to address them. By intentionally involving these groups in leadership and decision-making, a fairer, more sustainable, and more climate-resilient water management can be created (NE India Broadcast, 2022).

One significant example is India's Jal Jeevan Mission (JJM), which has revolutionised rural water governance. By women's representation in village water and sanitation committees, JJM has made space for women to shape water supply decisions directly (Ministry of Jal Shakti, 2023). Since its implementation, JJM developed a gender-responsive approach to water management by empowering women, while improving water service delivery.

The mission's decentralised, and community-owned approach have not just consulted women, but provided them opportunities to become decision-makers. Women have moved from carrying water to managing water supply infrastructure. They are organised into Pani Panchayats (Water Councils) to restore local water sources, raise groundwater levels, and strengthen community resilience. This major shift has broken cycles of time poverty and disempowerment of women, which proves that when women lead, water systems thrive (Bureaucrats India, 2024).

Water management is not gender-neutral, and women and marginalised communities are mostly vulnerable to water insecurity. In India, gender-inclusive governance is proving that when women are empowered, entire communities become more resilient. JJM's community-centric rollout has already reduced women's time-burden for water collection, while training 23.5 lakh women to use field-test kits for water-quality monitoring, thereby expanding technical capacity at the village level. The parallel efforts such as the "Nari Shakti se Jal Shakti" campaign have mobilised 24 lakh women to test piped water and ensured at least 33 % female representation in Gram-Panchayat water-budget committees. In Assam, gender-inclusive interventions increased women's awareness and decision-making, yet deep-rooted patriarchal norms still limited visibility and mobility, indicating that technical gains alone do not overturn deep-seated gender relations.

Nonetheless, the Indian government's articulation of "women-led development" under the G20 presidency and the Viksit Bharat agenda explicitly links gender empowerment to multiplier effects on health, employment, and socio-economic empowerment. Further towards the vision of becoming Viksit Bharat, here's a shoutout to all women who have made a mark and are weaving hope with focus on gender budgeting and women-led development. These women are leveraging their voices by ensuring that policies and programs actively support women's advancement across all sectors, which as a whole promotes inclusive development of all marginalised communities.

9. Challenges

Despite the successes of the implementation of the Jal Jeevan Mission, there are some challenges. Though the mission is able to give women opportunity to have dignified livelihood, still the ingrained patriarchy has hindered the pace of women empowerment. The rampant corruption along with poor planning in some areas are also other challenges to look after, to have more reliant water governance which not only provides water security but also empowers the marginalised communities of rural India.

10. Conclusion

As India enters into an era of rapid growth in Amrit Kaal and works towards becoming Viksit Bharat by 2047, it is equally important that both men and women have equal opportunities, leadership, and decision making to have true progress towards the fulfilment of India's equality driven vision and inclusive development. The water governance, Jal Jeevan Mission in particular is working towards achieving this goal by empowering women with the vision of no one is left out. The real development of a country depends on participation and inclusion of all in nation- building.

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