

# Importance of Rural Indian Women in Digitalization of India

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**Abstract:-** 6 years since Digital India initiative, there are many benefits reaped. From myGov, world's largest digital democracy platform, to Creation of Aadhaar database, world's largest biometric-based digital identity; India has started its digital revolution. With nearly 700 million internet users across the country, digital India has become an integral part of everyone's lives. But there remains a digital gender divide that can cost India its development. A nation moves forward when its women move ahead. Women are the engine of sustainable economies, benefiting both societies and humankind. My study aims at showing the importance of rural Indian women for the Indian economy. The number of women who have access to internet is much lower than men in the country, and the bias becomes wider in rural India. Without digital literacy, this vulnerable group may find themselves too far behind to ever catch up with "Digital India." Prime Minister Narendra Modi's goal for Digital India is ground-breaking. It has the potential to create an evolution in India, with rural India poised to receive largest benefits. But both, women and men should be the receiver of this campaign for it to be a true success. At the end of my study, one will be able to deduce the importance of rural women in a workforce.

**Keywords:** Rural Women, Digital India, Development, Economic growth

## I. INTRODUCTION

Internet is becoming an integral part of everyone's life throughout the world. But the impacting statistics prove that this connectivity can change the way we see our lives ahead, entirely.

Digitalisation of an entire nation will result in its economy experiencing a massive boom. The Internet

economy contributed up to \$537.4 billion to India's GDP in 2020, of which a minimum of \$270.9 billion was contributed by apps.<sup>1</sup> It has the potential to boost productivity, better the spread of information and creation of jobs, among others.<sup>2</sup> It can even improve the quality of life for society. To provide an example, if emerging markets could double the Digitisation Index score for their poorest citizens over the next 10 years, the result would be a global \$4.4 trillion gain in nominal GDP, an extra \$930 billion in the cumulative household income for the poorest, and 64 million new jobs for today's socially and economically marginal groups.<sup>2</sup> This would enable 580 million people to climb above the poverty line.<sup>2</sup> While the first step is to conquer doubling the Digital potential, these statistics give reassurance of the massive results a nation may get.

Digital India was launched by Honourable Prime Minister of India, Mr. Narendra Modi for India to finally become the "digitally empowered economy." (Shah, 2015) The Indian Talent with the Internet Technology will make the dream of India Tomorrow come true.

Digital India was implemented throughout the country, with its nine pillars.

1. **Broadband Connectivity:** This covers three sub components, namely Broadband for All - Rural, Broadband for All - Urban and National Information Infrastructure (NII).<sup>3</sup> Even though it is a great step, the data doesn't suggest that this has impacted many. Broadband penetration in rural India was limited to a mere 29.2%, as on 31 March 2020.<sup>4</sup> A World Bank study finds that every 10% increase in broadband penetration boosts GDP growth by 1.38 % in developing countries. McKinsey & company found that 10% increase in broadband household penetration delivers a boost to a

<sup>1</sup> *The economic impact of internet in India.* Times of India Blog. (2021, March 10). <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/economic-update/the-economic-impact-of-internet-in-india/>.

<sup>2</sup> El-Darwiche et al. 2012.

<sup>3</sup> *Broadband highways: Digital India Programme: Ministry of electronics & Information Technology(MeitY)*

*government of India.* Broadband Highways | Digital India Programme | Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology(MeitY) Government of India. (n.d.). <https://www.digitalindia.gov.in/content/broadband-highways>.

<sup>4</sup> *Topic: Internet usage in India.* Statista. <https://www.statista.com/topics/2157/internet-usage-in-india/>.

- country's GDP that ranges from 0.1–1.4%. Booz & Company found that 10% higher broadband penetration in a specific year is correlated to 1.5% greater labour productivity growth over the following five years.<sup>5</sup>
2. Universal Mobile connectivity: This pillar aims to increase mobile network penetration in the country and connect all uncovered villages of India. Out of 597,608 villages, 554,530 were already covered by August 2018.<sup>6</sup>
  3. Public internet access: This includes establishments of Common Service Centres (CSCs) and Post Offices as multi-service centres. CSCs are physical facilities for delivering government of India e-services to rural and remote locations where availability of computers and Internet used to be negligible or mostly absent.\* This service covered almost 300,000 of the country's 546,286 CSCs.<sup>7</sup>
  4. E-governance: This includes re-engineering of government to improve service and efficacy. Aadhaar, e-visa, and e-procurement are all an example of this productive scheme. The central government published 926,070 electronic tenders in 2017–18, up from 476,983 in 2014–15.<sup>8</sup>
  5. E-Kranti: This includes the electronic delivery of services to improve efficiency, transparency, and reliability. Progress has been made on 33 of e-Kranti's 44 "mission mode projects" i.e. high-priority e-governance tasks with clearly defined objectives and measurable outcomes.<sup>9</sup>
  6. Information for all: This pillar sought to open transparency in the digital space of the Indian government with its citizens, starting with the open data platform data.gov.in. Currently, around 255,004 documents, data sets, and other resources are available on the site.<sup>10</sup> Another platform, MyGov.in, facilitates citizen engagement with government.

7. Electronics manufacturing: This aims to promote electronics manufacturing in India, with the target of net zero imports by 2020. After the duty on imports of mobile components was more than halved, domestic mobile handset manufacturing output increased from 60 million units in 2014–15 to 225 million in 2017–18<sup>11</sup>
8. IT for jobs: This targets to teach young people the skills needed for IT and IT-enabled jobs. This is the need of the hour, as due to the pandemic everything moves online. The government has launched several initiatives, but greater scale is required to meet industry needs.
9. Early harvest: This has a lot potential in the rural sphere and could largely be made use of to better the current trend of offline databases. Examples include a biometric system to track the attendance of 901,713 central government employees, secure government email, a national portal for lost children, and conversion of schoolbooks to e-books.<sup>12</sup>

All these pillars aim to make the vision of a Digital India for every citizen come true.

Rural India constitutes one of the most integral part of Indian Economy, contributing about 46% of the national income.<sup>13</sup> This population will be important even in the next decade, though we see the rise of urbanisation. Rural men constantly move to urban setting to look for formal jobs as women cannot do so on a regular basis. The travel from a city to their village can exhaust the woman, who then also manages her home and children, among others.

Merging such an impacting and promising initiative with such an important workforce, who is the support of every rural family, could result in the development of India at a faster pace.

<sup>5</sup> Sikhdar, A. (2021, March 10). *The economic impact of internet in India*. Times of India Blog. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/economic-update/the-economic-impact-of-internet-in-india/>.

<sup>6</sup> Kaka, N., Madgavkar, A., Kshirsagar, A., Gupta, S., Bahl, K., Gupta, R., & Manyika, J. (n.d.). (rep.). *Digital India Technology to transform a connected nation* (pp. 29–29). McKinsey Global Institute.

<sup>7</sup> National monthly progress report, Common Services Centres Scheme, April 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Kaka, N., Madgavkar, A., Kshirsagar, A., Gupta, S., Bahl, K., Gupta, R., & Manyika, J. (n.d.). (rep.). *Digital India Technology to transform a connected nation* (pp. 29–29). McKinsey Global Institute.

<sup>9</sup> Kaka, N., Madgavkar, A., Kshirsagar, A., Gupta, S., Bahl, K., Gupta, R., & Manyika, J. (n.d.). (rep.). *Digital India Technology to transform a connected nation* (pp. 29–29). McKinsey Global Institute.

<sup>10</sup> Kaka, N., Madgavkar, A., Kshirsagar, A., Gupta, S., Bahl, K., Gupta, R., & Manyika, J. (n.d.). (rep.). *Digital India Technology to transform a connected nation* (pp. 29–29). McKinsey Global Institute.

<sup>11</sup> Kaka, N., Madgavkar, A., Kshirsagar, A., Gupta, S., Bahl, K., Gupta, R., & Manyika, J. (n.d.). (rep.). *Digital India Technology to transform a connected nation* (pp. 29–29). McKinsey Global Institute.

<sup>12</sup> Kaka, N., Madgavkar, A., Kshirsagar, A., Gupta, S., Bahl, K., Gupta, R., & Manyika, J. (n.d.). (rep.). *Digital India Technology to transform a connected nation* (pp. 29–29). McKinsey Global Institute.

<sup>13</sup> Sikhdar, A. (2021, March 10). *The economic impact of internet in India*. Times of India Blog. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/economic-update/the-economic-impact-of-internet-in-india/>.

Both Digital India and Rural Women are the key to the \$5 trillion vision India aims to achieve, especially after the pandemic.

Digital India was launched to improve the digital infrastructure of rural India, specifically. But it must be understood that Rural women form the main workforce behind making India digitally powered. Rural women form the basic task force responsible for making India digitally capable all while increasing the overall income for themselves. This will lead to a cycle that will be responsible for making them be pulled out of the vicious cycle of poverty. For example, Digital Beti, a partnership between Facebook and CSC academy trained over 250,000 women village level entrepreneurs, 70% of whom were first time digital users, in basic digital skills. The program led to an average increase of 20% in the annual income of these women. They are the ones at the most basic and under-represented sections of the society. Empowering them into the workforce through Digital India could be what makes India a developed nation.

While we applaud the Digital India Initiative, it should be remembered that it will only push India forward when it is implemented with the focus on the least represented to the most. Until that is done, coming out of the pandemic with a stable economy and the technological advancement can provide to be an impossible task.

## II. RURAL INDIA AND ITS ECONOMY

India is largely an agricultural country, with two thirds of its population living in the rural areas. Not only our staple diet but also India's GDP is a major contribution from the work of Indian rural women and men. Rural economy constituted as much as 25-30% of India's GDP and contributes as much as 46% to the national economy.<sup>14</sup>

India has also seen significant growth—between 2019 and 2020, the number of internet users in the country grew by 128 million.<sup>15</sup> Despite this only some are properly able to access internet on the daily basis due to the broadband disconnectivity. As per the TRAI report, internet penetration in rural India was only about 33% compared to 99% in Urban India.<sup>16</sup> This goes even higher in cases of rural women. The numbers shows a staggering difference. If we are not able to digitalise and bring forward such an integral and major part of the economy, our nation will not develop. Hence, for the

<sup>14</sup> Sikhdar, A. (2021, March 10). *The economic impact of internet in India*. Times of India Blog. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/economic-update/the-economic-impact-of-internet-in-india/>.

<sup>15</sup> Ang, C. (n.d.). *These are the countries where internet access is lowest*. World Economic Forum. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/08/internet-users-usage-countries-change-demographics/>.

<sup>16</sup> /www.tra.gov.in/

\$5 trillion vision of India to be realised, it is imperative that Rural India be at the focus of Digital India.

The first step towards digitally empowering rural India is empowering and educating its women, for the following reasons:

Firstly, the participation of rural women has been constantly falling in the workforce. WEF's 2020 Global Gender Gap Index figures indicated that just 25% of women formally engage in India's labour market, compared with 82% of men.<sup>17</sup> This statistic expresses grave concerns about India, its labour force and its development. Additionally, this negative trend is only seen in India among the major economies. This signals an even important reason to focus on rural women and their digitalisation.

Secondly, most men are at an advance position as they usually have both a smartphone and the basic education to operate it.

Thirdly, no one should be denied education and empowerment for whatever reasons, irrespective of its sex or gender.

Current initiatives like Internet Saathi, Women for Empowerment and Entrepreneurship and National e-Governance Plan aim to eradicate the digital illiteracy that has been in the rural space for years. Technology-oriented programs are being conducted in rural India for the benefit of women, but the projects are not successful because of the lack of equipment provided to the women. Educating them could provide a satisfactory result of rural India's development. And as rural India develops into a budding digital space, we could start seeing the change of women realising their dreams and educating not only themselves but their children, and even in some extraordinary cases - an entire village. This will eventually lead to the digital empowerment of a majority of the community.

## III. CURRENT SCENARIO OF RURAL WOMEN

Status of rural women paints a distressing picture. Out of the 135 crore population of India, 65.13% lives in the rural setups and women constitute 48% of total rural population. 74.8% women are agricultural workers, but only 9.85% own a piece of land.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ranz, D. J. (2021, February 14). *Empowering half of the workforce*. Economic Times Blog. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/blogs/et-commentary/empowering-half-of-the-workforce/>.

<sup>18</sup> United Nations. (n.d.). *UN Womenwatch | rural women - facts & FIGURES: Rural women and the Millennium development goals*. United Nations.

Though access to education has been improved, those who are more educated remain unemployed because of the unavailability of formal jobs and low wages. Formal jobs are not readily available in villages and if they are, the men are preferred. A woman has to constantly travel between cities and her home to do the job, if she manages to get one. They have to return home by the evening as the threat of their security looms in the darkness, which branches into another huge problem faced by a woman. Additionally, she has a family to take care of who are dependent on her for their survival. It should be noted that 81.3 percent of female workforce in India belongs to rural women, but women account for only 19.9% of the total labor force as per World Bank Data (2020).<sup>19</sup>

Several factors contribute to this equity gap among rural women. Despite being the backbone of rural communities and producing between 60% and 80% of all food in India, women face social hurdles when it comes to gaining access to education, health, land rights, as well as technology. It has been ingrained in a woman's and the society's mind that women do not belong in the digital sphere through years of stigma. It has been so deep-rooted that women themselves start to question whether or not the Digital Space is for them.

#### IV. RURAL WOMEN AND DIGITALISATION FOR THEM

Rural women are important to an economy, that is established. But what will be the true result of making them digitally empowered?

Digital empowerment of women is not essential for the well-being of herself or even her family but her true digital empowerment could increase the economic productivity, sensing their large, unacknowledged presence in the agricultural domain. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that if women farmers had the same access as men, agricultural output in 34 developing countries would rise by an estimated average of up to 4%.<sup>20</sup> This could reduce the number of undernourished people in those countries by as much as 17%, translating to up to 150 million fewer hungry

<https://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/ruralwomen/facts-figures.html>.

<sup>19</sup> Bureau, B. W. O. (n.d.). *Rural women in India the VEILED POTENTIAL*. BW Disrupt.

<http://bwdisrupt.businessworld.in/article/Rural-Women-in-India-The-Veiled-Potential/16-11-2020-343133/>.

<sup>20</sup> *The role of women in Rural Development, food production and poverty eradication*. UN Women – Headquarters. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/rural-women-day/2013>

people<sup>21</sup>. Their potential is not only in this sector. Given the opportunity, many can become successful entrepreneurs. Starting their own business could give them a chance at testing their own potential which will make them confident individuals, educating others who have faced a similar fate due to the discrimination. This can make the rural workforce a strength instead of a weakness. Becoming aware individuals, they could be helped into lifting out of a vicious cycle of poverty.

Digitalisation will make a woman aware of more than how to use the internet or pick up a call. After learning to be online, a woman can learn as much as she wants without any barriers even in the lockdown or being away from a school or while sitting at a stall. A study on mobile phone ownership and usage by women in India found that households where women had mobile phones reported lower tolerance for domestic violence and higher women's autonomy in mobility and economic independence.<sup>22</sup> This in the long run could pull out all the woman of the social stigma faced on a constant basis. The strong and fast development of women in digital era could create a cycle of awareness between a mother and a child, a friend to another and a sister to her sibling. This is an important tool to get rid of the discrimination, but this will take a lot of time, implementation, determination and perseverance.

#### V. CONCLUSION

While Digital India has a lot of scope for everyone, it cannot be emphasised enough how great it is for the development of women in various spheres. But all this cannot be achieved if they are not steadfast in their approach.

While I talk about all the positive sides of digitalisation of women, there is a lot that could go into just purchasing a single mobile phone for many rural women. And it is not only the barriers from the society. Due to the pandemic, income has decreased significantly, for both men and women. And the demand is going up constantly, from the internet to

<sup>21</sup> United Nations. (n.d.). *UN Womenwatch | rural women - facts & FIGURES: Rural women and the Millennium development goals*. United Nations. <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/feature/ruralwomen/facts-figures.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Bhowmick, A. (2018, September 19). *Opinion: Digitally empowering women in rural India*. mint. <https://www.livemint.com/Opinion/jhU4leh5ikkc0wQDCaXRhO/Opinion-Digitally-empowering-women-in-rural-India.html>.

smartphones by all the generations for their own education, entertainment or awareness.

But if we are able to come past the social stigma surrounding women and technology, and the government along with various other bodies like NGOs, private companies and women who have already being impacted by Digital India and given the opportunity to grow; then we could truly see the beginning of a new era for India.