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Role of Participatory Institutions in Reframing Patriarchy in Rural Water Governance : Some Evidence from South Indian Irrigation

K. Gulam Dasthagir* and K. Arun**

*Professor, Department of Sociology, School of Social Sciences and International Studies, Silver Jubilee Campus, Pondicherry University, Puducherry-605014 (India)
E-mail:<dasthagir@pondiuni.edu.in>

**Senior Research Fellow, Department of Sociology, School of Social Sciences and International Studies, Silver Jubilee Campus, Pondicherry University, Puducherry-605014 (India) E-mail:<arunkesavan266@gmail.com>

Abstract

Examining the impact of legislation for Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM) on gender participation, this article argues that patriarchal social structures and institutions contribute to the perpetuation of gender-based discrimination in the context of land ownership. This phenomenon subsequently impedes women empowerment and their engagement in governance and leadership positions within the domain of PIM. Further, the analysis posits that despite the Tamil Nadu Farmers' Management of Irrigation Systems (TNFMIS) Act being designed to ensure equitable participation of both genders, it has largely been unsuccessful in establishing gender equality in the context of South Indian irrigation.

Keywords

Participatory irrigation management, Gender equality, Women's land ownership, Tamil Nadu, Women exclusion.

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Editorial Office : D-59, Shastri Nagar, Meerut - 250 004 (INDIA)

Ph. : 0121-2763765, +91-9997771669, +91-9219658788

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1. Introduction

Although, the status of women in Indian society is undergoing change, it has been to a greater extent characterized by the amelioration from the historical status of subjugation to men. The prevailing patriarchal social structure in India with its social taboos and prevailing role stereotypes are to a greater or lesser extent preventing women from being equal partners to men in socio-cultural realms of Indian society. Consequently, even after seven decades of freedom, Indian women, except a privileged minority, have not achieved much in the main stream of life.

Contrarily, it is imperative to regard women as vital contributors to societal progress rather than merely as progenitors. This perspective is warranted by their equal share in citizenship and stakeholder responsibilities, underscored by their multifaceted roles. Moreover, the principles of social justice necessitate the equal involvement of women in development and various other endeavors.

In this scenario, gendered nature of irrigation assumes a distinctive position due to the continuation of patriarchal hegemony significantly affecting the engagement of women within the spheres of water resource management and the maintenance of water distribution systems. Further, the failure of the implementation of the New Water Policy to effectively restructure entitlements to evolve gender inclusion exposes that decentralization alone does not ensure engagement of women in water governance (Kulkarni, 2007). As a result, efforts towards gender mainstreaming are predominantly nominal, thereby obscuring the state's utilitarian strategy and the vested interests of the elite (Kelkar et al., 2007).

In the light of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) emphasizing women's empowerment and gender equality, Participatory Irrigation Management (PIM) is posited as an efficacious approach

towards engendering inclusion of women and fostering gender equity within governance in irrigation. In this backdrop, the present research endeavors to inquire into the implementation of the Tamil Nadu Farmers' Management of Irrigation Systems (TNFMIS) Act of 2000 prioritizing gender concerns. The objective is to examine the impact of the act in facilitating or hindering the participation of women farmers in PIM. Thus, exploring the binary of exclusion and inclusion from a gendered perspective.

2. Genesis of Legislative Paradigm for Participatory Irrigation Management in Tamil Nadu

The process of institutionalizing stakeholder engagement within the governance frameworks of large-scale irrigation systems in Tamil Nadu was realized through the promulgation of the Tamil Nadu Water Policy in 1994. This policy initiative was further actualized by the implementation of the Tamil Nadu Water Resources Consolidation Project (TNWRCP), which spanned from 1995 to 2004 (Elumalai, 2000). Progressing in this trajectory, the enactment of the TNFMIS Act in 2000 marked a significant legislative milestone by institutionalizing the role of agricultural stakeholders in the management and maintenance of the state's irrigation infrastructures (Government of Tamil Nadu, 2000). This legislation has been uniformly implemented across the state under the Water Resource Organization (WRO) in Tamil Nadu.

The TNFMIS Act has instituted a multi-tiered organizational framework for the formation of farmer organization composed of :

- a) Water User Associations (WUAs), which operate at the primary tier,
- b) Distributory Committees (DCs), constituting the intermediary tier situated at secondary system and
- c) Project Committees (PCs), at the main system.

This legislation stipulates that farmers are required to be granted a substantial role in the management and maintenance of irrigation infrastructure, thereby guaranteeing the effective and reliable distribution and allocation of water resources. The hydrological jurisdiction of the WUAs has been delineated based on the layout of the canal or tank. Within the demarcated territories of each WUA, Territorial Committees (TCs) have been instituted. The establishment of TCs within each WUA varies, with a minimum of four and a

maximum of ten committees per WUA. After the completion of the electoral procedures, the task of leading the administration of the irrigation systems located downstream of the branch canals are formally assigned to the farmers.

3. Legislative Paradigm of Gender Participation in Irrigation Management in Tamil Nadu

Greater involvement of women farmers in WUAs is identified as an essential prerequisite for the effective implementation and ongoing success of PIM practices in India (ADB, 2008). Aligning with this perspective, the TNFMIS Act formalizes the principles of democratic participation and equitable representation across different segments of water users within the framework of irrigation management organizations. This legislation mandates that every registered landowner within the ambit of bureaucratic canal irrigation systems in Tamil Nadu is inherently a member of the WUAs. Consequently, by virtue of their status as registered landowners, women farmers in Tamil Nadu are automatically accorded membership in WUAs, thereby legally affirming their participation.

In alignment with the principles of PIM, the TNFMIS Act has delineated the respective rights and duties of farmers :

- a. Membership in WUAs :** Pursuant to the stipulations outlined within this statute, all registered landowners, irrespective of gender, shall be mandatorily included as members of the WUAs. This inclusion is subject to the condition that the geographical location of their agricultural holdings is accurately reflected in the official revenue documentation.
- b. Voting in WUAs' elections :** Pursuant to the provisions of this act, men and women farmers are entitled to participate in the electoral process for the leadership of WUAs, executing their vote *via* a confidential ballot system.
- c. Contesting in WUAs' elections :** In accordance with the provisions of this act, both men and women farmers are entitled to participate in electoral contests for leadership roles within WUAs.
- d. Participation in meetings of WUAs :** This statute mandates that all farmers, irrespective of gender, as members, are entitled to participate in the meetings of WUAs.

- e. **Decision making in WUAs :** In accordance with the provisions of the specified legislation, individuals engaged in agriculture, regardless of gender, are granted the opportunity to engage in the governance processes of WUAs.
- f. **Representation at various levels of WUAs :** Pursuant to the provisions of this act, each member, irrespective of gender, who is engaged in farming, possesses the entitlement to nominate themselves and be elected for representation in leadership roles within WUAs.

Consequently, women farmers across Tamil Nadu have acquired specific rights within the framework of PIM following the enactment of the TNFMIS Act.

4. Perpetuation of Patriarchy in Participatory Irrigation Management in Tamil Nadu

Membership eligibility within the organization is predicated on the possession of agricultural land, thereby establishing land ownership as a core criterion for participation. Therefore, pursuant to the stipulations of this legislation, every registered proprietor of land, regardless of gender, is granted membership in WUAs, dependent upon the locational attributes of their agricultural properties as confirmed by official records.

Empirical investigations concerning the demographic composition of WUAs in Tamil Nadu have shed light on the impact of gender on land holding patterns and subsequent membership within WUAs. These studies specifically elucidate that women constitute only 8.32 percent of the total membership in the Sathanur region and 20.93 percent in the cumbum valley region (Dasthagir, 2009a, 2009b). This data underscores the significant influence of patriarchal structures on landholding patterns and the resultant nominal and notional inclusion of women in WUAs. Such dynamics are indicative of a broader context of gender discrimination in agricultural land ownership and the marginalization of women from property rights due to the prevailing patriarchal institutions (Dasthagir, 2021). Despite legal entitlements enabling women to secure memberships in WUAs, their actual representation remains markedly low (Dasthagir, 2022). This underrepresentation of women farmers within WUAs can largely be attributed to patriarchal norms that continue to foster gender discrimination in the realm of property ownership.

Conversely, the processes of conducting meetings and making decisions are being formalized, as the requirement for a quorum, which necessitates 50 percent attendance, can be satisfied even without the presence of women members in each WUAs. These evidences reveal that, attendance or participation of women farmer assumes less significance in WUAs. Evidence suggests that women represent a minor proportion, constituting merely a minority within WUAs.

The three-tier structure of PIM is operationalized through a hierarchical organization of farmer representatives. This framework delineates the roles and structures of WUAs, which are constituted by individuals from TCs and are led by directly elected presidents. Moreover, the DCs falls under the purview of their respective presidents. At a higher level, the PCs, which are instrumental in the oversight of major irrigation infrastructures, are under the leadership of presidents elected through an indirect electoral process. This organizational structure and electoral mechanism have been formalized by the Government of Tamil Nadu in 2000, indicating a structured governance approach within the PIM system. The electoral process for the selection of presidents of WUAs and members of the TCs was executed. However, a significant proportion of female members abstained from participating as candidates in the elections and refrained from exercising their voting rights to select their representatives. Consequently, women farmers were marginalized from the electoral process.

In Tamil Nadu, the governance in irrigation fall under the jurisdiction of TCs, leaders of WUAs, heads of DCs and the chairman of the PC. Research reveals that the positions of president across these three levels are consistently occupied by men. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that there are women representatives in the TCs, all of whom are from upper-class and high caste backgrounds (Dasthagir, 2016).

Through their occupation of leadership roles, men have acquired legal authority to enact and implement decisions within the domain of irrigation management. The exclusion of women from participating in elections and being selected by influential figures has resulted in women farmers being precluded from these positions. Consequently, by being absent from these leadership roles, women are deprived of the legal authority to represent and make decisions within Water Users Associations (Dasthagir, 2018).

Although women are participants within WUAs, they face discrimination that prevents them from assuming leadership roles due to pervasive male dominance. Contrary to expectations, the marginalization of female stakeholders from executive positions within WUAs systematically impedes their involvement and advocacy in the broader spectrum of PIM (Dasthagir, 2021).

5. Patriarchal Challenges to Women Empowerment in Participatory Irrigation Management

The involvement of users in the administration of irrigation systems is profoundly affected by gender-based discrimination, as patriarchal norms predominantly hinder the empowerment of female farmers within the framework of PIM. Accordingly, the challenges in empowerment of women farmers in irrigation management include :

- a. Passive membership of women farmers,
- b. Notional participation of women farmers,
- c. Nominal participation of women farmers and
- d. Non-representation of women farmers.

Accordingly, notwithstanding the established legislative framework for PIM which explicitly demarcates the entitlements of women farmers to representation, decision making and leadership within PIM structures, these entitlements remain unactualized in practical application.

6. Conclusion

The foregoing analysis substantiates that in Tamil Nadu, women farmers are significantly marginalized in the governance of irrigation systems. Indeed, the prevailing masculine hegemony obstructs women's empowerment in decision making processes and their representation in matters concerning irrigation. Concurrently, the engagement of women farmers is largely obligatory, superficial and passive, owing to their exclusion from decision making roles and representation in PIM. Thus, although the legislative framework of PIM envisages the empowerment of female farmers through representation, decision making and leadership roles within PIM, such aspirations remain unfulfilled in practice.

This circumstance predominantly stems from the gendered nature of irrigation as an institution, wherein patriarchal dominance

influences gender roles in water management and the upkeep of distribution systems. Moreover, the patriarchal structure inherent in societal norms perpetuates a gender-based disparity in the allocation of property rights, notably constraining female access to and ownership of agricultural properties.

As a result, the representation of women within WUAs diminishes, leading to their status as a numerical minority. This reduction in prevalence leads to their diminished presence at meetings and renders their contributions to the decision making processes of WUAs as less significant. Moreover, they are subjected to male dominance regarding their leadership representation at all tiers of PIM. Consequently, the participation of female agriculturists in PIM primarily manifests as obligatory, perfunctory and passive, attributable to their inadequate representation and involvement in the decision making processes.

The lack of legislative initiatives aimed at prioritizing or allocating quotas for diverse genders significantly hampers the participation and representation of female farmers within the framework of PIM. Although laws pertaining to PIM declare the rights of female farmers to represent themselves, make decisions and hold leadership positions within PIM, these rights are not manifested in practice. Therefore, this article advocates for gender mainstreaming and capacity building in PIM as strategies for empowering female farmers and enhancing the effectiveness and sustainability of PIM.

Based on the empirical evidence presented, the article argues that patriarchal social structures and institutions contribute to the perpetuation of gender-based discrimination in the context of land ownership. This phenomenon subsequently obstructs the facilitation of female empowerment and their engagement in governance and leadership positions within the domain of PIM. Furthermore, the analysis posits that despite the TNFMIS Act being designed to ensure equitable participation of both genders in agricultural decision making processes, it has largely been unsuccessful in establishing gender equality within the context of PIM.

7. Recommendations

The SDGs underscore the imperative of female empowerment and the attainment of gender parity as fundamental to sustainable progress. Within this paradigm, PIM emerges as a pivotal

mechanism for integrating female participation and ensuring gender equity in irrigation governance, thereby diminishing the potential for gender-based disparities. Consequently, an array of strategic initiatives and policy recommendations have been advocated to enhance women's competencies in overseeing and administering water-related projects, concurrently ensuring equitable access to informational resources and inclusivity in decision making frameworks. In alignment with these objectives, the following strategies are proposed to bolster women empowerment within PIM.

Gender Mainstreaming in Participatory Irrigation Management: The TNFMIS Act, despite its intent to facilitate the participation of both female and male farmers, has largely been ineffective in integrating gender considerations into PIM. The legislation mandates the automatic enrollment of all individuals holding registered titles to land as members of WUAs, contingent upon the spatial positioning of their agricultural estates, as delineated in official revenue records. Additionally, the act affords farmers the privilege to participate in the electoral process for WUA leadership through a secret ballot system. However, this legal framework has proven insufficient in addressing the gender aspects of irrigation development, as evidenced by the following considerations :

- i. Provision for Women's Participation in Decision Making in WUAs :** This legislation stipulates that each agriculturist, as a constituent member, holds the entitlement to engage in the assemblies of WUAs. Nonetheless, it does not prescribe the inclusion of gender representation within the requisite attendance for these gatherings. Data indicates that women farmers are significantly under-represented in each WUA. Consequently, in the absence of a mandated obligation for the compulsory participation of women, female agriculturists are substantively precluded from engaging in the decision making activities within WUAs.
- ii. Reservation for Women's Representation in WUAs :** The statute acknowledges the eligibility of farmers for leadership positions in WUAs; however, it notably omits guidelines for the allocation of reserved seats and offices for female farmers. This deficiency in oversight has resulted in a scant representation of women in the capacity of WUA presidents, which can primarily be ascribed to the prevailing male-dominated power structures.

Consequently, female farmers face significant barriers in achieving representation at the higher echelons of PIM.

The enactment of PIM policies across Tamil Nadu and other Indian states has failed to adequately incorporate mechanisms for female participation in decision making processes and hasn't facilitated their representation in leadership positions at various tiers within the PIM framework. This oversight underscores the critical necessity for integrating gender considerations into PIM frameworks, thereby fostering the empowerment of women farmers. Such empowerment is essential for enhancing the operational efficiency of WUAs and ensuring the sustainability of PIM initiatives.

To address these disparities, it is imperative to revisit and revise the PIM paradigm to include considerations for women's empowerment and related concerns. This amendment aims to augment the engagement and representation of women farmers in the decision making echelons and leadership positions within the framework of PIM. In light of this objective, there is an imperative need for legislative reforms tailored to PIM that would institutionalize seat reservations and the rotation of offices for female participants. Such reforms are pivotal for the formal incorporation of women farmers into participatory and representative roles across all strata of PIM, thereby ensuring that the principles of equity and inclusiveness are upheld within irrigation management practices.

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