



Women Empowerment: Age & Literacy no More a Barrier (Exemplary Instances from South India)

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Abstract: Women empowerment means the creation of an environment for women where they can feel free, stable, and strong. The current outlook of society shows a very depressive face of women's situation which is not at all real. The woman is god gifted with such strengths and capabilities that she easily overcomes the inner barriers like age, lack of education, traditions, etc., and the outer ones like restrictions by society, financial constraints, and other environmental issues. Both of my case studies in this chapter shows a picture of those ladies who fought against all the odds and became role model for all rural and urban women. Leaving behind the barrier of age and illiteracy, economic limitations, and opposition faced by the immediate family members, they both stood out as milestones for the women section and the whole society as well. It shows the story of patience, perseverance, awareness, and persistent effort that build strong foundations and lead to better outcomes.

Keywords: Women, Mother of Trees, Organic Farmer, Agriculture, Environment.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Outlook of Society on Women

In olden times, it was stated that nature itself is a goddess. Nature deity is feminine concept that exists in the world. It creates, it has the power of generation and so the power of woman. The meaning of the word nature is that from which things are born, and this is the reason it is always referred as 'her'.

Women work as an all-rounder in the society i.e. as a breadwinner of their family, as a care taker in the role of a mother, wife, daughter and service provider to the society. In spite of the fact that the womens' contribution to the country's development is equal to that of their male counterpart, still they experience a number of restrictions that hold them back from realizing their potential for expansion (Saryal, 2014).

Indian society that is highly patriarchal in nature and composed of a structure made by rigid system of socio cultural customs is a reason due to which women face a lot of identity crisis

and other major issues (Karuppanan, 2016). It's still male dominated and though women contribute a lot, their contribution is considered as just a supporting factor. This struggle of women for their individuality is not a current scenario, but, it exists right from history. If we just give a look back to past eras, it is evident that women need a different outlook of society in which they feel free, stable and be independent. Sita in Ramayan had to struggle for purity of her character, Draupadi for her freedom, for her decision making capability and Laxmibai for her independence and her strengths. Till now there are thousands of such examples that show that this society does not accept women as an independent individual who is not at all less than man in any aspect of life.

In this 21st century too, the women in India are still unaware of their fundamental civil and constitutional rights, because of which they are mostly positioned at a receiving end. Patriarchal system impacts and intrudes in every sphere of a woman's life in such a manner that majority of them are forced to accept the traditional practices that are unfavorable for both their and their childrens' development. Although women have attained a level of financial and political autonomy and awareness about their rights, yet they feel vulnerable in bringing about basic changes for eliminating gender inequalities from the society (Saryal, 2014; Kishwar, 1999). They are still considered as dependents on men. Age, education and freedom are known as the basic barriers for women but this is not true. Some women who are old enough but still working, some illiterate but work harder and more efficiently than the literate and few who are nothing without her male support but when fortunately or unfortunately circumstances appear they proved themselves. Both of my case studies here belong to those women who are from rural areas where women are considered as nothing but just a house worker, who can do house chores, give birth to a child and help a little to male and other members of the family.



Image Source: Her Zindagi

Case Study I

Saalumarada Thimamakka was born in Gubi taluk of Tumkur district, Karnataka. Her family's financial condition was weak. Due to lack of awareness for education and weak

financial condition, Thimmakka had to often work as a casual labourer in the quarry near the house. She had to take up grazing of sheep and cattle and also worked as a coolie. As she grew up, she was married to Sri Bikkala Chikkayya, a resident of Hulikal village of Magadi taluk of Ramnagar district, Karnataka. He was also illiterate and had to work in fields for the family. After a few years of their marriage, she came to know that she could not conceive, and from here a new struggle of her life started. The behaviour of her in laws changed. They started taunting and cursing her.

In her 40's she tried to commit suicide. At that moment her husband supported and guided her towards a new journey of life. He encouraged her to plant as many trees as possible and consider them as her children (Pranita, 2020; Vijayan, 2018).

After this, she started plantation and took care of them as their children. They started this by making new plants from the old banyan trees near their village. Firstly, they produced 10 saplings and planted them at a distance of about five kilometres near the neighbouring village. Then the number increased from fifteen in the second year to approximately twenty in the third year.



Image Source: Femina

From then it became a routine for both of them to go out to work in the field together every morning and to plant trees along the road in the afternoon. He dug the hole while Thimmakka planted the saplings along the way. Though it sounds very easy to plant trees but it was a hard task for them as reality was different. They both used to carry four bucket/containers of water for a distance of four kilometer to water the saplings. Then for getting sufficient water, they started plantations during monsoon season that provided them the solution to their problem of irrigation and also helped the trees to take root by the arrival of the next monsoon. Apart from irrigation, protection from grazing cattle was another issue, for which they fenced those plants with thorny bushes (Kumar V, 2020).

In this manner, in about span of thirty years they planted more than four hundred banyan trees and more than eight thousand of other species. This became their daily routine for many years though it had not made any improvement in her financial condition. Her husband died in the year 1991 and his death made her life miserable. Her immediate family made her life troublesome till she sold them the small piece of land that she and Chikkaiah depended upon till his eventual demise. After his demise she left alone and submitted her life to those plants. The charge of this mission towards protecting the environment has been taken up by Thimmakka's foster son, Sri B.N. Umesh. She adopted him a few years ago and he has been taking care of all her works, affairs, invitations, travel to various award ceremonies, and functions. He has been planting and nurturing trees along the roads, schools, public areas, and on the mountain and hill tops. He is also running the Prithvi Bachao Movement. He owns a nursery and distributes saplings or plants to the farmers who show any interest in growing them.

Her work got recognition from the year 1995 when she received National Citizen's Award. She received a number of titles like silviculturist, environmentalist, and 'mother of trees'. Although she received a number of laurels, awards, media coverage, organizations honouring her and foundations or groups named after her, yet she lived in poverty for most of her life. Though she planted the trees that are worth several crores of rupees today, but her financial condition remains the same. Her sole source of income is the pension of Rs 500/- given by the government and she lived in a hut till the Karnataka State government built a house for her in 2014.

During mid of 90s, Thimakka received a lot of publicity through local and international newspapers, environmental groups and agencies, but the language/terms used for her were not appropriate. She has been referred to as an "illiterate woman whom environmentalists love" in 1999, to "infertile woman who was healed by trees" in 2016. "What started as a ritual for children, ended up with the couple perceiving the trees as their children." This is how the narration takes place in Kannada textbooks across Karnataka (Kumar V, 2020). Recently the Government of India honored her with the Padma Shri award in 2019, i.e. the highest civilian award in the Republic of India. An environmental organization is also named after her in the U.S. known as Thimmakka's Resources for Environmental Education.



Image Source: Deccan Herald



On June 5th, World Environment Day a short documentary film was released by a Kannada social media page Namma Kannada Memes about Thimmakka's life. It showcases her life's journey, achievements, struggles and her adopted son Umesh. The film ends with Thimmakka offering her blessings to everyone and followed by contact details. Invitations for plantation drives in different cities and talks to various groups of society about her journey are still a part of her daily life. Now, due to planting saplings, she is known as 'Saalumarada' instead of Thimmakka, as it means 'row of trees' (Pandey, 2019).

Regardless of all these awards and recognition, Saalumarada remains an innocent and a humble person. She is 105 plus now and still she thinks of planting more trees. During widening of the Bagpalli-Halaguru road, her Banyan plantation (almost 70 years old) was in danger of being cut down. She requested higher authorities to reconsider the project and finally government decided to look for other alternatives. Her next mission is to bring hospital close to her village, Kadur, where there is lack of medical facilities.

Now the government of Karnataka is taking care of the trees grown from those saplings but the drive (planting trees rich in biodiversity) of Thimmakka still continues and is really remarkable. Today she is invited to each plantation drive in the state, she receives gifts and medals, but according to her without planting saplings, these awards, government schemes for protection of environment and books have no meaning. In her words, "By planting even one sapling, each could make a better place for their children."

Saalumarada Thimmakka is an individual who is a role model for the young generation and has brought worldwide recognition to the state of Karnataka through her incredible and massive environmental service.

Case Study II

A lady who is witness of not only two World Wars, India's Independence, several natural calamities, and now the COVID- 19 pandemic and also went through a lot of personal problems is still standing in her farms and working with the modern technologies towards her goal of organic farming and spreading awareness through her social engineering skills. In spite of all those problems she has never let her being a woman come in her way of getting what she wanted. She is not even working but also has become a role model for several of women out there. She is none other than Pappammal (105 years old), a resident of Coimbatore in Tamil Nadu.

She was born in 1914 in Devalpuram village in Tamil Nadu. Her parents died at a very early age, her paternal grandparents looked after her and so she lived with them in Thekkampatti, Coimbatore district (Raja, 2020).



Image Source: KVK Vivekanadapuram Coimbatore

There were no formal schools at that time. She learned counting, mathematics and all through games like Pallanghuzi (traditional ancient manchala played in South India) etc.

Since childhood days only she was very eager about agricultural practices and started learning about it. After marriage too her responsibilities increased from house chores to working at farm. In late 1950s, her life changed suddenly, as her sister got married to her husband because Pappammal was not able to conceive. From this point her life changed, she started living in Thekampatti with her grandmother. After the death of her grandmother, she started a small tea and snacks shop which converted to a grocery shop and later savings from it helped her in buying 10 acres of land for cultivation. She started to grow corn, rain fed crops like pulses, grams and a little of vegetables and fruits for self consumption. Since last ten years, she has been growing banana under micro –irrigation. Later on, she gave away 7.5 acres of land to her elder sister’s four daughters and continued organic farming in remaining 2.5 acres of land (Kannadasan, 2021).

After the adoption of Tamil Nadu Panchayats Act in 1958, Pappammal was elected as a councillor of the Thekampatti Panchayat in 1959. In 1962, she became a member of a political party and won the local body election, later became the vice chairman of the panchayat. She joined KVK (Krishi Vigyan Kendra) in Coimbatore district in 1983 that made her a lead farmer and an icon of, ‘women in farming’. She got trained and became an instant leader in the Local Management Committee (LMC) of KVK. Here with her outstanding organizing skills, she started to mobilize other women in the farm extension activities (Rajasekaran, 2021).

Later on, the LMC turned into a Scientific Advisory Committee (SAC) and Pappammal became a member of it and soon got a chance to have interactions with various experts. She played a significant role in providing practical exposure to various lab-to-farm technologies. She became a role model among her fellow women farmers as an early adopter and promoter of new initiatives and technology.

Her farm in Thekampatti turned into a model farm for the students of home science and agriculture and she played host to students during their village stay programmes. She also organized the first self help group of women farmers in her village under KVK.

She had contributed a lot towards agricultural aspects. In 2007 her collective initiatives resulted in ensured participation of other farmers that resulted in success of village granary scheme. In 2008, after completion of training, she operated modern farm machinery that seemed impossible at the age of 92.



Her active participation in KVK even during the pandemic is proof of Pappammal's dedication to farming. Image Source: KVK Vivekanadapuram Coimbatore

The government honored her recently with the Padma Shri (2021) for being a role model woman farmer and her significant contribution in promoting women in agriculture. She is mostly famous for her social engineering skills – organizing women in agricultural extension programmes and for being a passionate organic farmer who is in sync with use of modern technologies and new farm practices (Banerjee, 2021).

After receiving the Padma Shri award, she is busy in attending functions arranged to facilitate her. According to her, “Women should take part in decisions at the farm, household and in the social institutions only then the whole community will benefit.” She, a 105-year-old lady advocated that, “age can't be the barrier for anything and always remember that there can never be a substitute for hard work.”



2. CONCLUSION

These above case studies give us an insight view of what our society perceives about being a woman. It shows the strength of a woman who is not at all fit in any of the criteria made by the society, but still has faith in her own efforts and is courageous enough to fulfill her goals of life and pursue whatever she wishes to.

People's perception about growing trees or organic farming is something like 'not a big deal', but one would know the reality of it only once when they go through it on their own with less of resources available.

The position and holdings of male in the society is always high as compared to females, although work ratio is almost the same. In India, where 73.2% of rural women workers are engaged in agriculture and 80% of the farm work is carried out by them; they own only 12.8% of land holdings (Raman, 2019). When it comes to land transfer in India, it occurs mainly through inheritance that is too accompanied by various religious personal laws. Eventually, the women will be the last beneficiary and that too sometimes get cheated by their immediate family.

It also depicts that age and literacy cannot be the barrier for anyone at any point of life at least not for women. As she never gets retirement from her household chores then how at professional front! Both of the ladies represent and advise that if you have the will to learn, to grow, to change the world around you, you have that power within you.

Thus, both the case studies show that women do not depend on others or their male counterparts for their survival and other aspects.

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