

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD): Promoting Neurodiversity in Society

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition that influences communication, social interaction, and daily life. It is not a disease but rather a different way of experiencing the world. Since ASD exists on a spectrum, the challenges and abilities of individuals vary significantly. Some may experience mild difficulties, while others require significant support to navigate everyday life. Individuals with ASD often find it challenging to interpret social cues, maintain eye contact, and engage in conversations.

To foster a more inclusive world, it is crucial to raise awareness about ASD and educate people about neurodiversity. Schools, workplaces, and public platforms should actively work to dispel misconceptions and create environments that welcome autistic individuals.

Occupational therapy helps autistic individuals improve motor skills, sensory processing, and daily functioning, making it easier to navigate their environment. Special education programs tailored to the strengths and needs of autistic students ensure they receive the support necessary for academic

Autism Spectrum Disorder should not be regarded as a disability but rather as a unique form of neurodiversity that enriches society. Instead of seeing ASD as a challenge, it is crucial to acknowledge and appreciate the strengths and potential of autistic individuals. By fostering awareness, building inclusive educational systems, creating supportive workplaces, and promoting social acceptance, society can ensure that autistic individuals have the opportunity to thrive. Embracing neurodiversity benefits everyone, fostering innovation, creativity, and diverse perspectives. A truly inclusive world is one where every individual, regardless of neurological differences, is valued and given the opportunity to lead a fulfilling and meaningful life.

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Women make significant contributions to the rural economy across the globe. Achieving gender equality is a key step towards achieving many of the Sustainable Development Goals and can enhance rural revitalization. Women's empowerment can improve agricultural productivity, dietary quality and maternal and children nutrition. In many settings women face more constraints than men in accessing key productive resources such as land and to services such as credit, extension and social protection, they face wage discrimination in rural labour markets. Women constitute around half of the world's population but in fact they are the largest excluded category in many aspects of life. They have only 1/10th of the global income. About 70 per cent of women are still living below the poverty line. They constitute almost invariably a small minority of those holding elected office. The data reveals that they were around 10 per cent of the world's parliamentarians in 1980 which rose to 14.8 per cent in 1988, came down to 12.7 per cent in 1997 and 19.5 per cent in 2011.

The women around the world are striving for gender equality. Women specially in the rural areas are subjected to gender oppression and gender

discrimination. The year 2001 was observed as the "Year of Women Empowerment" in India. Poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, ill-health etc. are the major problems in our country from the dawn of independence. These factors are impeding the socio-economic development of our country. Women are mostly affected by these socio-economic factors. It has been observed that ill-health, unemployment and illiteracy rates are higher among the women as compared to men in our country. It has also been observed that women-headed households suffer more from the poverty as compared to men-headed household. Between 2001 and 2009 the poverty rates for women were double than that of men. They still face injustice from birth to death and discrimination among them is still very common. Every year; three million women die due to gender based violence.

Poverty is the greatest hurdle in the path of development. According to World Bank, 129 mn of the Indian people fall below the poverty line in 2024. The incidence of poverty customarily is more in rural areas as compared to the urban areas and also the poverty in SC and ST households is more as compared to general castes. The Human Development Report has noted that gender equality is essential

for empowering women and eradicating the poverty from the society. From time to time the Indian government has been emphasizing on empowerment of women. The only motive behind these endeavours is to bring them into the main stream of development. Different policies, programmes and plans are laid to raise the economic status of women. Article 15 of the constitution prohibits any discrimination on grounds of sex while the directive principles of state policy urges that states shall direct its policy for securing an adequate means of livelihood for women and securing equal pay for men and women. In many five years plans, emphasis was given on women empowerment.

It has been envisaged to organise women into self help groups and thus empower them to equip with skills in different trades to make them economically independent and to increase access to credit by setting up development bank for women. It has also been envisaged that the women programmes and policies need to be redesigned. It has also been designed to provide marketing channels for them. The various programmes like Indira Mahila Yojana, Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas, Mahila Samridhi Yojana, Rashtriya Mahila Kosh etc. have been launched by the

Indian government from time to time.

Prevalence of patriarchy norms, stereotyped gender biased and preference for son's right to inherit parent's property have deprived girl children from their right to property. In general, the son enjoys the inheritance father's property. Women cannot claim equality with men unless she has the same right as men hold and inherit. Ironically, the land reforms measures undertaken by different state governments are also silent about the women's right to property. In present era, growing modernization has escalated social aspirations and family tension, resulting in growing single women and women-headed households in the form of divorce, deserted and separated.

The reports indicate that about 16.23 million of women headed households are existing in India of which 72 per cent are residing in rural areas. Therefore empowering the rural headed households would enable them to fight against the income and poverty. The sweets of women welfare benefits are mostly enjoyed by the highly literate women and those who belong to upper strata of urban society. Women specially the rural women are deployed for the unpaid activities. Only about 15 per cent women are working in the organised sectors. Women employment

opportunities are characterised with seasonality, unskilled assignments, discrimination in wage etc. in unorganised sectors. In the arid and semi-arid areas, the women specially belonging to Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes and impoverished households work hard in order to mitigate hunger and poverty.

The data reveals that 43 per cent of working women constitute almost half of total earnings of their families and 18 per cent families entirely dependent on their earnings.

Women accessibility to savings and credit facilities improves their gender economic status. Women accessibility to saving and credits from banking and non-banking sectors is low particularly for the rural women. The empowerment of women largely confines to the few literate and employed urban women and the rural women remain beyond the reach of empowerment.

Even it has been observed that the bank officials hesitate to sanction loan to the rural women thinking them to be too poor because the ownership of assets usually rested with men. Women are meagerly represented in the business because they lack of savings, credits and investment facilities. The Self Help Groups (SHGs) formulation is really a stepping stone for the economic empowerment of rural women. These

types of schemes really enable the rural women for the small saving and help them to carry out small investments in income generation activities at the rural level. The women Sarpanches, Panches and village level workers of ICDS can further help for strengthening these types of schemes. Credibility among the women, difficulty in regular deposition of money, uncertainty about the benefits of activities etc. are the major hurdles in the formation of self help groups. The income from the small income generating activities would definitely help to substantiate the rural household activities and food security.

The women have a decisive role in the eradication of household poverty. Empowering women with the property rights and banking facilities for the loans would contribute for the household income. The income in the hands of women can contribute more in the household economic status than the income in the hands of men. The economic empowerment of women would certainly help for the social upliftment and eradication of poverty specially from the rural areas. There is need to close gender gap in access to assets, resources, services and opportunities to combat rural poverty and promote agricultural and rural development.

(The writer is Chief Scientist and Head of KVK Reasi SKUAST-J)

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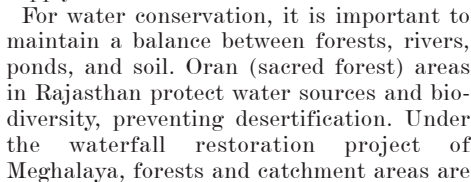
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Local communities can make better use of water by adopting their traditional knowledge and new technological measures. Hiiware Bazaar model of Maharashtra: Groundwater level was increased in this village using traditional and modern techniques. Water availability increased here by rainwater harvesting and cleaning of wells. Johad system of Rajasthan: Construction of small ponds (johads) improved the groundwater level and reduced the problem of drought. Chal-Khal system of Uttarakhand: These small reservoirs store rainwater and help in groundwater recharge. Adoption of traditional methods and new technologies is necessary for efficient use of water. Zabo agricultural system of Nagaland: This method collects rainwater and uses it for farming, which reduces the impact of



Climate change and erratic rainfall can increase water scarcity. In such a situation, traditional water conservation systems can prove to be helpful. Drought relief work in Bundelkhand: Reconstruction of ponds and rainwater harvesting is reducing water prob-

Traditional water conservation systems should be given legal status. Partnerships between scientific institutions, government agencies, and local communities should be strengthened. IIT Madras is providing tech-

"Drop by drop the pot fills"-even a small effort towards water conservation can bring a big change in the future.