

Daily Editorial Analysis 10 June 2025

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Empowering Women in Agriculture for Food Security

Context

- In a landmark resolution supported by over 100 countries, the United Nations General Assembly has declared **2026 as the International Year of the Woman Farmer**, placing global focus on the indispensable role of women in agriculture.
- While this recognition is a step forward, **it also draws attention to the deeply entrenched challenges women face in the agricultural sector.**
- Therefore, it is **important to explore those challenges and the innovative responses being developed, particularly in India**, through the lens of recent collaborative projects and policy initiatives.

The Centrality of Women in Agriculture

- Women are the **backbone** of food production globally.
- They contribute to **60% to 80% of food production in developing countries** and constitute **39% of the agricultural workforce in South Asia.**
- In India, a staggering **80% of economically active women** are employed in agriculture. Yet, their contributions remain under-recognised and under-rewarded.
- One stark indicator of this disparity is **land ownership**. Despite their large presence in agricultural work, **only 14% of landowners in India are women**, and the **National Family Health Survey reports an even lower rate of 8.3%.**
- This **lack of land ownership not only restricts their access to institutional credit but also hampers investments in modern tools and technology**, limiting their productivity and economic independence.

Institutional Support and Policy Initiatives

- Recognising these barriers, the **Government of India** has initiated several programs aimed at supporting women in agriculture.
- The **Mahila Kisan Sashaktikaran Pariyojana** focuses on skill development and enhancing access to resources, while the **Sub-Mission on Agricultural Mechanisation** provides significant subsidies on farm

machinery.

- Additionally, **30% of the National Food Security Mission's budget** is earmarked for women farmers across various States and Union Territories.
- These **initiatives aim to narrow the gender gap in agriculture** by promoting sustainable farming practices and facilitating women's access to credit, inputs, and technologies.
- However, **the impact of such programs depends on their reach, quality of implementation**, and the creation of enabling ecosystems.

Climate Change and the Gendered Vulnerability

- Climate change is **compounding** existing gender disparities.
- **Women, already burdened with domestic responsibilities, face heightened risks** due to erratic weather patterns and agricultural uncertainties.
- Projects like **ENACT (Enhancing Climate Adaptation of Vulnerable Communities)**, implemented by the World Food Programme (WFP) and supported by the Government of Assam and the Norwegian government, are addressing these concerns.
- In the flood-prone regions of Assam, ENACT introduces **climate-resilient crop varieties** and promotes **livelihood diversification**.
- **By equipping over 300 women farmers** with weekly advisories on weather and agriculture through mobile phones, **the project exemplifies the use of technology and information dissemination** to strengthen resilience.
- The **Climate Adaptation Information Centres** further this mission by enabling video conferencing and community meetings for knowledge exchange.

The Way Forward

- **Partnerships and Scalable Solutions**
 - ENACT demonstrates the power of **multi-stakeholder collaboration**.
 - By engaging state departments, **meteorological institutions, agricultural universities, and rural livelihood missions**, it creates an integrated approach to address the vulnerabilities of women farmers.
 - This project also promotes **smart seed production systems**, market linkages, and the cultivation of **nutrient-rich local varieties**, enhancing both food security and sustainability.
 - Such **interventions show that when women are empowered with knowledge, tools, and networks**, they can lead climate adaptation at the grassroots level.
- **Need for Gender Equality in Agriculture**
 - While initiatives like ENACT are promising, **much more is needed to realise gender equity in agriculture**.
 - Policy frameworks must be **gender-sensitive**, informed by **granular, sex-disaggregated data**, and responsive to the diverse needs of women. This includes:
 - Designing tools and technologies suited to women's use and scale of operation
 - Expanding access to **credit, savings, and insurance mechanisms**

- Supporting **women-led agri-value chains** and **self-help groups**
- Building **collective agency and leadership** among women farmers

Conclusion

- The declaration of 2026 as the International Year of the Woman Farmer presents a historic opportunity to **mainstream gender equality in agriculture**.
 - **Women farmers are not just food producers; they are agents of change, resilience, and sustainability.**
 - **By recognising their contributions** and addressing systemic inequalities, **we can promote a more inclusive, secure, and prosperous future for all.**
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The Census and the Remaking of a People

Context

- The **transition from a population to a people is not merely a demographic process**, but a deeply political transformation.
- In India, **this transformation is mediated by tools such as the decadal census**, which, while appearing to be a technical exercise in enumeration, in reality plays a profound role in shaping political identities, resource allocation, and representational structures.
- The **upcoming 2027 Census promises to be a watershed moment in this regard, comparable in its long-term consequences to the COVID-19 pandemic** that delayed the 2021 census, as it is poised to redraw the contours of Indian democracy through delimitation, caste enumeration, and political redistribution.

The Census: More Than a Count

- A **census is conventionally understood as a comprehensive enumeration** of the population, accounting for various demographic markers, including urban/rural residence, caste and tribe status, literacy, fertility, economic activity, and migration.
- However, **the census does more than passively record reality**; it actively shapes it.
- By categorising individuals into fixed groups, **the census institutionalises identities and priorities**, and in doing so, it helps constitute the political community, the people.
- Thus, **the census is not a neutral exercise**. As population trends shift, so too does the political landscape.
- For instance, **increasing Hindi speakers in metropolitan cities or migration flows to southern India indicate changing demographic dynamics** with potent political implications.

Political Demography and Parliamentary Representation

- At the heart of the 2027 Census lies **the question of parliamentary representation**.
- **Article 81 of the Constitution mandates** that **parliamentary seats be redistributed** after the first census following 2026.

- **Due to the delay of the 2021 census**, this redistribution, or delimitation, could take place earlier than expected, **potentially in time for the 2029 general elections**.
- With all data being captured digitally, the pace of this exercise is likely to be unprecedented.
- This raises a crucial question: **What happens when population size becomes the sole criterion for representation?**
- **States with higher birth rates but slower economic growth, predominantly in northern and central India, stand to gain seats**, while southern and western States, which have invested in population control and economic development, could lose influence.
- This **paradox threatens to penalise states that have pursued responsible demographic policies and rewarded those that have not**, thereby igniting regional tensions. The Centre has acknowledged the need for discussions, but clarity remains elusive.

Caste Enumeration, Social Politics and The Federal Compact and Revenue Sharing

- **Caste Enumeration and Social Politics**
 - One of the most transformative elements of Census 2027 is **the proposed comprehensive caste census, the first since 1931**.
 - The **counting of all castes, beyond Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), is expected to dramatically alter the political discourse**.
 - **Caste identities**, long embedded in India's social fabric, **are poised to become even more central to resource claims and political mobilisation**.
 - This **development is likely to rekindle debates over the 50% reservation ceiling**, a landmark constraint that many political groups seek to overturn.
 - Moreover, **this census aligns with the constitutional push for one-third reservation for women in legislative bodies**, further adding complexity to the social reorganisation of political power.
 - **Combined with the possibility of simultaneous elections** to Parliament and State Assemblies, **these changes suggest a far-reaching restructuring of democratic representation**.
- **The Federal Compact and Revenue Sharing**
 - Alongside these demographic and electoral transformations, **the Sixteenth Finance Commission, due to submit its recommendations by October 2025**, is expected to revisit the formula for revenue sharing between the Centre and the States.
 - **Many States have expressed dissatisfaction with the criteria used by previous Commissions**, especially when these have appeared to favour population size over developmental performance.
 - As with parliamentary representation, **the question is whether population-heavy but economically weaker states should receive a disproportionately higher share** of national revenues.
 - The **overlapping timelines of the census, delimitation, and the Finance Commission's recommendations underscore a moment of pivotal renegotiation** in India's federal compact.

Political Strategies and National Identity

- These **demographic transitions are not occurring in a political vacuum.**
- The **ruling Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP)**, with its centralising and majoritarian vision, **sees in these changes both a challenge and an opportunity.**
- A **population-based delimitation could consolidate its power** in regions where it is strongest, primarily in the north and central belt.
- At the same time, **by bringing gender and caste into the delimitation debate, the BJP may seek to transcend narrow regional rivalries** and construct a broader national coalition based on identity categories that cut across states.
- The **Congress and Left parties, traditionally national in outlook but now weakened in the heartland, are also seeking to reclaim space** by aligning with demands for caste-based justice.
- Yet, **whether they can compete with the BJP's organisational strength** and ideological clarity in navigating this demographic moment **remains uncertain.**
- The **political use of census categories, from caste to language** to migration status, is **now central to all parties' electoral strategies.**

Conclusion

- **Census 2027 is more than a decadal statistical exercise;** it is a political event of generational importance. It **will reconfigure how Indians are counted, represented, governed, and resourced.**
- From delimitation to caste enumeration, from revenue sharing to identity formation, **this census sits at the intersection of administration and politics, demography and democracy.**
- **It will shape not only the size and shape of constituencies but also the meaning of citizenship** and the nature of national identity in 21st-century India.
- As the nation prepares for this defining moment, **it must confront the tensions inherent in balancing demographic realities, federal equity, and democratic fairness.**

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