From Access To Agency: Uplifting India's Marginalised

Times News Network

India's empowerment journey is at a critical inflection point. While its developmental story often showcases soaring GDP figures and rising global stature, this progress masks a more complex reality. For millions on the margins, advancement remains a distant promise. Caste, gender, disability, religion, and sexuality frequently intersect, forging layers of exclusion that persist despite legislative guarantees.

It's in these invisible trenches that the real battle for empowerment is unfolding — quiet, yet transformational. At the heart of this shift is a recalibration of what empowerment means.

No longer is it just about delivering benefits. As Nobel laureate Amartya Sen and feminist scholar Naila Kabeer argue, empowerment must expand people's capabilities and life choices. That means not merely giving marginalised communities access to goods and services, but enabling them to exercise voice, agency, and dignity.

India has, in recent years, initiated an array of legal and policy instruments to address entrenched inequities. The Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016), Forest Rights Act (2006), and Transgender Persons Act (2019) are emblematic of this shift.

Schemes like MGNREGA and the Ujjwala Yojana have brought work and clean fuel to rural doorsteps. Yet implementation reveals uneven outcomes, especially among Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and women with disabilities.

Bihar's Viklang Sashaktikaran Yojna and Telangana's Aasara pension scheme are examples of state-level adaptations that attempt to bridge local gaps. Civil society networks like Wada Na Todo Abhiyan monitor and pressure govts to fulfil promises, adding a layer of accountability. Meanwhile, institutions such as NITI Aayog's SDG coordination centres are beginning to integrate community voices in planning and monitoring processes.

But real change hinges on more than schemes. It requires systems that understand complexity. A tribal woman with a disability, for instance, doesn't just need a wheelchair ramp. She needs coordinated entitlements, accessible communication, and community support that acknowledges the multi-layered nature of her exclusion.

Corporate India, too, is stepping in with purpose. CSR is evolving beyond cheque-writing. Projects like ITC's Mission Sunehra Kal, which has mobilised over 3.5 lakh women into self-help groups, or HUL's Project Shakti, empowering over 1.3 lakh rural women with entrepreneurship and hygiene training, are crafting new templates for inclusive growth. Vedanta's Nand Ghar and NTPC's Girl Empowerment Mission are weaving nutrition, education, and health into holistic empowerment.

These initiatives are not without limitations. Intersectional targeting is still nascent. While SC/ST inclusion has improved, a closer look reveals gaps in addressing compounded vulnerabilities—say, for transgender persons with disabilities or religious minorities in remote areas.

CSR interventions must therefore move from outcome counting to impact mapping, using tools like storytelling, community audits, and life histories to understand what change looks like from the ground. International partnerships add momentum. UNDP-supported projects like the Gender Seal for Development are institutionalising gender equity across health systems and skilling programmes like SMILE.

A major structural reform is the govt's push for third-party evaluations of centrally-sponsored schemes, undertaken by the Development Monitoring and Evaluation Office (DMEO). These assessments are unearthing the gaps and successes that often escape attention.

The convergence of law, policy, civil society, and corporate commitment offers an unparalleled opportunity. But the real test lies in embedding intersectionality — in seeing the individual not just through one identity marker but through all that shapes their lived reality. Welfare delivery must give way to systems of recognition, redistribution, and representation.

Only then will India's growth story be truly inclusive, not just in charts and numbers, but in lives changed, voices heard, and futures reimagined.

CSR IMPACT HIGHLIGHTS

- **JSW Steel** | ₹235 cr ('23–24); rural BPOs for 10k+ women
- **NTPC GEM** | Empowered 12,700+ rural girls
- **Vedanta Nand Ghar** | Integrated Anganwadi reform
- **ITC Mission Sunehra Kal** | ₹3.5 lakh+ women in SHGs
- **HUL Project Shakti** | ₹1.3 lakh+ rural women entrepreneurs
- **Kotak UNNATI** | 95% trainees report enhanced self-belief

POLICY MILESTONES

- **Rights of Persons with Disabilities Act (2016)**
- **Forest Rights Act (2006)**
- **Transgender Persons Act (2019)**
- **Ujjwala Yojana** | LPG access for rural women
- **MGNREGA** | Guaranteed employment

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