

Rural Roots Market and Self-Help Groups (SHGs): A Study of Economic Empowerment for Rural Women in Manipur

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ABSTRACT

Recently, Rural Roots Market was launched in three districts of Manipur: Bishnupur, Imphal East, and Thoubal. It is promoted by the Manipur State Rural Livelihood Mission (MSRLM) under the aegis of the Department of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (RD&PR), Government of Manipur. In this market, women from various SHGs showcase various products. The market contributes to the empowerment of rural women through active social interaction in Manipur. Although this market has considerable future potential, several factors need to be considered, including infrastructure development and the limited availability of market opening times. However, Rural Roots Market is a good start by creating small financial hubs in rural areas, which can help achieve Viksit Bharat.

KEYWORDS: Rural, Roots, Market, SHGs (Self Help groups), Women, economic, empowerment

1. Introduction

The government of India has targeted 2047 -the 100th year of independence to achieve Viksit Bharat. However, it would not be an easy task to accomplish this objective without focusing on the needs of rural life, where approximately 60% of the population resides in rural areas. From time to time, the government has taken various steps to promote women's empowerment, particularly in rural areas. When it comes to women's empowerment in rural areas, Self-Help Groups (SHGs) play a crucial role in empowering women financially, thereby increasing their standard of living. The objective of the paper is to analyze the impact of the Rural Roots market on rural women as a game-changer for economic liberation. This paper also examines how this market influences the fate of SHGs in Manipur, as a key stakeholder in the cause of rural women's empowerment. For fieldwork, six SHGs were randomly selected from Khangabok Village, and five members from each SHG were interviewed using unstructured questions. The respondents are selected based on convenience. This paper is based on observations from unstructured interviews with respondents, utilizing a qualitative method.

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Recently, Rural Roots Market was launched in three districts as a milestone initiative of the Government of Manipur, promoted by the Manipur State Rural Livelihood Mission (MSRLM) under the aegis of the Department of Rural Development and Panchayati Raj (RD&PR). The main objective of this initiative is to empower women by eliminating middlemen, providing self-help members with the opportunity to sell their products directly to consumers at local wholesale prices. This initiative has a direct impact on many aspects of empowering rural women in Manipur. The markets were solely organised by Self Help Group (SHGs) Members of various village-level Federations (VLF) and cluster-level federations (CLF) under the guidance of MSRLM.

As part of this, the "Rural Roots Market" was launched on August 20th and 21st, 2025, at 11 am at the Khangabok New Market Complex, Khangabok, Thoubal District. This function was hosted by the Yainubi Cluster Level Federation and promoted by the Manipur State Rural Livelihood Mission (MSRLM). The first of its kind was launched at the Leimapokpam Makha Leikai Community Hall, Nambol, Bishnupur. As a step to support women's self-help groups (SHGs), the Rural Roots Market was inaugurated at Yaipha Lamjing Kanglup Ground, Chingarel, Tezpur, Imphal East district, on October 10, 2025, for a two-day event. It was hosted by Kaifadaba Lan Women Multipurpose Cooperative Society Ltd in collaboration with Ita Women Multipurpose Cooperative Society Ltd, Thougambi Women Multipurpose Cooperative Society Ltd, and Kanglei Heeyai Women Multipurpose Cooperative Society Ltd. This two-day market features 58 stalls showcasing products designed & made by SHGs under 4 Cluster Level Federations (CLFs) of Imphal East-I.

The various stakeholders involved in the setup of this market are-

- i. Government of Manipur-MSRLM (Manipur State Rural Livelihoods Mission) as promoter
- ii. Rural Women (SHG members) as producers and sellers
- iii. Customers- from various parts and visitors from other states.

2. Rural Roots Market and SHGs-

So, to discuss this market properly, we need to know about SHGs in detail. SHGs are voluntary groups of people, typically from disadvantaged backgrounds, who come together to engage in income-generating activities, access credit, and save money. Mutual trust, communal decision-making, and shared accountability are the cornerstones of these organizations. Also, "*SHGs are small informal group of 10-20 individuals, who are homogenous with respect to social and economic background and come together voluntarily for promoting savings habit among members and for a common cause to raise and manage*



resources for the benefit of group members. However, in hilly tracts / regions and predominantly tribal dominated areas where communities are dispersed, smaller groups of minimum 5 members are also formed into SHGs. The internal savings mobilised by the group are then lent by it to its members for emergent needs or such other purposes as decided by the group.” (nabard.org).

The concept of SHGs was introduced in Manipur during the 1990s through various government schemes, including the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP). The National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) played a crucial role in promoting SHGs under its SHG-Bank Linkage Programme (SBLP). Local NGOs and civil society organizations have played a vital role in popularizing SHGs, particularly in rural and tribal areas.

The National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) mention some of the essential features for the provision of credit by the bank to the group area as follows:

1. SHG members should preferably have a homogeneous background and shared interests.
2. It should have been in active existence for at least a period of six months.
3. It should have successfully undertaken savings and credit operations from its own resources.
4. It should be democratically working, wherein all members feel that they have an equal say.
5. The group is maintaining proper accounts/records.
6. Bankers should be convinced that the group has not come into existence only for the availing of benefits, and there should be a genuine need to help each other and work together among the members

3. Rural Roots Market : A means to achieve Viksit Bharat

The implications of the Rural Roots Market can be analysed in various dimensions. The first is that these markets, just like the famous Ima Market of Manipur, are entirely run by women, which symbolizes women's power. If this kind of market is launched in every district of Manipur, it will help to change the socio-economic perspective of women in Manipur. The market can serve as a means for women to turn their dream of financial independence into reality. It doesn't seem like a market, but a moment of celebration for the womenfolk, recognizing their hard work and skills. Even though they express that SHG saves their lives, they are confined to the kitchen only. They say that they can see light now, as if they can achieve everything. It is a symbol of economic consciousness to the women in rural areas of Manipur.



It can enhance the very objective of the Made in India Initiative of the Government of India. The market can give rise to small manufacturing hubs in rural areas of Manipur, as well as women's entrepreneurship. The market was filled with various items manufactured and produced by women from various SHGs, such as materials made with Kouna in English called Club rush or Water rush, scientifically called as *Schoenoplectus lacustris* (a type of weed), Bags, weaving products like Phanek Phi, Pheijom (Manipuri clothes), vegetables, handicraft items (made with Kouna like lady handbag, tools, hats, etc), and many others. There was even a small local restaurant that they set up for the market and other visitors. The market was highly successful, with many items selling out within a few hours. I also personally bought some items, such as a bag and Phanek.

Another perspective concerns the significant change in the personality of rural women in Manipur. At the inaugural function of Khangabok Rural Roots Market, speeches were given by successful self-help group members, including Mina Devi from the Wangbal Self-Help Group and Ashalata from Khangabok Part 2. One of the speakers even cried during her speech on stage, expressing that she was unable to answer even her own name during her first time in the self-help group. It is an essential indicator of the social empowerment of women in rural areas of Manipur, and in fact, they are happy to be in that position. It can help with social and behavioural changes. Addressing the gathering, Hannah Kahmei, IAS, Deputy Commissioner of Thoubal and District Mission Director of MSRLM Thoubal, said the initiative aims to empower women by providing them with opportunities for income generation and economic upliftment. She lauded the efforts of women participants from various Gram Panchayats across the district who contributed their products to the market, and encouraged SHG members for their dedication and hard work.

When the respondents are asked if they are facing any patriarchal norms of the society, such as not being able to go out for SHG groups and any restrictions from family members, they said they don't face such restrictions anymore. As the benefits of the SHG program, such as loans and investments, help family members, they also become aware of these benefits and continue to motivate and encourage women to participate in such activities. Thus, these programs make a significant contribution to the socialization of rural women's lives. It facilitates more social interaction among rural women.

With the launch of this market, the rural woman, as well as group members, are getting motivated. It also elevates the status of rural women, shifting them from the hardship of the care economy to an economically stable way of life. The launch of this kind of market provides excess logistics support to the welfare of rural women's livelihoods. Earlier, although rural women had developed small skills through their day-to-day practice, such as weaving and other handicraft activities, the lack of a good market source was one of the



stumbling blocks. However, nowadays they are mainly waiting for this market so that they can showcase their products and earn economic profits from their daily activities. Thus, this market can act as a source of economic liberation for rural women.

Besides empowering rural women economically, these markets can also serve as a boost for indigenously made items in the market. Products that are only directly produced or manufactured by rural women can be showcased. It can serve as a direct medium for the consumption of locally made items. This market also serves as a platform for forming opportunities and connections. Some respondents even share their experience of one of the vendors of Kuona products establishing a connection with a customer from an outside state and continuing to send Finnish products from home, reaping a huge profit margin. By seeing these opportunities, other women are also becoming self-conscious, so that if they try, they may also be able to secure such opportunities in the future. Thus, this market already has a significant impact on the lives of rural women.

When it comes to the financial organisation for arranging products to be sold at the market, the amount is invested by the CLF-Cluster level federation, from which the central government later recovers it. For older SHG members, there is also the privilege of obtaining a loan of up to ₹ 1 lakh, allowing them to invest in whatever they wish to pursue. The problem arises when there are no such opportunities for newly formed or registered SHGs. They struggled at the grassroots level to gather funds for their products. When Rural Roots Markets was first established, a charge of Rs 80 per stall per day was in effect, but this is no longer applicable. When it comes to items showcased in the market, it includes a variety of products such as brooms, bed sheets, mosquito nets, dresses, Hentak (Grinded fermented fish), Mat, bags, and other various items made with Kouna, pickles, wooden items, vegetables etc, the products to be showcased has to be produced solely by the SHG members.

There have been social and behavioural changes in women, as well as other sections of society as a whole. Earlier, women were hesitant to participate in social gatherings. Still, after learning about and seeing what others have achieved by joining SHGs, rural women are now ready to join and engage in SHG activities. One responder even told me that they are prepared and would voluntarily come out to be members of cadres and as 'Active Women'. When it comes to acceptance from society and their family for what they are doing, they reply that the members of their family have also seen all the good things and received financial help from SHGs. As a result, there is no restriction from the family on the majority of them, although a few still face one. I think that time is over when women were expected not to step out of the house. Now, women



are actively participating in the social and economic realm of society, marking a huge success and achievement for the SHGs in Manipur.

4. Challenges Ahead-

One of the significant setbacks of the rural roads market is that it is like a fair and showcase only once a month, which itself is a sign of a substantial limitation. However, some respondents are satisfied if the market is open for 5 days a week in a month, as they believe that a lack of heterogeneity in products and the shortest customer service hours will hinder the rate of selling goods. Additionally, the opinions of other respondents indicate that the opportunities will be more numerous if the market continues to operate for the entire month. Although the older SHGs have many options to address their financing challenges, such as loans, the starting SHG members who are not eligible for such incentives are facing economic difficulties in preparing products for the market.

Some of the respondents also expressed that the number of buyers was not a handful, and although the products were sold extensively during the first lunch, they were unable to sell them later. The market will be more successful if the infrastructure challenges are adequately addressed. One of the flaws of the launch was seen that day itself. While the market was running smoothly, rain suddenly fell, and a large amount of water accumulated. Although the staff of MSRLM and Women's groups handled the moment, some of the products were completely wet. These kinds of infrastructure issues are needed to address first. Also, a well-organized market setup, including proper signboards and a suitable market shed, is crucial for the success of this initiative. Additionally, the market needs to offer a diverse range of products to attract more customers. Therefore, there is a need for training programs, as well as government initiatives, to incorporate other products into the market, thereby increasing market viability.

5. Conclusion

No Doubt, the market signifies the epitome of success for MSRLM and women's SHG members. If the continuity of this market is maintained with the same enthusiasm for an extended period, it can contribute to the empowerment of rural women in various dimensions, including economic, social, and financial empowerment. It can eventually impact their ability to make decisions. Although there is still scope for infrastructure improvement, it will help achieve the very aim of Viksit Bharat by 2047. It would not be wrong to say that the Rural Roots Market is one of the key milestone initiatives of the government of Manipur, which aims to transform the existing socio-economic landscape for rural women in Manipur. This



introduction can be more ironic if the government addresses the issues of advertisement, infrastructure development, and market regulation more efficiently.

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