

# Women Empowerment in Rural Bihar

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**Abstract**—The status of women in Bihar is particularly low because of a lethal combination of feudal, caste and patriarchal oppression. Various programmers and schemes are operational with differential outreach and impact on the lives of women. Amidst the continued presence of patriarchal norms and structures, gender stereotypes are less resilient to change. There is an urgent need to upgrade the livelihood opportunities for women workers in Bihar. Given the current situation of the labor market, various avenues to increase income and empowerment opportunities for women need to be explored and strengthened.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

EMPOWERMENT IS a multi-dimensional process which should enable the individuals or a group of individuals to realize their full identity, as well as, powers in all knowledge and resources, greater autonomy in decision-making to enable them to have greater ability to plan their lives to have greater control over the circumstances, which influence their lives and free them from the shackles imposed on them by traditional customs, beliefs and practices.

Empowerment is a self-generating and multi-dimensional process, where involving activity for advancement of women in different fields of life such as economic, political and social empowerment can be considered a change in the context of woman's and man's life that enables her/him increased capacity to lead a human life, characterized by external quality related to health, education, awareness, status and security. Empowerment means individual acquiring the power to think, act freely, exercise choice, voice, and decide autonomy and fulfillment of their potentials. In other words, empowerment means to create free and fair circumstances where the individual has the rights to determine his/her own future lifestyle. The process of empowerment of women in Bihar has recently been paid attention by passing the Bihar Panchayati Raj Act, 1993, whereby 50 per cent of the total number seats reserved for SCs, STs, and OBCs has been reserved for women in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs).

In Bihar where nearly 11 crore people live, the conditions of rural Bihari are pathetic and vulnerable because they are still in grip of mass poverty. Women of Bihar in the rural field are still exploited and neglected. They are mostly illiterate and are deprived of essential requirements and very dependent upon their male counterparts. In the recent years, the government has adopted certain schemes and programmes to develop the rural poor. Attention has been paid to upgrade the status of women and preserve their identity and prestige. The Government of Nitish Kumar in the latest Panchayat elections has shown concern towards women development by reserving 50 per cent seats in the PRIs.

No doubt, the step is appreciable but its implementation is lamentable. The illiterate backward rural women in Bihar are yet hesitant to provide the leadership with the result that their male members use them as a means to fulfill their own interest. These males do everything in the name of female *Mukhia*, *Sarpanch* and other members. Most of them are puppets in the hands of their male members like husband, sons, father, etc. They have no choice other than ditto what their male members say whether right or wrong.

Swami Vivekananda had said, "That country and that nation which don't respect women will never become great now and nor will ever in future and in pursuit of making India a great nation, let us work towards giving women their much deserved status".

Education is both an indicator and an instrument of development and its attainment is a major factor in the accumulation of human capital. It raises skill and productivity, enables new lines of production, and lowers costs all round. Thus, education increases the political, social, and economic opportunities available in the society, but independent India inherited a legacy of abysmally low literacy rates, large scale inter and intra regional imbalances, gender disparities and rigid social stratification in education levels. However, the Indian Government has expressed a strong commitment towards education for all and the gender gap in educational

involvement has been reduced over the years, but it is still a matter of great concern. According to the latest Human Development Report of South Asia, "One of the discrimination that girls and women are facing in India is the fact that they are not able to enjoy the right to education. More than half of the adult illiterates, i.e. 63 per cent are women and nearly two fifth girls enrolled in primary schools are dropouts before grade five." However, it is heartening to note that while the gap between enrolment of boys and girls or the male-female ratio, in education is still a matter of concern, it has been steadily improving over the years.

Thus, education has an important role in empowering women because it increases the political, social, and economic opportunities available in society to women.

## **2. DEMOCRATIC ORIENTATION OF WOMEN IN BIHAR**

Although some prominent women are in the forefront of Indian politics, the participation of women in governance is very small. Until the reservation of 33 per cent seats for women in local government bodies came into being in 1992 after the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment, the gender bias pervaded at all levels of governance in India. In consequence, the number of women elected to panchayats increased to one million. At present, there are 655629 women members in gram panchayat, 37,523 in panchayat samities, and 3,161 in Zilla Parishad.

There is a wind of change blowing across Bihar. The 50 per cent reservation for the fair sex is all set to challenge the male dominance. According to rough estimate, over 20,000 women candidates were in the fray from three naxal-affected district of Arwal, Jehanabad and Gaya. The number of women candidates in the entire state was 1.20 lakh.

The 73rd Amendment and Empowering Women— Article (14), Article (15), Article 15 (E), Article (39), Article 51 (A) (e) shows basics of gender equality and protection of women's right in our Constitution. These are the significant legal tools for women's development and participation in socio-political-economic scenario of India. The 73rd Amendment provides a broad base to perform them particularly in rural areas, which is more than the concept of welfare, development, and employment before 1992.

All social re-construction takes place only through political activities, that too through political system. Democracy provides enough scope for such reconstruction through polity. Hence, every social segment is moving towards power. Yet, women hesitate to take part in politics as if it is a male space. In order to break this barrier at the micro level a new device has been worked out through the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. Women had been made ineffective in administration. Since they came to these institutions as freshers, but there are instances of women having achieved a great deal of success in managing Panchayat responsibilities.

Women leaders in Panchayat are engaged in a constant struggle. The 73rd Constitutional Amendment provided an opportunity for women, the weaker section of the community to share the fruits of democracy along with their counterparts in the society in the form of reservation of posts in the PRIs.

## **3. POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT OF RURAL WOMEN: A MYTH OR REALITY**

Mahatma Gandhi has rightly been acclaimed as father of women empowerment. He was seriously concerned about the socio-economic subordination of women and socially disastrous consequences of increasing level of gender inequality, because he firmly believed that society could not

claim to be dynamic and progressive. He also believed that for social justice, equal rights for men and women are imperative. Gandhi visualized wider role of women as agents of socio-economic change.

Empowerment is a process of awareness and capacity building, which is both individual and collective. It is through empowerment in-group that people most often begin to develop their awareness and ability to organize, take action, and bring about change. Women empowerment especially for rural women cannot be achieved unless women in large numbers are visible and active politically, socially and economically. They must be involved in decision-making body of all social, economic, and political organizations since they constitute about half the population of India.

The introduction of new Panchayati Raj Institution under 73rd Constitutional Amendment has paved way for women political participation on larger scale. The reservation provisions in Panchayat bodies have facilitated them to take up political roles at grassroots level. India's experiment with reservation of seats for women at grassroots democracy has been a huge success. A large number of women have entered the panchayat and local bodies due to reservation through this 73rd and 74th Amendment to the Constitution. However, it is largely alleged that this phenomenon of proxy leadership prevails.

As regards women's share in power structure at micro level, the situation is not very encouraging in case of India in general and Bihar in particular. In case of Indian trend, the facts show that their share in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIS) has been limited to the reservation provisions as is evident from the fact depicted in the National Commission for Women (NCW) shortly conducted across the country. The trend of proxy leadership among women still prevails all over India. The situation in Bihar has been found a bit better in comparison to the national level. Bihar has witnessed two panchayat elections in this first decade of last century, i.e. in 2001 and 2006 respectively. It was found that in 2001 election women could win 37 per cent of seats as against 33 per cent reservation. It is interesting to note that Bihar Panchayati Raj Act 2006 has made a drastic provision of reservation in favor of women (50% of all categories for women). This has assured

certain entry of women into the power structure at lower level in proportion to their population. In 2006 Panchayat election in Bihar more than 50 per cent women have entered the panchayat and local bodies institutions to share this political power for their empowerment. However, this trend of proxy leadership among women does also prevail in this 2006 election. A sizeable of the women PRI leaders admitted that they had neither awareness nor interest in the power play. The male family members do all on their (women's) behalf.

#### 4. EMPOWERMENT OF RURAL WOMEN THROUGH AWARENESS OF THEIR RIGHTS

Empowerment of women also means equal status to women. Empowering women socio-economically through increased awareness of their rights and duties as well as access to resources is a decisive step towards greater security for them. Empowerment includes higher literacy level and education for women, better health care for women and children, equal ownership of productive resources, increased participation in economic and commercial sectors, awareness of their rights and responsibilities, improved standards of living and acquiring self-reliance, self-esteem and self-confidence.

Even after more than 63 years of Independence, positive spell of modernization and industrialization, development of Science and Technology, entering into space and nuclear age, the status of women in India continues to be low. Under the customary law, women have no right to inheritance of property from either father or husband. After her death or remarriage/marriage, it goes to other family male members. It shows the lower status of women. These days' cases of rape, dowry death, and physical exploitation of women have gone up in rural areas. Women of all ages from four years to 70 years are reported being raped. Similar is the case of dowry deaths.

It is most unfortunate and tragic scenario of our society. So many Acts for safeguard of women have been enacted, i.e. Article 44 through 86th Amendment of Constitution of India as well as other enactment. Provisions of these Amendments say that women should be given special social security, to give more education with a view to provide more employment.

Such and many more are cruel realities amidst which, she is struggling to breathe and wade through life's long and tedious journey. Undoubtedly the various developmental programmes initiated by the government and different organizations or the Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) have put their focus on women's over all development. Their basic approach is to inculcate confidence among women and bring about awareness of their own potential for development. This would certainly give them their due place as equal partners in all development programmes. Government may also make policy of reservation or incentives as they also constitute half of population and do not have proper representation in any material aspect of life.

#### 5. WOMEN EMPOWERMENT THROUGH SELF-HELP GROUPS: A KEY TO ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Women constitute almost half of the population of the world. In India also women population is about half of total population. According to Census 2011, 48.15 per cent of the total population consists of women.

Development of the economy largely depends upon the active participation of the women in economic activities.

Self-help Group concept is almost two decade old. Generally, members of SHGs are women. They play an important role in upliftment of the economic status of their families. It has boosted the process of women empowerment. In India, banks are main agency for delivery of micro credit. Ila Ben Bhatt had founded Self-Employed Women Association (SEWA) in 1970. She had developed the concept of 'Women and Microfinance', in 1991-92., NABARD has also started promoting Self-Help Groups on a large Scale. In 1993, Reserve Bank of India allowed SHGs to open saving accounts in bank. Following are some of the steps required for forming a SHG.

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| Step one   | Decide number of Women in one SHG (e.g. 10-20)  |
| Step 2     | Give specific name to that SHG and register to respective government department.                |
| Step three | Select/Elect Chairman/Vice-Chairman from the Group.   |
| Step 4     | Open Bank account in any nationalized bank in the name of SHG and decide monthly saving amount. |
| Step 5     | Decide the day for meeting.   |

The basic aim of promoting SHGs is poverty alleviation and to achieve empowerment of women. There are three SHG models of linkage.

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| Model 1 | Banks themselves form and finance the SHGs.                                  |
| Model 2 | SHGs are formed by NGOs and other agencies but financed by banks.            |
| Model 3 | Banks finance SHGs with NGOs and other agencies as financial Intermediaries. |

The year 1975 was declared as a 'Year for Women'. The period 1975-85 was declared as 'Decade for Women'. During this period, importance of role of women was highlighted. Emphasis was given that men and women should get equal opportunity.

Empowerment involves access to resources, participation in discussion-making, bargaining power, and control over benefits, self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-respect. Empowerment includes economic, social, and political involvement of women.

## 6. WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: ROLE OF THE GOVERNMENT IN BIHAR

Empowerment is multi-faceted, multi-dimensional, and multi-layered concept. Women's empowerment is a process in which women gain greater share of control over resources—materials, human and intellectual like knowledge information, ideas and financial resources like access to money and control over decision-making in the home, community, society and nation, and to gain 'power'. According to a Report of the Government of India, "Empowerment means moving from a position of enforced powerlessness to one of power".

Man and woman are both equal and both play a vital role in the creation and development of their families in particular and the society in general: Man and woman have got equal right and position in the Constitution of India, even then the question of empowerment of woman is one of the major issue in the process of development of countries all over the world. In India, Government had made Empowerment of Women as one of the Principal objectives of Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2002) and declared 2001 as the year of "Women's Empowerment". In order to give a fillip to empowerment of women and appropriate institutional mechanisms and interventions have been consciously built into the development design. The launching of Rashtriya Mahila Kosh, Indira Mahila Yojana, Mahila Samridhi Yojana, reserving of one-third of the number of seats in panchayats and the local bodies are programmes launched with a view to improve and empower women socially, economically and on political frontiers.

Women have always and almost everywhere been on the fringe of political and social power. Like other states, Bihar is no exception and continues to have marginal representation of its women in political institutions. Now that the Bihar Government has announced 50 per cent reservation for women PRI candidates and 15 per cent of the total budgetary allocations for 10 departments was earmarked for the empowerment of women in the state.

Even then, the gender ratio in Bihar was 921 women against thousand men. The population of women was 39.7 million against 43.2 million of men. Women literacy rate is just more than half of men. For the empowerment of women, Bihar Government has provided 720 million for Chief Minister Balika Poshak Yojana, Rs.421.4 million for Balika Cycle Scheme, Rs.200 million for Kanya Vivah Scheme, Rs.225 million for Nari Shakti Yojana. Besides this, the Government has earmarked Rs. 51.5 million for Swamsidha, Rs.539 million for Lakshmi Bai Social Security Scheme, Rs.138 million for National Programme for adolescent girls, Rs. one billion for supplementary nutrition, Rs.49 billion for Indira Awas Yojana and Rs.144.5 million for Dular strategy.

The impact of this Yojana for empowerment of women was visible in the state and national elections. Women exercised

their voting right block and as a result, nearly 10 per cent more women voted in this election.

## 7. NATIONAL RURAL EMPLOYMENT GUARANTEE ACT AND RURAL WOMEN WORKERS IN BIHAR

Women cannot be truly empowered without sound economic backing. It is the truth that women have been discriminated and under estimated, due to their low economic acquisitions. They have been marginalized as the most insignificant segment of the male-dominated society. Most of the governments of developing countries are launching number of programmes for elimination of poverty and empowerment of women in the country.

The 'National Rural Employment Guarantee Act' (NREGA), new name 'Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act' (MNREGA) is the most ambitious 'income security programme' for rural poor women of India. The Act provides guaranteed employment of up to 100 days, at minimum wages to those who volunteer to do manual work but are not even assured of finding work in rural areas on daily basis. Employment can thus be claimed as an entitlement, providing women scope for ensuring equal wages for all sections of society. There are certain provisions within the NREGA, which have been designed to create better conditions for rural women. For example, the Act mandates 33 per cent participation for women. There are provisions for giving priority to women workers to ensure that at least one-third of beneficiaries are women and ensuring equal wages for men, women, and crèche for children of women workers. The unique features of the Act include, time bound employment guarantee and wage payment within 15 days. Provisions like work within the radius of five kilometers from the house, absence of supervisor and contractor, flexibility in terms of choosing period and months of employment also make the scheme, 'women friendly'.

In Bihar, the scheme implemented in 23 districts for the first phase. It will be the major step towards changing the face of rural Bihar. The programme indicates a positive impact on social and economic well-being of rural women laborers and their families. It holds the powerful prospect of bringing major changes in the lives of rural women in Bihar. By generating employment for women at fair wages in the village, NREGA is playing a substantial role in economically empowering women and laying the basis for greater independence and self-esteem. However, for the successful implementation and successful performance of 'Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act' (MGNREGA) in Bihar, an integrated approach is needed. Due to some shortcomings and lack of coordination between different departments, the women participation remains below the stipulated minimum of 33 per cent. Hence, here question arises what prevents women from joining the MGNREGA in large number in the other

states like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Gujarat, etc.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Development is a process of gradual change where different component factors work together. It may be also called that development is base of social change where process of social mobilisation begins in the people's attitude, faith and behavior and then their social structure. It is, in fact a shift from old to new value, new faith, and new living style. Under the process of development "major clusters of old social, economic and physical commitments are eroded or broken and people are available for new pattern of socialization of behavior with the development, changes take place, prestige strata, power strata and economic strata of power. The development is the process of betterment provided in right direction. Those who are aware, capable, mighty take the better benefits of development while the neglected, suppressed and poor remain deprived.

Today development is a major cry all over the world. In modern world, emphasis is given to change the social fabric by bringing about changes in thinking of man and providing him opportunities until traditional pattern of society and traditional way of thinking and living is changed. Development provides a new set of life style increasing human needs and supplying new requirements. Huge amount of money is invested through various plans, giving priority to different aspects of life. Means of production are upgraded; every section of the people is expected to participate in development process. With the development, changes take place in prestige strata, power strata and economic strata of the people dividing society in permanent groups or categories linked with each other by the relationship of subordination. The group, which acquires maximum benefits of development, occupies the highest hierarchical ranks of the social stratum and provides leadership to the society in such a manner that their interests are safe and well protected. Moreover, they have enough strength to defend their interest if there is any threat to it. On the other hand, the subordinate groups are bound or rather forced to follow the lead provided by the group that is

both capable and viable. The schemes related to development of SCs and STs are available but due to low awareness among these people, the benefits of such schemes hardly reach in proper proportion to the related people. Due to practice of corruption and interference of brokers, the rural families who are backward and illiterate still lag behind to harvest the fruits of their share. The development schemes have enabled the stakes to improve their status at the cost of poor and deprived sections of society. Like other parts of India, materialism is mounting over moralist in Bihar also. The development process has widened the gap between the rich and the poor. The state has developed and the society has changed, but the real beneficiaries are those who have successfully maneuvered to exploit political, administrative, and economic mechanism of the state. The poor sections are yet deprived of even essential daily requirements. Among them, the status of women is most vulnerable. A lot has been done to improve their conditions. Special attention must be paid to provide them education, health facilities and social securities.

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