



The role of affirmative actions for women empowerment in Bihar: A case study of 2005-2020

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Abstract

The principle of gender equality is enshrined in the Indian Constitution. The Constitution does not only grants equality to women, but also empowers the state to adopt affirmative action for women empowerment. Within the framework of constitutional and parliamentary democratic polity, our statutory laws, development policies, plans and programmes have aimed at women's advancement in different spheres. In the 21st century, strategies and goals have been shifted from welfare of women to empowerment of women. In recent years, the empowerment of women has been recognized as the central issue in determining the status of women. This paper discusses changing dynamics of women empowerment in India. Women make up nearly half of India's population. Therefore, without active participation of women in decision making process India could not achieve goals in different areas. Women empowerment is multi-dimensional gaining self-confidence and meaningful participation in decision making process. Empowering women to make their own decisions without any limitations and treating them at par with men is imperative for the holistic progress of the nation. The term affirmative action originated from USA to prohibit unfair discrimination against certain groups or people. It is a set of policies that are designed to promote inclusion of all individuals by addressing concern about discrimination some form of present in society. The Bihar government has initiated affirmative action to address the issues and challenges for women empowerment. Since 2005, Nitish government has launched various programmes, plans and policies for empowerment of women. This study examines Nitish government's affirmative action for empowerment of women in Bihar.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Affirmative Action, Nitish Government, Gender Equality, Constitutional Provisions, Programmes

Introduction

Since 1950s India considers gender equality and women's empowerment to be essential for the development of nation. In India women have been discriminated against, excluded from decision making at all levels, marginalised and disempowered. This is so because of the prevalence of patriarchy in society. The patriarchy is a social system in which men are considered superior to be to women. Through the concept of superiority men have more control over resources and decision making. In patriarchy social system, discrimination and violence against women are a part of the system (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2019, p. 1). The most women suffer from caste discrimination, patriarchal structures, religious discrimination and subordination in India. Women lag behind their men in all indicators of social and human development. India has the most adverse sex-ratios for women in the world. Life expectancy for women is lower than men. Women's health, nutritional and educational levels are significantly lower that of men. The participation of women in political and social decision making is low. Women live with disadvantages and fears. Till 2005, in Bihar women lag behind their men in all indicators of social and human development. Since 2005, the Chief Minister Nitish Kumar has focused on development and empowerment of women as they are important half of sate population. Bihar government under Nitish Kumar is the first government which has included women empowerment

in development strategy of state. Since 2005 Nitish government has focused on women empowerment through various mechanism. Bihar is the first state in India who has taken affirmative action in various areas for women's empowerment. As a result of affirmative action, there have indeed been positive changes for women in Bihar. The Bihar government has declared the state policy for women empowerment on the occasion of International Women's Day in 2020. The state policy for women empowerment will ensure that women are able to reach the resources and participate in mainstream development and decision making process. According to Chief Minister Nitish Kumar the state policy for women empowerment will ensure active participation of women in all areas of life. For the empowerment purposes of women, the Bihar government ahs launched various schemes. These schemes mainly address the empowerment need of women in the sphere of economic, social, political and cultural. The Chief Minister Nitish Kumar said on the occasion of International Women's Day in 2020 that his government is committed to empower women across all sections of the society. Bihar Chief Minister believes that true development of a state and nation entailed social and economic betterment of women and creation of an environment, where they feel secure. In this regard, the Chief Minister Nitish Kumar initiated a number of measures and has taken affirmative action aimed at improving the standard of living for women in the state.

Women Empowerment: A new paradigm

Empowerment is the process in which confers power on individuals over their own lives in their society. It signifies development in the social, economic, political and cultural sphere of individuals. In the context of women, it is an exercise in enhancing their economic, social, political and health status. Empowerment, as an enabling process will only be achieved when an improvement in the condition of women in terms of health, education, safety and security including financial security is achieved (Nair 2016, p. 13). For empowering women in India, the Constitution gives direction and protection to betterment of women. The Constitutional provisions such as the Preamble, Fundamental Rights, The Directives Principle for State Policy, Part IX and Part IXA. Fundamental Rights are central to women empowerment in India. Fundamental Rights give protection to women from discrimination. In addition to the Constitutional Provisions, there are several laws which have been enacted by Parliament and the State Legislatives to empowerment of women.

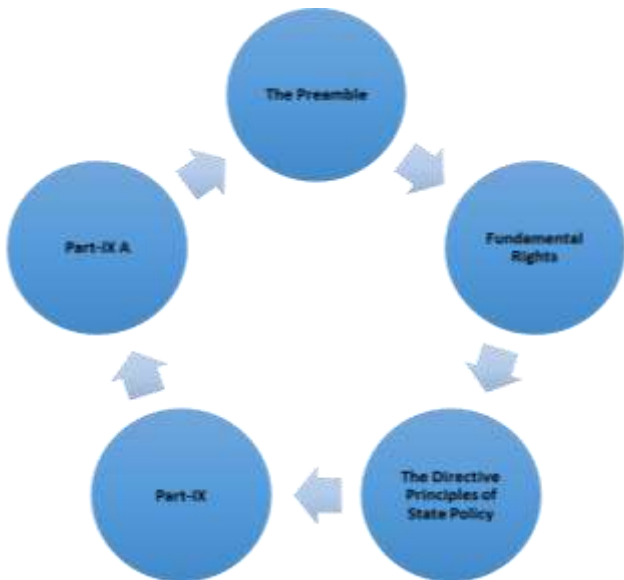


Fig 1: The Constitutional Provisions for Women Empowerment

There are several institutions and mechanisms which are active in women empowerment process such as Ministry of Women and Child Development, National Commission for Women, State Commission for Women, Parliamentary Committee on Empowerment of Women. India is the party of several international conventions and treaties to dedicated to safeguarding the women’s rights. These include convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against women (CEDAW) International Conference on Population Development (ICPD), the Beijing Declaration, the Mexico Plan of Action and Nairobi Action Plan (Press Information Bureau 2020, p. 1).



Fig 2: Institutions for Women Empowerment in India

India has recognized that women empowerment and gender equality are fundamental to the achievement of sustainable development of the nation. Under the cooperative federalism in India, all the states have accepted empowerment of women as pre-condition for the development. An empowered woman would be in a position to access the opportunities available to her without restrictions and limitations of social, education, health, nutrition, profession and lifestyle. To achieve women empowerment, the Indian government has initiated comprehensive programmes and affirmative action to safeguards educational rights, economic security, social security rights and safety of women (Ministry of Women and Child Development 2019, p. 1)

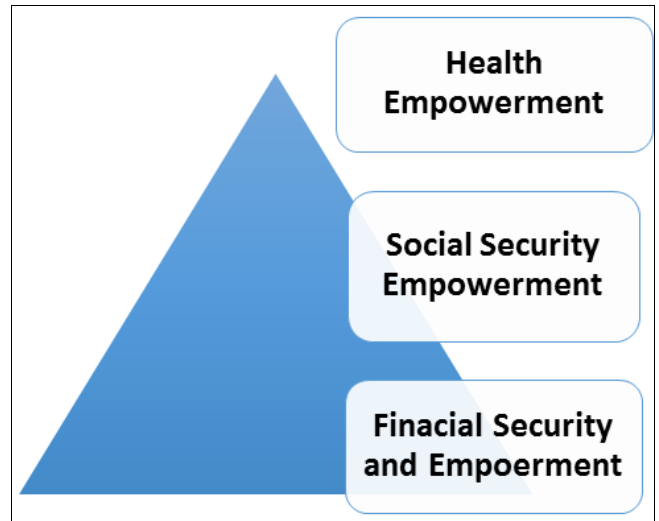


Fig 3: Areas of Women Empowerment

A few of these programmes are enumerated in various areas. Health empowerment is one of the important requirement for women empowerment. For health empowerment government of India has started many programmes such as Pradhan Mantri Matru Vandana Yojana, Maternity Care Act, Pradhan Mantri Surakshit Matritva Abhiyaan, National Nutrition Mission, Mission Indradhanush. For social security empowerment government of India has launched Swachh Vidyalya Initiative, Swachh Bharat Mission, Ujjwala Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, New Passport Rules and Working Women Hostels (Press Information Bureau 2020). For financial security and empowerment for women the government of India has initiated Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana, Stand Up India, Sukanya Samridhi Yojana, Mahilla e-haat. Safety for women is another issue which has been addressed by the Indian government. The government of India has taken important steps for the safety of women such as Nirbhaya Fund, Ujjawala Scheme, Swadhar Greh, Mahila Police Volunteers, Mahila Shakti Kendra Scheme. In order to facilitate States/UTs, MHA has launched an online analytic tool for police on 19th February 2019 called “Investigation Tracking System for Sexual Offences” to monitor and track time-bound investigation in sexual assault cases in accordance with Criminal Law (Amendment) Act 2018 (Press Information Bureau 2019, p. 1)



Fig 4: Safety Measures for Women

The Ministry of Women and Child Development has been administering various special laws relating to women such as the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act, 2005; Dowry Prohibition Act, 1961; Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986; the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 and the Prohibition of Child Marriage Act, 2006 (Press Information Bureau 2020, p. 2).

Women Empowerment in Bihar through Affirmative Action

The affirmative action sanctioned by Indian Constitution and implemented by central government and state governments is called reservation policy. Reservation Policy is one of the constitutional means adopted by India to address the problems of centuries of discrimination inflicted on certain groups resulting in all types of inequalities (Rao 2008, p. 483). Reservation is the state policy which has targeted the marginalized community and class of society. On the one side, The constitution of India promises equality and social justice to all of its citizens through fundamental rights. One other side, the Constitution has also given permission to state to take affirmative action for empowerment of underprivileged sections (Jaffrelot 2016, p. 174).

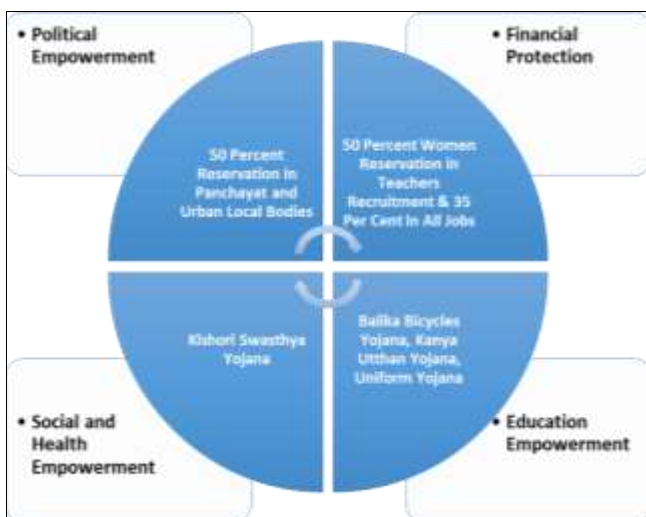


Fig 5: Affirmative Actions for Women Empowerment in Bihar

Nitish government has realized that Bihar development not possible without women empowerment. Therefore, Nitish government has taken important steps by affirmative action and schemes for women empowerment. For political empowerment of women, Nitish government has provided

50 per cent reservation to women in local bodies poll. When the Bihar government provided for 50 per cent reservation to women in panchayat bodies in 2006, it was recognized as a silent revolution by Chief Minister Nitish Kumar. It was empowerment of a new kind of for half of the population. The rise in the percentage of women voting in Bihar has been a notable phenomenon since the 2010 assembly elections. This commendable record of women voters in the past 10 years signifies their enhanced awareness of the democratic system, including in terms of their individual rights and responsibilities within the system (Bihar Report Card 2016, p. 4). This dynamic change is the due to the implementation of 50 per cent women reservation in all three tiers of Panchayati Raj Institutions in Bihar. For financial protection to women, Nitish government has implemented 35 per cent reservation in recruitment process of jobs. The implementation of 35 per cent reservation in all jobs have increased the number of women employed in state government services. After implementing 35 per cent reservation for women in government jobs, 20,572 women were selected out of the 40,884 women who qualified in BPSC, Bihar SSC, and Bihar Police Service exams (Bihar Economic Survey 2019-20). The Bihar government has given 50 per cent reservation for women in teacher recruitment. For education empowerment of women, Chief Minister has launched bicycle and free uniform schemes to boosting attendance of girls in school. The Bihar government decided to teach every girl till 12th class for which plus two schools are opened in every panchayat (Education Department 2020, p. 1). The Bihar government has launched the Mukhyamantri Kanya Utthan Yojana for women empowerment (Bihar Budget 2020-21). Through this ambitious scheme government promises to provide 54,100 from the birth of a girl child. The Bihar government has started Kishori Swasthya Yojana, Mukhyamantri Balika Bicycles Yojana, Uniform Yojana.

Conclusion

Empowering woman through her journey to motherhood is an important agenda for the central and state governments. Schemes like the PM Matru Vandana Yojana give financial security to women during their pregnancy and lactation period. A very significant move has been the modification of the Maternity Benefit Act allowing working women 26 weeks of paid maternity leave. The Central government’s programmes like Beti Bachao, Beti Padhao programme and Sukanya Samridhi Yojana take care of the girl child right from protecting her from female foeticide to ensuring her education and financial security. According to the United Nations only a healthy woman can be an empowered woman. The Ayushman Bharat Programme, National Nutrition Mission, Ujjawala Yojana etc take care of the health and nutritional requirements of Indian women. On the other side, safety and security of women at all places is high on the agenda of woman empowerment. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, the online complaint system, 181 women helplines, One Stop Centres and panic buttons are all geared to protect women in their journey towards empowerment. Therefore, road to development cannot be travelled without the empowerment of women who form almost 50 per cent per cent of the Indian population The Bihar government has influenced the world because of women empowerment through affirmative action. The Chief Minister Nitish Kumar has supported

strategy of affirmative action for women empowerment. Under Nitish government, Bihar has empowered women in political, social and financial areas through reservation in panchayat election, formation of Jeevika and 35 percent women reservation in jobs. The United Nations and World Bank have appreciated the strategy of affirmative action for women empowerment in Bihar.

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