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Government's Initiative Schemes and Programmes for Women's Empowerment : A Critical Analysis of Bihar

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Empowerment is an active multi-dimensional process enabling women to realize their identity and power in all spheres of life. Women's empowerment could be considered as a process in which women gain a greater share of control over resources, material, human, and intellectual resources like knowledge, information, ideas, and financial resources like money and control over decision-making, community, society, and the nation, and to gain power. Empowerment can be broadly categorized into (a) Educational, (b) Economic, (c) Psychological, (d) Social, and (e) Political empowerment, where women are used as a strategy to achieve the above dimensions. In most regions of the world, women receive less formal education than men, and at the same time, women's own knowledge, abilities, and coping mechanisms often go unrecognized.

The lack of women's empowerment in Bihar is due to a lack of women's education, gender stereotypes, patriarchal norms and structure, patriarchal oppression, caste system, fewer employment opportunities, dowry system, child marriage, lack of skill development in women, and lack of awareness about women's reservation in society. Here, in this paper attempt has been made to see the role of education in attaining empowerment in general and for women in particular.

Key Words: - Empowerment, Multi-dimensional, Gender Stereotype, Patriarchal Norm, and Structure.

Introduction : The empowerment and autonomy of women and the improvement of their political, social, economic, and health status a

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highly important ends in themselves. The full participation and partnership of both women and men is required in productive and reproductive life, including shared responsibilities for the care and nurturing of children and maintenance of the household. In addition, improving the status of women also enhances their decision-making capacity at all levels in all spheres of life, especially in the area of sexuality and reproduction. Experience shows that population and development programmes are most effective when steps have simultaneously been taken to improve the status of women.

The Study Area : Bihar, known as the Land of Nirvana, is located in the eastern part of the country. The capital of Bihar is Patna, which is situated on the banks of the holy river Ganga. The state is located in the fertile Gangetic Plains. The name Bihar is derived from a Sanskrit word "Vihara". Bihar is the 12th largest state of India in terms of its area and the third largest in terms of population. The history of Bihar takes one to the ancient era to observe the glorious past of this part of the country. Bihar had once remained an important centre of power and was known for its high-spirited cultural amalgamations and richness of art, music, and literature.

Geographically, Bihar has its total size of 94,163.00 sq. km where more than 10 crores people reside as per the 2011 census. However, this state lags in every sphere of educational, social, and economic development in general and for women in particular. The female literacy rate and women's participation rate in offices, businesses are very unsatisfactory. Women have been adversely affected by the jobless growth trend in Bihar. Female labour force participation in Bihar is among the lowest in the country, with only 6.4 per cent of women employed in urban areas and 3.9 per cent in rural regions. The all-India figures stand at 20.4 per cent and 24.6 per cent respectively. The lower participation is a result of the patriarchal social norms that restrict women to the confines of family, domesticity, and unpaid care work.

Here, the women are still marginalised in every sphere of social, economic, political, and decision-making processes. This is mainly due to the lack of low literacy rate, less access to educational avenues, infrastructure, and the feudal mindset of male dominated society.

Concept of Empowerment : The literal meaning of the term "empowerment" is "becoming powerful". However, for everyone, the goal of empowerment is to deal with issues relating to women's subordination, inequity, and inequality. Empowerment can be traced

to the theories of Paulo Freire, who put forward the notion of conscientization. Initially, the concept of empowerment was introduced at the International Women's Conference held during the year 1985 in Nairobi. In that very conference, empowerment as a concept was defined as "A redistribution of social power and control of resources in favour of women." It refers to a social process that challenges the basic imbalances of power distribution and relations. It helps in the redistribution of power within and between families, societies, through disempowering some structures, systems, and institutions. Thus, we find that the term "empowerment" is a broader concept, and it has been defined by different social scientists in their own perspectives with different connotations.

Dimensions of Women's Empowerment : It is extremely difficult to define the concept of empowerment, as it reflects various aspects of people, which are conditional upon the context in which they live. Women's Empowerment is a Western concept. The question has been raised, not only in microfinance but also in the broader field of international development, whether it is ethical and appropriate for developed institutions to promote women's empowerment. The empowerment or disempowerment of women and other groups in each society is closely linked to the culture of that society. The promotion of women's empowerment implies advocacy for cultural and social change, which is an inappropriate imposition of "Western" values on non-Western societies. Empowerment can be broadly categorized into (a) Educational, (b) Economic, (c) Psychological, (d) Social, and (e) Political empowerment, where women are used as a strategy to achieve the above dimensions.

Educational Empowerment : Education is one of the most important means of empowering women with the knowledge, skills, and self-confidence necessary to participate fully in the development process. More than 40 years ago, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights asserted that "everyone has the right to education". Education is the prime way to empower women. This process of empowering not only provides women to gain knowledge but also equips them with the necessary courage and inner strength so that they can face the challenges of life. Further, it helps women to break down the powerful sex stereotyping, which prevents them from demanding their rights from men in positions of authority. For them, it entails breaking away from the cycle of learned and taught submission to discrimination, learned from one generation of women and passed on to the rest. With higher levels of education, women

have better access to employment opportunities and an increase in their ability to secure their own economic resources.

Economic Empowerment : Economic empowerment, being one of the aspects of the broad term empowerment, refers to access to financial resources, decrease of vulnerability of women during crises, increase in the income and the freedom to use the income, financial self-reliance, eliminating the dependency on money, and ownership of income-generating assets. When the right to earn and savings, entrepreneurship skills, marketing ability, managerial capacity, and ownership of assets were experienced by women, it could be accepted that they were in the process of empowerment. The various indications that determine economic empowerment are income, savings, landholding, house ownership, consumer goods, occupation, expenditure on food and non-food items. Income is the most important indicator of economic development. For making Women economically empowered, it requires bold and sustained action to advance women's opportunities and rights and to ensure that women can participate and be heard. Economically empowered women contributed to the wealth and well-being not only of their families, but also of their nations.

Psychological Empowerment : Psychological empowerment, as one of the dimensions of empowerment, implies confidence-building, acquisition of a sense of efficacy, and the ability to overcome the feeling of helplessness. The definitions of knowledge, self-respect, and other elements related to human beings may be culture-specific. However, consistently in society, the concepts of strong determination, assertive nature, motivation, etc., revealed the psychological empowerment of the individual. Often their self-confidence is expressed in their courage to meet the officials without any fear and to represent their problems and difficulties.

Social Empowerment : Dignity and culture of a society can be detected from the status of women in that society. Empowerment as a social process challenges the fundamental imbalances of power distribution and relations. It is a process of redistribution of power within and between families, societies, through disempowering some structures, systems, and institutions. Making women empowered means making a family empowered, and in turn development of a nation or a country. Its benefits are not only for individual women, but also for the whole society. Social empowerment means providing equal status to women while imparting their role in different social units, such as in the family, and providing them with the power of

decision-making making both at the household level and community level.

Political Empowerment : The Political process is central to the empowerment process. It is characterized by producers organizing collectively and attempting to enhance their influence and bargaining power not simply with respect to other market actors, but also in terms of the development policy process itself and in relation to bodies such as local, regional, national, and global. Political empowerment is about the capacity of producers to exert claims on such actors and institutions and to hold them accountable. The political empowerment indicators the basic political rights, role in decision-making bodies of the state and the central government, representation in policy-making, participation in political campaigning, leadership quality, and the ability to politicize their problems related to them either directly or indirectly.

Resolution and Solution in Bihar : Bihar has been making concerted efforts to empower women. The State government has prepared the women empowerment policy in 2015 and promoted a centre (Gender Resource Centre) for looking into gender related issues. Bihar State Women Empowerment Policy, 2015, was approved and adopted in March 2015 for the social, economic, political, and cultural advancement of women and to bring them into the national mainstream of development. These schemes and programmes may be studied under the following heads, which can resolve many issues of women in the long run.

- A. Education :** There are five schemes in the state operating in the domain of education, all of which have education as a primary outcome.
 - i. Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojana :** The scheme offers cash transfers to provide bicycles for girl students and increase their enrolment and attendance in the schools.
 - ii. Mukhyamantri Balika Poshak Yojana :** Under this scheme, 22 lakh girl students studying in classes 9 to 12 are being provided Rs 1,000 to purchase their school uniform and shoes. If funds remain after the purchase, they are to be utilised for purchasing stationery and other study materials.
 - iii. Mukhyamantri Akshar Aanchal Yojana :** This adult literacy programme was launched to address high levels of illiteracy among women. It aimed to make 40 lakh illiterate women in the age group of 15–35 years literate within a period of 6 months.

- iv. **Mukhyamantri Kanya Utthan Yojana** : It is an incentive-based scheme to encourage girls to complete their education and delay marriage. Unmarried girls are paid Rs 10,000 for completing their intermediate course and an amount of Rs 25,000 for completing graduation.
- v. **Civil Seva Protsahan Yojana** : To encourage women candidates for civil services, an amount of Rs. 50,000 and Rs. 1 lakh is given to the aspirants who have passed the preliminary examination, conducted either by BPSC or UPSC, to prepare for the mains examination.
- B. **JOB QUOTAS** : Here, the main objective is to give financial security by reserving government jobs for females.
 - i. **Aarakshit Rozgaar Mahilaon ka Adhikaar**: The scheme has been providing 35 percent reservation to women for all services of the state government since 2016.
 - ii. **Admission in Medical and Engineering Colleges: The** Bihar government has proposed to reserve 33 per cent seats for girls in medical and engineering colleges.
- C. **HEALTH** : A total of three schemes operates in this domain. Two schemes exist whose primary outcome is health, and another scheme addresses health as a secondary outcome.
 - i. **Nayee Pidhi Swasthya Guarantee Karyakram**: Under this scheme, medical check-up of children and adolescent girls up to 18 years of age is conducted, and all beneficiaries are provided health cards.
 - ii. **Yukti Yojana**: Under this scheme, women receive high-quality, free-of-cost abortion care from accredited private clinics, which are then reimbursed by the respective district health societies.
 - iii. **Janani Bal Suraksha Yojana**: Remarkable achievement has been recorded in institutional deliveries under. Health protection was provided to pregnant women and nursing mothers through trained health workers like ASHA and MAMTA. The Health Department observed the year 2011 as Safe Motherhood Year as a step towards women's empowerment.
- D. **Gender Discriminatory Norm** :
 - i. **Mukhyamantri Kanya Suraksha Yojana**: It provides an investment of Rs 2,000 to all BPL girls at the time of their birth to improve the sex ratio, encourage birth registration and stop female foeticide. The maturity amount is received at the age of 18. In 2017-18, more

than 2,80,000 girls benefited from the programme (Government of Bihar, 2018)

- ii. **Mukhyamantri Sanwasin Kanya Vivah Anudaan Yojana:** The scheme provides girls staying at state-run shelter homes with a financial support of Rs 20,000 on the event of their marriage.
- iii. **Antarjatiya Vivah Yojana:** Under this scheme, a fixed deposit of Rs 1 lakh is made in a nationalised bank in favour of the bride who marries a bridegroom of another caste.
- iv. **Mukhyamantri Kanya Vivah Yojana:** The scheme extends financial support of Rs 5,000 to girls of BPL families who get married at the age of 18. Mukhyamantri Kanya Vivah Yojana is in operation from the financial year 2007-08. The scheme provides financial assistance to poor families at the time of marriage of girls after attaining the age of 18 years. The scheme has multiple objectives of encouraging marriage registration, preventing child marriage, and encouraging girls' education.

E. Women's Empowerment Collectives :

- i. **JEEVIKA (Bihar Rural Livelihoods Project) :** JEEVIKA is a community-driven rural poverty reduction project in the state. Operating under the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), JEEViKA's mandate is to mobilise 12.5 million rural households into 1 million SHGs, 65,000 village organisations, and 1,600 cluster-level federations.
- ii. **Mukhyamantri Nari Jyothi Programme:** This scheme has been designed to empower the women of Mahadalit communities with the strategy of forming and nurturing their SHGs.
- iii. **Mukhyamantri Kanya Utthan Yojna:** The situation of girls in Bihar warrants concerted and expeditious efforts, given that female literacy stands just over fifty percent (Census 2011), sex ratio at birth stands at 870 (CRS 2015), more than two in every five drop out of school before completing elementary education (Census 2011) and an equal number get married before turning 18 (NFHS 4).
- iv. **Mukhya Mantri Kanya Surksha Yojana:** - To enhance birth registration, and SRB was launched in the state in the year 2008-09. In this Rs 2000/- was transferred to girls born in the BPL family. The scheme is limited to 2 girls per family. As a result of this scheme, there has been a tremendous increase in the birth registration from

an abysmal 5.8 to 60.7, hence, a 54.9 percentage point increase in birth registration (NFHS-IV).

- v. **50% reservation for women in Panchayati Raj institutions and urban bodies:** 50 percent reservation to women in panchayati raj institutions and urban bodies laid the foundations of a social revolution, as it aimed at providing equal rights, equal social status, and equal opportunities to women. This paved the way for women's respectful partnership in local self-governance as policymakers.

F. Gender Based Violence :

- i. **Mukhyamantri Nari Shakti Yojana (MNSY):** It is a holistic empowerment scheme that aims to empower women economically, socially, and culturally. The programme offers help lines for victims of violence and trafficked women and adolescents, short stay homes, socio-psychological support, and legal aid.
- ii. **Mahila Thana:** - Here, only female police personnel are appointed to look after the problems of females.
- iii. **Mahila Helpline:** - Women Helpline has been established and made functional in 38 districts of the State under 'Mukhyamantri Nari Shakti Yojana to provide free psychological and legal aid to the victims of domestic violence.

G. SKILL DEVELOPMENT : There are two schemes in the state whose secondary outcome is to ensure skill development for women. These schemes are

- i. **JEEVIKA :** Bihar Rural Livelihoods Promotion Society (BRLPS), popularly known as JEEVIKA, has transformed itself into a state-wide movement touching the lives of more than 1.27 crore families. Bihar has become the first state in the country to have 10 lakh self-help groups (SHGs) managed by women. The groups have been functioning under Jeevika, a World Bank-supported poverty alleviation programme operational in the state since 2007, to empower women and make them self-reliant.
- ii. **Mukhyamantri Nari Shakti Yojana:** It's a holistic empowerment scheme for women and adolescent girls. There is no scheme with institutional support as a primary outcome.

H. Other Initiatives :

- i. Interest-free Rs 10 lakh loan scheme with half the subsidy for entrepreneurship and financial empowerment of women.
- ii. Higher secondary schools are being established in each gram panchayat as a compliance with the state government's policy decision. This will enable girls'

- access to higher secondary education and will also help stabilise the population.
- iii. Implementation of Mukhyamantri Akshar Anchal Yojana (from 2009-10) made more than 67 lac women literates. A 20 percent decadal increase in women's literacy was recorded in the Census 2011. The objective is to provide Elementary education to the women and to link the deprived children of the above category to school.
 - iv. Thousands of girls belonging to minority groups have been given vocational training in 20 different trades under the '**Hunar**' programme. They have also been provided with tool-kits under the '**Auzar**' programme for supporting them to begin self-employment and to gain self-reliance.
 - v. **Sabla programme** was launched in 12 districts (Patna, Buxar, Gaya, Aurangabad, W. Champaran, Vaishali, Saharsa, Kishanganj, Katihar, Banka, and Munger) in the financial year 2011-12 for empowering the adolescent girls (11-18 years). The main focus of the programme is to make the adolescent girls self-reliant, providing skill development training, and to provide supplementary nutrition.
 - vi. **Indira Gandhi Matritva Sahayog Yojana** stands to provide a cash incentive of Rs. 6000 in two instalments to the pregnant women first and then to the nursing mothers. Currently, the scheme operates in Vaishali and Saharsa.

But still, there is a lack of real women's empowerment in Bihar. Officially wife is a government officer, but her husband/son/family member takes care of all official work in rural Bihar. Education provided up to the Secondary level in government schools is not very well. Due to this, female children are getting less success in academics. An invisible rift is taking place in society, which is against real women's empowerment.

Financial independence for women is required for real women's empowerment in Bihar. Now housewife in Bihar is handling house-related work. They do not have any job opportunities in rural Bihar. So, providing job opportunities like handicraft business, fishing, and tailoring business are required for their financial independence.

The dowry system is a major hurdle to women's empowerment. Since the birth of a girl, parents start to think about the money required for the marriage of their daughter. Due to this, parents are unable to provide proper education to their daughters. Now "composite scheme" for women's empowerment is needed. Otherwise, those who are already capable will only benefit from the

government quota. The government should provide proper training to ASHAs, ANMs, and Mamata Workers. During COVID, they were distributing kits with basic knowledge about it. Education, Society, and government efforts can solve all major challenges in the way of real women's empowerment in Bihar. The government should act to empower women and should take steps to eliminate inequalities between men and women as soon as possible by :

(a) Establishing mechanisms for women's equal participation and equitable representation at all levels of the political process and public life in each community and society, and enabling women to articulate their concerns and needs.

(b) Promoting the fulfilment of women's potential through education, skill development, and employment, giving paramount importance to the elimination of poverty, illiteracy, and ill health among women.

(c) Eliminating all practices that discriminate against women; assisting women to establish and realize their rights, including those that relate to reproductive and sexual health.

(d) Adopting appropriate measures to improve women's ability to earn income beyond traditional occupations, achieve economic self-reliance, and ensure women's equal access to the labour market and social security systems;

(e) Eliminating discriminatory practices by employers against women, such as those based on proof of contraceptive use or pregnancy status.

(f) Making it possible, through laws, regulations, and other appropriate measures, for women to combine the roles of child-bearing, breast-feeding, and child-rearing with participation in the workforce.

With the implementation of gender quotas since India's 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, the percentage of women in political activities at the local level has risen from 4-5% to about 35-40%. Reserving one-third of seats for women in the elected bodies of rural local governments in Bihar has unleashed a silent revolution.

For the first time, rural women began to participate in local governance to improve their status and acquire a decisive say in matters crucial to their livelihoods. This decision to ensure the participation of women in local government is perhaps the most innovative aspect of grassroots democracy, contributing to the improvement of the well-being of rural women. Control over local government resources and the collective power of women have helped women discover their own self-respect and confidence. In the recent discourse on women's empowerment in the 62nd session of the Commission on the Status of Women, the government of India has said that gender equality and emancipation

of rural women a key drivers of inclusive growth. The discourse on women's empowerment has evolved from viewing women as recipients of welfare benefits to engaging them as active agents of change, and these resolutions may yield the desired results and solutions.

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