

# A Report on 2 Day Interactive

## 'Bihar Panchayat Elections- A turning point in the role of women leadership?'

(Women's Experience as Panchayat Representatives)



**Organised by:**

**EQUITY FOUNDATION  
123- A Pataliputra Colony  
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Bihar**

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## **'Bihar Panchayat Elections- A turning point in the role of women leadership?'**

### **Background**

*“To fetch, to carry, to cook, to wash...year after year a submissive silent slave sold to life for nothing.” (From ‘Silver Shackles’- by Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay).*

India's children and families are fed, clothed and sheltered by the labour of women. Its water and firewood are gathered by the hands of women. Its family farms and rural economy are productive because of women's work. Yet, when men are asked, they say women do nothing at all. Because of women's low social status, their work goes unacknowledged, unvalued and unsupported. Women carry a triple burden. They make indispensable contributions in all areas of rural life and economic activity, particularly in household maintenance, agriculture, and income-generating activities.

Woman's role in the conservative patriarchal society of Bihar, is determined more by men, tradition and livelihood patterns. As in the other patriarchal societies, these influences have restricted her role - largely to home, hearth, child rearing and those farming activities which have a basis in gender rather than equity.

In the decade of 1980s a number of developments particularly the movements and struggles during the emergency and post emergency periods led to more debates on women issues and renewed activity in favour of women. These included an increased focus on women in development in 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> five year plans. The National Perspective Plan (NPP) for women and the alternative perspective plan offered by the women's movement. The National Front government of V.P. Singh introduced another constitutional 72<sup>nd</sup> amendment bill in 1990 including in it not less than 1/3<sup>rd</sup> reservation for women in membership at all levels. In 1991 the Bill was reintroduced in the Parliament by the Congress government which finally became the 73<sup>rd</sup> amendment of the Constitution, providing reservations for women in rural local self governing bodies. In December 1992 Indian Parliament passed a new amendment to the Indian Constitution to revive and revitalize the Panchayati Raj –the rural local self government in India. It has mandated representation of at least 1/3<sup>rd</sup> women through election, thus legitimised entry of women in a critical mass in the mainstream politics at the grass root level in the whole country and has created political space for women across caste and class. It is a major step for inclusive politics and addressing as it does their continued political marginality it has a potential of changing the existing gender relations.

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. In our lower house of National Parliament women representatives have increased from 14 (i.e. less than 3%) in 1952 to 43 in 1998 and 47 in the next election. The similar situation continues in the States

despite our having had a woman PM and women CMs. Has the formal change brought by the institutional intervention of reservations adequately addressed women's marginality or has it only led to their numerically expanded presence? Has the numerical presence transformed these structures made them more receptive to women's needs and concerns or has patriarchy already succeeded in defeating the intentions of the amendment?

## **Rationale**

According to the Department of Rural Development, as a result of Panchayat elections in all the states, there are about 3.4 million elected representatives at all levels of Panchayat. Out of this, an overwhelming majority are new entrants, particularly from the weaker sections of society i.e. SC/ST and women. It is necessary to evolve a comprehensive policy of right to information to women Panchayat workers. A strong role for women in political decision making is the key to the development and implementation of a meaningful state policy for women. The poor participation of women in political decision making is both the cause and effect of gender inequality. Their persistent marginalization from development processes, demonstrate the urgent need to strengthen their role in political decision making.

Women Panchayat members' role- their own perception of it is quite limited; They think their job is only to inform the Mukhiya/ Pradhan (headman) about the various needs of their own wards ( village and/or hamlet); More often than not, these are petty constructions / repair / maintenance jobs. That they have any role or say in the implementation phase - is not widely shared by them. Their concern is narrowed down to their own village and possibility of larger collaboration for tackling wider issues like water or vegetable co-operative is rarely considered. Block officials are still exercising many of the functions which actually belong to women Panchayat functionaries; Bureaucracy seems reluctant to give up the privileges, on one pretext or the other. There is a widespread agreement that women's influence in the political process remains at the fringes. As women have entered political structures, some doubts and dilemmas have also surfaced. **For instance:**

- The "genuineness" of women's participation, as compared to "proxy" participation, has become a matter of concern;
- The issue of prerequisites necessary to make women participate has become an imperative that must be addressed;
- They cannot make a more substantive difference unless they are empowered.

If patriarchy is at the root of this situation, will the system not defeat the intentions of the amendment? There are issues of power, authority, hierarchy and control which bring up the essentiality of change in power structures and gender relations, if we hope to see transformed and transformative politics.

### ***The questions to be raised in the seminar-***

- Now that the new Bihar Government has announced 50% reservation for women PRI candidates, will this formal change brought by the institutional intervention

adequately address women's marginality, or will it only lead to their numerically expanded presence? Will the numerical presence transform these structures and make them more receptive to women's needs and concerns, or will patriarchy succeed in defeating the intentions of the amendment? Seeking answers to these crucial questions, we are holding the Seminar on Women Panchayat Representatives' experiences and their roles:

1. Whether the intervention like constitutional amendment, legal changes and women's response to them contribute to their empowerment or do the patriarchal structures manifest in the household and in the state only co-opt women and make them 'namesake' members?
2. Are rural women beginning to break their silence, to question to gain confidence, to gain access and control over material and knowledge resources altering self image after entering the newly re-elected panchayat?
3. The Seminar will also try to explore various aspects including the newly elected women's socio-economic profile, motivation to enter these institution, awareness and knowledge, participation, performance, constraints, aspirations, support of various social institutions and the community members' perception about their impact and performance.
4. How do they perceive 50% reservation for women in Panchayat elections.
5. The two day seminar will bring together the various stakeholders to share experiences and evolve a collective strategy for addressing the role of women in grass root politics.

### **Objective**

- To provide a platform to the Women PRIs to share their real life experience as leaders
- Views on 50% Reservation
- To create awareness among the women leaders regarding their roles and responsibilities as PRIs;
- To create awareness of Right to Information;
- To create awareness among the women leaders regarding Trafficking and HIV/AIDS;
- To analyse the impact of women's participation in Panchayati Raj- A phenomena of their hyper-visibility or invisibility?
- The activities designed for the seminar would help to develop strategies to empower the women as leaders;
- The compilation of recommendations based on past and future expectations of women Panchayat representatives that would serve as a resource guide for the dos and don'ts in the post Panchayati Raj elections, thus bringing the agenda of women panchayat workers into public policy making.

### **Methodology**

It is with this endeavor in mind, that the proposal for empowering the women Panchayat workers through an interactive seminar on **'Bihar panchayat elections- A**

**turning point in the role of women leadership?’** has been designed. The seminar aims at bringing the agenda of women Panchayat workers into public policy making and developing the capacities of elected women in structures of local self- government, in spite of the reservation policy through bringing out their problems and making effective strategies. In all, 100 women Panchayat workers 12 districts would be participating. The formulated activities for the different sessions would be conducted through a participatory process with the support of Resource Persons.

**Participatory Process:**

- Open house session
- Group Discussion
- Chart Presentation
- Formulation of recommendations

**Important activities during the seminar**

- The seminar will start with the inauguration by the Honorable Member Planning Commission, Government of India. It will be attended by a large number of women panchayat members, eminent persons from cross sections of society including Bureaucrats, GOs, NGOs, INGOs, doctors, judiciary, Academicians and Academic institutions, media person and Politicians;
- The social programme will include a Cartoon presentation by an eminent cartoonist Pawan on his perceptions on Panchayati Raj in Bihar; and;
- **Images for Change- 'Ruma Ki Kahani'**- A sensitive Play by IPTA presenting problems, raising questions and providing solutions for women representatives. They describe, prescribe, debate, contemplate, motivate and celebrate. An image for change is aimed to inspire thought that will result in positive action and change. The message is, 'We can,' and the belief is that 'we will'.
- The second day of the seminar will be based on group discussion that will include women Panchayat Representatives, NGOs, GOs, INGOs, Academicians, media and others to draft future recommendation for effective working of PRIs.

# **DAY 1**

## **6<sup>TH</sup> DAY OF JULY**

**T**he 2 day interactive Seminar on ‘**Bihar Panchayat Elections- A turning point in the role of women leadership?**’ was organised by Equity Foundation at Hotel Maurya, Patna (A Forum for woman & Child). The activities spanned two days – 6 and 7 July, 2006 with more than 100 elected women panchayat representatives from East Champaran to Gaya, from Khagaria to Buxar and from Siwan to Raxaul participating actively. Apart from the women panchayat members, academicians, researchers, members of Non-Governmental Organisations, International Organisations, media-persons etc., as well as Senior Government officials participated.

### **The Speakers:**

As many as 35 speakers including the Panchayat Representatives from several districts participated in the different sessions. The welcome address was given by Ms. Nina Srivastava Director Equity Foundation. The inaugural session was addressed by Sri Narendra Narayan Yadav, Honorable Minister Panchayati Raj, Bihar; the honorable Chief Guest Mrs. Manjulika Gautam, Adviser Women & Child Planning Commission of India. Mrs. Indu Sinha (CENCORED); Mr. R.P. Sinha (Secretary, State Election Commission), Sri OmPrakash (Convener Gandhian Action Network; Convener Bihar Panchayat Sashaktikaran Abhiyaan), Ms. Amita Paul, IAS Member Board of Revenue; Mr. T. N. Singh Expert on Panchayati Raj and former secretary Bihar Rajya Panchayat Parishad were the Speakers for the different sessions. Dr. Suraiya Parveen from AASRA chaired the session. Among the major highlights of the two-day seminar was the inaugural Address by Sri Narendra Narayan Yadav, Honorable Minister Panchayati Raj, Bihar and speech by the honorable Chief Guest Mrs. Manjulika Gautam, Adviser Women & Child Planning Commission of India.

### **Highlights of the First Day: Experience Sharing of Women Panchayat Representatives (Past Experience & Future Expectations)-**

A large chunk of delegates were in the age group of 30-40. Moreover, the delegates were from different districts and posts. Women belonging to the Scheduled Castes, particularly the most oppressed ‘Musahar’ community, in large numbers. The seminar also drew a large number of Muslim women from the most backward districts. The numbers of men escorting the women

panchayat members were less. The percentage of illiterate and barely literate women panchayat members among the participants was more.

The inaugural session was followed by an open house session with the Panchayat Representatives on different dimensions of women's political empowerment. In 1993 one of the most important step for the empowerment of women and increasing their participation in decision making was taken by reserving 33% seats for women in Panchayati Raj institutions. This paved the way for election of around one million at the village, block and district level. By now most states have completed at least one five year term. What has been the experience of women during their first tenure? What lessons can be learnt for the future from this experience? In 2006 one of the most important step for the empowerment of women and increasing their participation in decision making was taken by the Government of Bihar towards reserving 50% seats for women in Panchayat Raj institutions. Bihar is the first state to give 50% reservation to women in Panchayats.

### **The Key Issues: where do these women representatives stand?**

Corruption according to many of the speakers had been one of the main problems of panchayati Raj institutions. Many confirmed during the open house that when women representatives function in an independent way, possibilities for corruption are lesser. Some were of the view that even if a Mukhiya or Sarpanch is honest, there is the other threat that government officials refuse to release money and do not cooperate in other ways unless a certain commission is paid to them. This opposition to the demand for commission was strongly voiced by several women at the open house.

**Poonam, an Aanganwadi** worker from Jamui, who had won President Award for her commendable work in the field of education in 2004 said, "Women are known to use money very carefully at home and somehow manage the family budget even when income is low. Women show the same abilities when they manage the village funds." Her colleague **Amina Khatoon, Mukhiya from Bhagwanpur** added, "When men are in-charge of development works, they indulge in a lot of wasteful spending in inaugurations and completion ceremonies. Women know how to be frugal and concentrate on the real work."

Specific cases:

**Ginni Devi, Up-Mukhiya of Kako** in Jehanabad district strongly resisted the bribe demands of officials. Although this created a lot of delays and other problems, she finally had her way.

Some women like **Pakeezah Khatoon** of Jamui district who lost election of panchayat samiti member on the ground that she was communal have resisted efforts by powerful vested interests

to harass and lodged a case for re-election. She has fought them with a lot of courage and firmness.

*Some women have overcome heavy odds to accomplish victory:*

**Mrs. Karuna Devi, first lady Mukhiya of Bihar from Jamui** also attended the seminar.

**Hajra Khatoon, ward member from Phulparas Buxar** district fought with two 'bahubalis' candidates who were pitched against her. She resisted efforts of vested interests to harass and dislodge her with a lot of courage and firmness.

So many efforts were made to dislodge **Mandavi Sharma, a panchayat samiti member** from Hulasganj, Jehanabad by powerful vested interests, but she survived them all by her transparent way of functioning and by establishing direct relationship with people.



*The reality for many:*

It is easy to point out numerous examples of women who have worked entirely according to what they were told by their husbands or other male members of their families. In some cases elected women remained at home while their husbands attended the panchayat meetings and carried out official transactions on their behalf. Some of the elected women were approached

by men only when their signatures (or thumb impressions) were needed.

The issues raised in the panel discussions and interactive sessions ranged from the social dimensions of patriarchy to good governance, transparency and accountability in Panchayats. The role of the quota system in ensuring a 'critical mass' of women in local bodies came in for praise. Many of the participants expressed the opinion that though Panchayats have been given the charge of 29 subjects, devolution of financial power is still largely on paper. Other issues which generated heated discussion included gender asymmetry both in terms of access to education and health services.

**And finally:**

The linkages of women's political empowerment with issues like health, education, law, livelihood and environment, NGO intervention and electoral process were critically analysed by the honorable Minister and Adviser Planning Commission.

The yearning of several women to assert their independence and make a significant contribution to the welfare of the people was visible in many such speakers. In many cases they have been

helped by volunteer organisations and people's movements active in their region. In some cases enlightened family members, including husbands, have also encouraged them to realise their potential of initiating meaningful social change. From such examples it is quite clear that when favorable conditions exist for women to play a leading and active role in the decision making of the village, the entire village community benefits. This increased participation of women is often associated with better utilisation of financial resources, increased harmony in village and prioritisation of some important but neglected aspects of development such as girls' education and sanitation. Many were of the view that social reform measures such as reduction in alcohol consumption and domestic violence clearly got more prominence if women come to the forefront in rural communities.

***Given the chance, we will excel was the answer of the many.***

Many Resource Persons maintained that provision of reservation for women in local bodies should not be seen as a magic wand to achieve empowerment because there are many loopholes in it. It was also felt that panchayat in general and the women panchayat representatives in particular will have an important role to play in terms of livelihood in the age of globalisation. According to them essential services like health and education can be more effectively delivered, provided panchayat members become empowered.

The Social programme included a **Cartoon presentation by an eminent cartoonist Pawan** on his perceptions on Panchayati Raj in Bihar. The first day's session concluded with a play By Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) titled '**Main bhi Mukhiya**'. Besides this the first publication of Equity Foundation 'Women Struggle for Existence' was released by the Hon'ble Minister Panchayati Raj and Adviser Women & Child Planning Commission of India. The publication was funded by UNDP-TAHA.

The entire session was conducted by Dr. R.N. Raman. The vote of thanks was given by Ms. Madhurima Raj, Member Equity Foundation.

## **DAY 2**

# **7<sup>TH</sup> DAY OF JULY**

On the second day a group of Panchayat representatives, NGOs, Researchers and experts on the Panchayati Raj system sat down to formulate the recommendations. The charter of demands was formulated after a series of group discussions.

The Charter of Demands adopted by the group on the 7th day of July 2006:

*We, the representatives of elected women panchayat leaders from Bihar, who assembled in Patna, after due deliberation unanimously resolve the following and appeal to the authorities concerned to implement the demands:*

The Panchayat should be for the people, by the people and of the people.

1. Set up Panchayat Training Centers for women, at least one in each division in the State, to strengthen the capacity-building of women representatives within a year of their election. Training programmes for women panchayat members should aim at continuous skill up-gradation including internet access to enable them to handle panchayat work with competence and efficiency.
2. Ensure that all panchayat representatives get a certain amount of salary and TA/DA to attend meeting outside the state and districts. They should be given Travel Allowance (TA) and Daily Allowance (DA) for the work related to Panchayati Raj including attendance at training workshops.
3. Introduce regular gender sensitive reorientation programmes for the MPs, MLAs and bureaucrats about the funds, functions and functionalities of the Panchayats. Sensitization of the officials is essential so that they approach the elected women rather than their husband/son or male family members.
4. Reduce bureaucratic control and scope for political involvement and interference.
5. Ensure that preference is given by Gram Panchayats to women's self- help groups in awarding contracts for village level construction work.
6. Implementation should be a key responsibility of the Panchayats. The gram sabha must be deeply involved in implementation at all levels because it is the best form of social audit, both pre-implementation and post-implementation. This is also the most effective way of cutting down corruption and nepotism and ensuring transparency and accountability, as well as functioning democracy.
7. Ensure that due consideration is given by authorities at all levels to the proposals of the Gram Sabha, particularly those relating to issues of women and children.
8. Facilitate formation of women's associations at different levels to act as pressure groups.
9. Ensure that every State Government opens a 'toll-free help line' for panchayat women at

- the state and district levels to attend to emergent needs of elected women functionaries of PRIs in terms of police assistance, information dissemination, legal assistance, counselling, etc., with a view to strengthen women's participation in local governance.
10. In laying down the procedure for panchayat-level implementation at all levels of the Panchayati Raj system, state governments should specify the role and functions of the Panchayats.
  11. Give representation to women on all committees of the Panchayats at all levels and see to it that parallel committees are not formed.
  12. Implement the Women Component of the Five-Year Plan through Panchayats.
  13. Ensure the incorporation of word 'trafficking in person' by making amendment in the Panchayati Raj Act, 2006.
  14. The Gram Sabha should make each and every villager aware of the consequences of trafficking.
  15. Ensure that it should be the responsibility of the gram sabha to keep a track of women and girls going out of their villages and do the follow-up. A Gram Prahari should be formed at village level to keep vigilance over the transportation of women and girls.
  16. Provide for stringent laws to deal with those committing violence against women candidates during and after elections.
  17. Provide right to land and housing in joint names of spouses and for single, deserted, Dalit, tribal, *sex workers*, women suffering from HIV/AIDS, widowed and battered women, and for those rendered homeless in caste/communal riots and due to displacement.
  18. Strictly implement the law regarding equal wages for women.
  19. Provide literacy training under special crash programmes for illiterate women Panchayat members.
  20. Facilitate exchange programmes for panchayat women representatives inside the country.
  21. Give awards for outstanding performance by women representatives at all levels of the Panchayats in the state.
  22. Ensure that the government provides funds for celebrating women's empowerment day at the state and district levels.
  23. Legal literacy is a major tool for empowering women. Women gain confidence and dignity from knowledge of their rights. These are labour laws, family laws, criminal laws and fundamental rights. In addition they need to know the rights against the police, procedures related to FIR, bail, rights related to interrogation, detention and arrest etc. We have concluded that women in every walk of life need legal literacy.

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## Participants:

100-150 women Panchayat representatives from 20 different districts of Bihar  
Nearly 20 NGOs working on Panchayati Raj in Bihar  
Mahila Samakhya  
Bihar Education Project

### Local NGOs/INGOs:

Pratham  
Pathfinder  
UNDP-TAHA  
Bal Sakha  
IDF  
Sansarg (CENCORED)  
ADRI  
Bachpan Bachao Andolan  
Actionaid  
East and West  
UNICEF

### GOs:

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State Election Commission  
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### Media:

The Times of India  
The Hindustan Times  
Dainik Jaagaran  
Sahara Samay  
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Aaj  
Doordarshan  
ETV Bihar  
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### Others

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Academicians  
Department of Rural Management/Sociology/LSW (Patna University)  
Population Research Center (Patna University)

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- \* Shri T.N. Singh - Former Secretary Bihar Rajya Panchayat Parishad and an Expert on Panchayati Raj system in Bihar
- \* Dr. Renu Ranjan- Head of Department, PG Center of Sociology Magadh Mahila College Patna University
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- \* Mr. R.K. Raman- Educationist
- \* Ms. Nina Srivastava- Director Equity Foundation

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3. Deependra- Rural Management
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5. Aarti Prakash- Rural Management
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