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Women's education in rural Bihar: A case study

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Abstract

Education plays a vital role in economic and social development and it is essential for the all-around development of an individual. Education manifests itself in many ways like cognitive thinking, affirmative thought system etc. It brings well-being to the society.

Education of women is vital not only on grounds of social justice but also because it accelerates social transformation. Level of literacy and educational attainment are important indicators of development of any given society and we cannot exclude rural women in the development of any society as they equally contribute to the progress of the society and largely to the economy.

The last decade in Bihar (2004-14) has seen an exceptional development in education. Efforts by the Government of Bihar to increase accessibility to educational facilities in the state are showing signs of positive change. The improvement of Female Literacy Rate in Bihar during 2001-11 (20 percentage points) was the highest, achieved by any state in India during that period.

Although the growing literacy rates are showing some positive results, still literacy cannot be considered as the only sign of an educated society. On the other hand education rate in Bihar is characterized by wide gaps between the urban and rural woman (Urban female literacy is 72.6% & Rural female literacy is 49.6%) as well as in between the male and female population.

The purpose of this paper is to focus on the current status of women education level of rural Bihar and this paper will also highlight the various issues and challenges associated with. The ultimate purpose of this paper is to demonstrate some measures to deal with all these barriers.

Keywords: women education, female literacy, social development

1. Introduction

"If you educate a man you educate an individual, but if you educate a woman you educate a family (nation)." -Dr. James Emmanuel Kwegyir-Aggrey (1875-1927, Ghana).

Education has always been a foundation for economic and social development and it will be essential for the knowledge economies of the 21st century. Every issue that our society faces is like a link of a chain. Each issue is connected to another either directly or indirectly. Lack of education and Illiteracy is the mother of all issues as it gives birth, to many other issues like poverty, unemployment, child labor, population burst and many more. Education in India is a key for social and economic progress. Education of girls is vital not only on grounds of social justice but also because it accelerates social transformation. Level of literacy and educational attainment are important indicators of development of any given society and we cannot exclude women in the development of any society as they contribute about half of the human race. Reflecting into the "Vedas Purana" of Indian culture, women are being worshiped such as LAXMI MAA, goddess of wealth; SARSWATI MAA, for wisdom; DURGA MAA for power.

Literacy and proper Education is a game-changer in the effort to advance women's standing in the third world. In *Women and Literacy*, Marcela Ballara (1992) defines literacy as "the apprenticeship for the knowledge needed to cope with everyday needs, including the individual's relationship with the surrounding world". In essence, literacy is a tool for lifelong learning. Gaining literacy expands a woman's opportunities to communicate feelings and needs. According to Ballara, not only does literacy help silent women express needs, interests and concerns, but "literacy activities for and with women motivate the organization of women's groups to support collective demands and to seek active participation in development and a better position in society".

Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru said, *"When women move forward the family moves, the village moves and the nation moves"*. It is essential as their thought and their value systems lead the

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development of a good family, good society and ultimately a good nation. As swami Vivekananda said, *“It is impossible to think about the welfare of the world unless the condition of women is improved. It is impossible for a bird to fly on only one wing”*. The best way of empowerment of women is perhaps through empowering women with knowledge, skills and abilities. Education is the only way for actual empowerment of women in 21st century.

In the light of the present scenario, the purpose of this study is to highlight the current status of women education in Bihar, causes and the possible remedies of such of such problems. This study is exploratory in nature and for this purpose an in-depth analysis has been conducted by referring the available secondary sources.

2. Contribution of rural women to the society

Rural women and girls make up a quarter of the global population. They play a critical role in the economies of both developed and developing countries. In most parts of the developing world they participate in crop production and

livestock care, provide food, water and fuel for their families, and engage in off-farm activities to diversify their families’ livelihoods. In addition, they carry out vital reproductive functions in caring for children, older persons and the sick. They perform most of the unpaid care work in rural areas and are a major part of the agricultural labor force, making up almost half a billion smallholder farmers and landless workers.

Women in India make the major work force in the agricultural sector. In India more than 71% of women work as agricultural laborers which become more than 82% when it is confined to rural India only. That means women are doing most of the works that include sowing, weeding, harvesting, carrying etc. They are key agents for achieving the transformational economic, environmental and social changes required for sustainable development in our society. Participation of women in economic activities in India has shown tremendous growth over the last few decades. But, the state Bihar has the lowest female work force participation in comparison to other states.

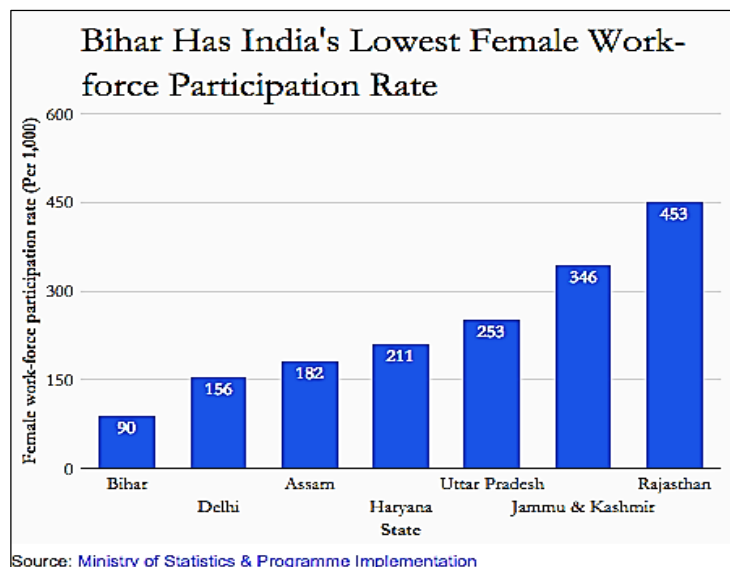


Fig 1: Female Work-force Participation in India

3. Women literacy in Bihar

H. Subrahmanyam (2011) compares women education in India at present and Past. Author highlighted that there has a

good progress in overall enrolment of girl students in schools.

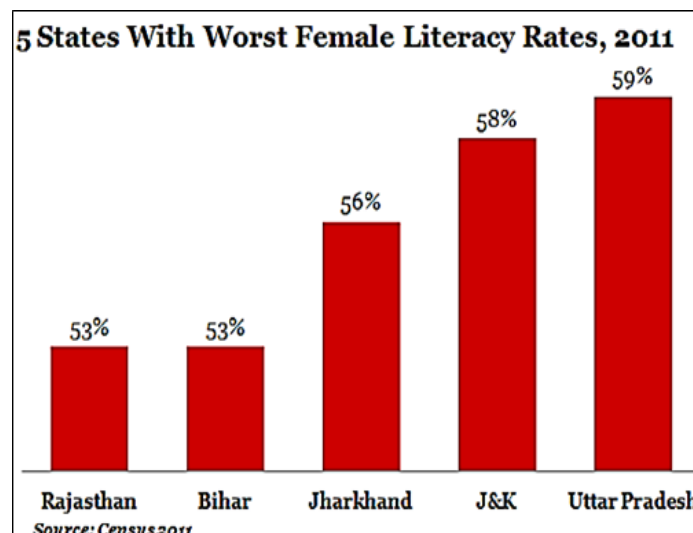


Fig 2: Low Female Literacy rate states, census-2011

The number of rural girls attending schools is rising, still; illiteracy and access to quality education is the major concern in rural Bihar. A recent study has revealed that the population of Bihar has gone up by 25 per cent in the past decade. This is an alarming rate. All development work and GDP growth rate will come to a naught if it has not been controlled. Education in this point plays a vital role in helping stabilise the population as well.

Bihar witnessed a growth of 16.3 percentage points in literacy levels from 2001-2011 (Census, India). The last decade in Bihar (2004-14) has seen an unprecedented development in education. Efforts by the Government of Bihar to increase accessibility to educational facilities in the state are showing signs of positive change. The literacy rate in Bihar has improved from 47.0% in 2001 to 61.8% in 2011 to 63.82% in 2015. Bihar's improvement in Female Literacy Rate during 2001-11 (20 percentage points) was the highest ever achieved by any state in India during that period. The overall dropout rate and number of out-of-school children have also declined. The number of higher education institutions increased during the period 2001-15. Although the growing literacy rates are showing some positive results, still literacy cannot be considered as the only sign of an educated society. On the other hand education rate in Bihar is characterized by wide gaps between the urban and rural woman as well as in between the male and female population. These can be illustrated with the following facts-

Table 1: Status of Female Literacy All India vs. Bihar, census-2011

Status of Women: All-India Vs Bihar (%)				
	Male		Female	
	All-India Bihar	All-India Bihar	All-India Bihar	All-India Bihar
Labour force participation rate*	82.7	78.5	33.1	9.0
Worker population ratio*	80.9	76.1	32.3	8.4
Casual labour-employment ratio	29.4	40.9	31.2	49.1
Agriculture worker ratio	43.6	61.4	62.8	72.5
Literacy rate-2011	82.14	73.39	65.46	53.33
Literacy rate-2001	75.26	59.68	53.67	33.12

15-59 years age-group according to 'usual' status of principal and subsidiary economic activity

Table 2: Total Literacy in Bihar

Total number of literates in Bihar	5,96,75,607
• Total number of Male Literates	3,99,78,955
• Total number of Female Literates	1,96,96,652

Source: Census 2011 Report

Table 3: Literacy Rates in Bihar

Bihar has a total literacy rate	63.82%
• Overall Males literacy rate is	73.39%
• Overall Females literacy rate is	53.53%
• Total Rural literacy rate in Bihar	53.9%
• Male Literacy rate In Rural Bihar	67.1%
• Female Literacy rate in Rural Bihar	49.6
• Total Urban literacy rate in Bihar	81.9
• Male Literacy Rate in Urban Bihar	89.9
• Female Literacy Rate in Urban Bihar	72.6

Source: Census 2011 Report

The above facts and figures clearly shows that there exists a huge gap while comparing male literacy and female literacy and at the same time the literacy rate of rural areas and urban areas of Bihar. It is also showing that the labor force

participation and worker population of Bihar are also comparatively low with the other parts of India. Although Bihar is showing some positive signs in terms of overall literacy rate in last ten years, still; it is at the bottom of the list. The Female literacy rate of rural Bihar is the lowest with comparison to the other states of India.

4. Issues and challenges with female literacy of rural Bihar

Although the rural women are playing a crucial role in the advancement of agriculture and economy and largely to the society, a number of challenges are being faced by the rural women of our society due to various reasons like- the gender discrimination, inadequate access to the health care etc. They are also having light access to the medical services, less income, limited inheritance and land rights. The females of rural area are deprived of job security. Injustice, violence and insecurity are the major issues that persist in the rural society. The ultimate reason behind all these issues is lack of having quality education for the women of rural Bihar. There are other burning social issues such as child marriage and gender inequality which are reasons for several social problems. These too can be tackled through girls' education.

The Bihar Government has expressed a strong commitment towards education for all; however the state still has one of the lowest rural female literacy rates in Asia. This low level of literacy not only has a negative impact on rural women's lives but also on their families' lives and on their country's economic development.

The following are the some of the important factors which could affect the low literacy rate of women of rural Bihar

Poor school environment for girls

In general the school environment for girls in rural Bihar is not really interesting and encouraging. There are still many schools with poor basic amenities such as drinking water, and toilet facilities, improper building and inadequate number of teachers especially female teachers preferable for any parents for safety of their girl children from different types of exploitation and abuse.

The lower enrolment due to family responsibilities

The major educational problem faced by girls, especially girls from rural areas, is that although they may be enrolled at the beginning at the year, they do not always remain in school. Girls are often taken out of school to share the family responsibilities. Children belonging to low caste families are forced to learn skills and work and not encouraged to go to school due to various factors in the sphere of strict instruction from high caste communities for their selfish motives of keeping them as domestic servants.

The data on school attendance collected by the World Bank shows the proportion of girls attending school decreases with age while for boys it remains stable.

Dowry system

In rural Bihar, dowry refers to the durable goods, cash and real or movable property that the bride's family gives to the bridegroom, his parents or his relatives as a condition of the marriage. The dowry system is thought to put great financial burden on the bride's family. Dowry system and other social act as main causes of the neglect of the girl child and

discrimination against girl child including the deprivation of right to education. In some cases, the dowry system leads to the crime against women ranging from emotional abuse, injury to even deaths.

Early marriage

Early or child marriage in India, according to Indian law, is a marriage where either the woman is below age 18 or the man is below age 21. Most child marriage involves underage women, many of whom are in poor socio-economic conditions. Bihar is the state amongst the highest child marriage rates in India. Rural rates of early marriages were three times higher than urban India rates in 2009 and still it is on the higher side. There is high association of female literacy with female age at marriage. By and large the female age at marriage of 18 as prescribed by various legislations not at all followed in India. It is very much ignored and neglected by the families of parents with low literacy.

Priority to son's education compared to daughter's education

Many parents view educating sons as an investment because the sons will be responsible for caring for aging parents. On the other hand parents may see the education of daughter a waste of money as daughter will eventually live with their husband's families and the parents will not benefit directly from their education.

Poverty

Poverty happens to be the single biggest cause of illiteracy in rural Bihar and a precursor to all other effects. Rural women are found to be economically very poor all over the state. A few women are engaged in services and other activities. So, they need economic power to stand on their own legs on par with men. Poverty is considered the greatest threat to peace in the world. Sex slaves are a direct outcome of poverty. In a poor family, girls are the main victims; they are malnourished and are denied the opportunity of better education and other facility. If poverty were not a concern, then the girl child will be able to follow her dreams without concerns of sexual exploitation, domestic abuse and any education or work. Numerous studies show that illiterate women have high levels of fertility, poor nutritional status, low earning potential and little autonomy within the household.

Lack of adequate number of female teachers

Another barrier to female education is the lack of female teachers. As India is a gender segregated society, it is a very important factor in the low female literacy rate. It is one of the barriers to girls' education. Girls are more likely to attend school and have higher academic achievement if they have female teachers. This is particularly true in highly gender-segregated societies such as India (Bellew and King, 1993; King, 1990).

Caste disparities

Severe caste disparities also exist. Specifically it is on the higher side in the rural part of Bihar. Discrimination of lower castes has resulted in high dropout rates and low enrollment rates.

But in spite of all reasons, women must understand and realize that education can actually end the vivacious cycle of

poverty, their misfortune, so that they can live a life with pride. In case of any misfortune in life, it is education that would help her, not anything else. The government should really work towards the number, distance and quality of schools in rural as well as urban India. We should encourage the girl child in getting education to create a balanced and an educated society.

5. Collaborative efforts and incentives for the betterment of rural women education

The cause for female education has attracted the efforts of many organizations and governments, and different initiatives have proven the importance of financial incentives, non-formal training, the hiring of women in the education sector, and community engagement. Financial incentives have been used both to encourage educators to enter the field of girls' education and specially enabling the rural girls to come into the main flow of development. Following are some of the major initiatives taken by the Government time to time for the betterment of women education of rural Bihar-

Educational Schemes by Government of Bihar
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fund Released under Maulana Azad National Fellowship for Students Belonging to Minority Communities in Bihar (2011-2012 to 2014-2015 upto 24.02.2015). • Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas (KGBVs) Operational and Girls Enrollment in Bihar (2011- 2012 to 2014-2015)
<p><u>Sarva Shiksha Abhiyaan (SSA) (1987-2016)</u> It is an Indian programme aimed at the universalisation of elementary education "in a time bound manner", as mandated by the 86th Amendment to the Constitution of India making free and compulsory education to children between the ages of 6 to 14 a fundamental right. The program was pioneered by former Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.</p>
<p><u>Balika Poshak Yojana</u> A scheme to provide school uniforms to girls in middle school, it gives girl students from Class VI to VIII Rs. 700 every year for purchasing two pairs of uniforms under the Balika Poshak Yojana.</p>
<p><u>Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojana</u> According to the Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojana, all girls are to be given bicycles free of cost by the State Government after getting admission to Class IX. The scheme mandates a cash transfer of Rs. 2,000 per girl child to purchase a bicycle within a stipulated time.</p>
<p><u>Mukhya Mantri Akshar Anchal Yojana</u> This adult literacy programme was launched by the government of Bihar in September 2009 to address high levels of illiteracy among women. With an allocation of Rs 52.6 crores it aimed to make 40 lakh illiterate women in the age group of 15-35 years literate within a period of 6 months. It was found that many women in the survey villages participated in this adult literacy programme. The Akshar Anchal Yojana was popular with illiterate women in poor communities. The classes were usually held at the local school after school hours.</p>
<p><u>Mahila Akshar Anchal Yojana</u> It has shown very good results and of the 40 lakh women covered under the scheme, more than 35 lakh have already been made literate. This helped increase the decadal literacy growth in the state more than any other state.</p>

Source: Extracted from-<http://www.biharstat.com/education>

6. Conclusion

Not only the government but every literate citizen should contribute in battling with the evil spirit of illiteracy. Our motto should be "each one teach one", If we are to become a developed state. It's now turn of the youth to step up and

take the responsibility on their shoulders to take the rural women of this state towards the light of literacy.

The time for the change is now. There is need to redefine the status and role of rural women. There is a need to formulate reducing feminized poverty, promoting education of women, and prevention and elimination of violence against women, specifically the rural part of our society.

The government as well as NGOs has been working on solving this problem of how we can eradicate illiteracy in rural Bihar for both children and female. In a way to achieve the ultimate goal of quality education and reach of education the following measures can be helpful-

1. Creating better schooling programs.
2. Creating better health care more accessible in the rural part of the state.
3. The son preference that has resulted in sex imbalances and excess mortality among girls needs to be addressed.
4. Achieve appropriate student-teacher ratio with quality of teaching.
5. Bring back the drop out children.
6. Proper monitoring to discover corruption in welfare schemes implemented by the Government time to time.
7. Providing sufficient number of schools and educational facilities so that girls don't have to travel for long distance.
8. Emphasize vocational education in the rural part of the state as well.
9. Promoting career oriented approach in education.
10. Motivate the girls to opt the field of their choice.
11. To remove the present imbalances, extend access by supporting existing institutions, establishing new institutions, supporting government and non-government organizations, civil society to supplement public efforts.
12. Promote the quality of higher education by investing in infrastructure and faculty, promoting academic reforms, improving governance and institutional restructuring towards the inclusion of the yet deprived communities.

Other than the above mentioned methods, the method of communication and media can facilitate development by encouraging dialogue and debate. Furthermore, they can give a voice to rural women, thus enabling them to articulate their own development agendas. Similarly, by fostering the exchange of knowledge and information, communication can stimulate women's awareness and motivation, allowing them to take informed decisions on the crucial issues affecting their lives and education is one of such important decisions.

In a way educated women can uplift her life as well as the quality of her life and her entire family.

As Mahatma Gandhi said, "Educate one man, you educate one person, but educate a woman, you educate a whole civilization."

Gandhi believed women could do much to transform India on all levels. Today let us pledge to create an atmosphere of equality for the girl child. Let's work together to remove this hazard from society. We have a long way to go, but we will get there someday.

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