Tempering Patriarchy and Reinventing Gender

Impact of Male Outflow on Women in Rural Bihar

Anamika Priyadarshini

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Prologue

This paper is based on an ongoing research that intends to understand the interplay of the response of poor women, whose immediate male relatives have migrated, to the patriarchal institutions and engendering of development in contemporary rural Bihar. The research started in March 2018 in three villages of Bihar, two in Saharsa (Paharpur and Hamidpur of Simri Bakhtiyarpur block) and one in Siwan (Sahasraon of Andar block). The research is in its initial stage and hence the paper is based on my preliminary interactions, observations and review of available literature. Though the research started recently, I had been interacting with poor women of Bihar for over a decade, and, especially with Bihar's rural women since 2014, while working on a research on declining female workforce participation in India. Dynamics of rural Bihar had been swiftly changing. Women, despite their constrained mobility and exposure, were outnumbering their male counterparts in local governing bodies and were also actively engaged in implementing government's new initiatives as Asha, Mamta and Jeevika didis. This change is intricate as it is not an outcome of women's collective initiatives but manifestation of policy intervention by the government. More importantly, this change is happening in the wake of male outmigration.

Impact of this change is apparent in the improving gender development indicators of Bihar (NFHS, 2016). And hence it could be argued that the model of engendering development and politics, adopted by the government of Bihar, turns out to be a successful one. Findings of NFHS (2016) and NSS (2013) makes this research more significant than ever as it reflects progression of a paradoxical trend in Bihar, where a process of engendering development and politics is materializing in the wake of degendering economy. In other words, women in Bihar are outnumbering their male counterparts in local governing bodies and are vibrantly active in implementation of development projects while their participation in the workforce is declining.

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Interestingly, female workforce participation in Bihar has been alarmingly low despite substantial male outmigration. Through this research, I intend to understand how women, overburdened with their numerous responsibilities in the absence of their migrant husbands, are negotiating with the changing dynamics of Bihar, where the state projects them as the face of development while rejecting the worth of their contribution in the economy.

As noted above, the research is in its preliminary stage and in this paper, I make an attempt to situate my preliminary interactions with research participants in the context of the review of available literature and my previous experience of working with women in Bihar. The first section of the paper offers a context of the research, followed by the main objectives of the research. The third section attempts to examine the state of women in the drive of improving indicators in Bihar. Next two sections focus on poor women's organizational base in rural Bihar, followed by a section on left behind women's response to the changing dynamics of twenty first century Bihar.

“Left Behind Women” and the Interplay of Gender and Development

To a great extent, image of Bihar as almost an antonym of whatever constitutes the idea and practice of development has been transfixed in the collective perception. Words like feudal, semi-feudal, underdeveloped, 'traditional' are often pronounced to characterize this state's dominant feature. These adjectives certainly reinforce Bihar as a state with constrained space for women. However, a long history of male outmigration from the state also indicates that though the majority of Bihari women, especially in rural Bihar, had to live in oppressive patriarchal settings, they were not necessarily under the constant and direct control of their male counterparts. In many households of rural Bihar, men are almost absent and women are left with all the responsibilities of family, society and economy. Furthermore, rural women, with their limited exposure and mobility, are doomed to deal with the changing dynamics of the economy, often shaped by neoliberal agenda. It would not be inappropriate to argue that Bihari women have been the epitome of numerous paradoxes manifested by the intersections of the dominant institutions of rural Bihar and development drive of neoliberal regime. Yet, it is the idea of “left behind” women that prevails as 'the' image of rural Bihari women.
Researches on “left behind” women clearly indicate that wives of migrant men are not necessarily passive recipients of patriarchal hegemony. To a great extent, this label disconnects rural Bihari women from their historical experience of tempering patriarchy while reproducing and reinventing it in response to the changing dynamics of society. Needless to note that patriarchal institutions like caste and gender continues to prevail as the dominant determinants of rural Bihar’s society and, as some researches underscore, men continue to be the prime decision makers in the households and communities of rural Bihar (Datta and Mishra, 2011). It is also true that male outmigration is not a new phenomenon in the state. But women outnumbering men at polling booths, especially in the wake of state’s pro-women policies, is certainly a new phenomenon that calls for attention. Recent report of NFHS (2014-15), reflects substantial improvement in overall condition of women in Bihar.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women who are literate</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>49.6% (70.6% urban, 46.3% rural)</td>
<td>68.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women aged 20-24 who married before 18</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>39.1% (26.9% urban, 40.9% rural)</td>
<td>26.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women who have experienced spousal violence</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>43.2% (40.2% urban, 43.7% rural)</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women with a bank account they themselves use</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>26.4% (36.9% urban, 24.6% rural)</td>
<td>53.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Women with below normal BMI</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>30.4% (22.2% urban, 31.8% rural)</td>
<td>22.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Married women who take part in household decisions</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>75.2% (77.6% urban, 74.8% rural)</td>
<td>84.0%</td>
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Source: National Family Health Survey 4, 2015-16, and National Family Health Survey 4, 2005-06

Though Bihar’s health and education related gender development indicator is much behind the national average, condition of women in the state, as the table mentioned above shows, has remarkably improved in the past ten years. There has been an impressive rise in the proportion of women with 10 or more years of schooling from 13.2% in 2005-06 to almost 23% in 2015-16. Proportion of literate
women has also increased and almost 50% women in the state are now literates. Women's education has often had an impact on age at marriage as well as health of women and children. There has been about 21% decline in the rate of marriage among under-18 girls and almost 44% rise in institutional deliveries. Substantial decline in anaemia among women (over 7%) and children (about 15%) has also been recorded in the past ten years. Moreover, women's involvement in decision making processes of household has also increased (6%) and about 59% women own house and/or land (alone or jointly). About 50% of them have mobile phone and about 41% have a bank saving account that they themselves use.

These indicators do reflect some crucial transition in the lives of Bihar's rural women, a group often labelled as “left behind women”. There are very few researches on Bihari migrant labour's immediate female relatives, often overwhelmed with numerous responsibilities of home, society, while negotiating with the intersectionalities caste, gender and development in contemporary rural Bihar. Scholars like Jaitley (1987), Desai and Banerjee (2008), Datta and Mishra (2011) have been writing about wives of Bihar's male migrant labour. An important publication in this field is the Institute for Human Development's (IHD) report Status of Women in Bihar: Exploring Transformation in Work and Gender Relations (Datta and Rustagi, 2012). But this research is based on a “survey of groups of women in 14 selected villages across 9 districts of north and south Bihar” (Datta and Rustagi, 2012: 1). The survey was not designed to gather information from individuals but aimed at recording the “collective perceptions of the groups of women”. This perception, as the authors clearly register in the beginning of their report, “may, at times, differ from what one may elicit from individuals covered in a household survey” (2012: 2). Another important publication that specifically addresses the issues of Bihar's “left behind women” is Archana K. Roy's book Distress Migration and 'Left Behind' Women: A Study of Rural Bihar (2011). This book attempts to address the impact of migration in a holistic manner, keeping left behind women at its center. However, it was published in 2011. IHD's study was also published in 2012. Most of these publications are primarily based on researches conducted in the 2000s. Whereas the period between 2005 and 2017 (or between NFHS 3 and NHFS 4) seems to be a crucial time for women in rural Bihar. I could not find any research that captures the transitions happened in the past ten years in
rural Bihar where “left behind women” are emerging as a group with substantial impact on the state's policies. Considering the paucity of researches/publications on contemporary rural Bihar's women, this research intends to understand the interplay of “left behind women's” response to patriarchal institutions and engendering of development policies in Bihar.

**Aim of Research**

Contemporary Bihar is witnessing a transformation that indicates some correlation between male outmigration and engendering of development policies and politics. This context has propounded some very intriguing research questions. For instance, what prompted the government to envision women as an important group of citizen in a state like Bihar where patriarchal norms often restrict women's mobility and their participation in decision making processes? Is the state exploring possibilities to integrate women into the mainstream political economy while reinstating the possibilities to ensure the inflow of remittance through male outmigration? In what ways male outmigration has influenced the production relations of rural Bihar? How the socio-economic backgrounds of migrants shape the push factors of rural Bihar? How women in rural Bihar are negotiating with the intersections of class, caste and gender while interacting with concerned officials to avail benefits of state's policies to facilitate women? How women are tempering patriarchy while reproducing and reinventing it in response to the changing dynamics of contemporary Bihar? These questions are the prime trigger of my ongoing research. The research is approaching these questions through an analysis of women's response to the interplay of state, women's organizations and social institutions like caste and gender. I recognize these three institutions in the axis of those dynamics that shape gender relations in contemporary Bihar.

**Women: A “Left Behind” Constituent of the Indicators**

As per NFHS 3 (2006), Bihar had the most critical gender development indicators in India. The following year turned out to be the onset of an era of engendering politics and development in Bihar. The newly elected Government of Bihar reserved 50 percent seats for women in the local governing bodies and introduced several policies specially to facilitate poor women of the state. It would be important to note here that the tenure of the regime under chief minister Nitish Kumar thrived during
the UPA regime when India was rapidly emerging as a globally known economic power. Gender had been a special focus of state intervention as many states, especially the ones falling in the Hindi belt spread across the Ganges, were marked with a critically low GDI (Gender Development Index). Special funds like Backward Region Grant Fund (launched in 2006) were allocated to the states to improve the condition of marginalized groups like women. Bihar certainly was one of the needy recipients of such grants and received financial support from the Central Government as well as other concerned agencies like the World Bank for improving its extremely critical HDIs and GDIs. These initiatives, combined with the Bihar Government’s proactive role for engendering development, played a crucial role in improving gender development indicators of the state.

Preliminary interactions for this research, however, offers a counter narrative and there seems to be a clear gap in the rhetoric of data and reality. For instance, many children enrolled in the government schools rarely attend their classes as they are either concurrently enrolled in private schools or have migrated along with their families. Attendance record of the absentee students is maintained as the school authorities are expected to achieve the targeted rate of enrolment and check the school dropout rate. On the other hand, the parents of the absentee students envision this arrangement as an opportunity to avail the benefits provided by the government for poor children. The fixation for improving data has subsided the real challenges that needed to be addressed for a natural process of improving indicators.

The prime focus of the state seems to be improving the gender development indicators whereas actual well-being of women remains an insignificant issue. For instance, rate of institutional delivery in the state has increased from about 20 percent in 2006 to about 64 percent in 2016. This boost must be a matter of serious concern as the quality of services provided by the public health institutions of Bihar is worst in the countryiii (Kumar and Singh, 2016). Labour rooms are in extremely unhygienic condition and yet, the state seems to be determined to ensure institutional delivery through incentive cum monitoring mechanisms like Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY). Effective implementation of JSY, a scheme to incentivise institutional delivery in India, is being celebrated as the prime factor behind
improving institutional delivery in the state. Proportion of JSY beneficiaries in the state (54 percent) is much higher than the national average (36.4 percent) and the government recognizes it as one of the most successful initiatives. Considering the condition of labour rooms, this should be a matter of concern. Moreover, as the preliminary interactions for this research indicates, the component of incentive is actually affecting this scheme.

None of the eight households I visited (in April 2018) in a dalit tola of Pahadpur village (Simari Bakhtiyarpur, Saharsa) had opted for institutional delivery in the past two years. Benefit of Janani Suraksha Yojana was cited as the key reason behind poor families' reluctance for institutional delivery. The “amount” people are compelled to pay to the PHC (Primary Health Centre) staffs after delivery is often more than what they receive as incentive through JSY. Out of pocket expenditure after institutional delivery was another additional expense and also a demotivating factor referred by the poor dalit families. Undoubtedly, the public health officials are not unaware of these lacunae. However, the ones I interacted for the research opted to justify women's preference for giving birth at home over public health centres/hospitals as a manifestation of their ignorance and illiteracy. Interestingly, the block level government officials found male outmigration a constraint for their mobilisation initiatives, aimed at motivating “left behind” women to avail the benefits proffered by the state. Struggle of dealing with “illiterate” dalit women in the absence of their “guardians”, which is almost a synonym for husband in Bihar, was recognized as a challenge by them. Poor level of educational attainment and awareness among the mobilisers of schemes like Mamta and ASHA, who are expected to facilitate and motivate women to avail the benefits offered through public health institutions, was considered another critical limitation. In sum, literacy level of dalit women, living in the absence of their migrant husbands and being motivated through barely literate health mobilisers, was perceived by the government officials as one of the practical hurdles in improving the rate of institutional delivery as well as other developmental indicators of the state.

To some extent, absence of men in the poor household was envisioned as a phenomenon that not only decapacitates the households but also incapacitate the implementation process of state's policies. Neither the issue of re-capacitating poor
households through initiatives to check male outmigration nor the plight of overburdened women of those “de-capacitated” households emerged in my interactions with officials of three blocks in Saharsa. What remains the ethos of official concern is improving indicators. Or rather, to achieve the target of improving indicators. Women seem to be lost in the race of achieving targeted indicators. It is not surprising that women, whose well-being was projected as the prime concern of the Bihar government, seems to be the “left-behind” constituent in the race of improving indicators. In fact, poor women, especially whose husbands have migrated, are often framed as a somewhat disabled category.

**Poor Women and Their Organizational Base in Rural Bihar**

An important avenue for poor women has been their organization. Women's organizations have been playing a crucial role in organizing, capacitating and facilitating poor women since 1970s. These initiatives have also been apparent in the changing gender dynamics of the society. In the last quarter of the past century, lobbying for engendering policies was one of the crucial agendas of women workers' organizations. One of the most prominent initiatives of women workers' organizations was the establishment of Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), world's first trade union of self employed women workers, in the early 1970s. In Bihar, organizations like ADITHI, established in 1980s, has been offering critical support to poor women, often overburdened with the responsibilities of family and society in the absence of their migrant husbands. ADITHI, SEWA, Mahila Samakhya, Srijani are some of the numerous organizations that has been constantly working to facilitate poor women in Bihar.

Most of these women's organizations operate through small self-help groups (SHG) of women. To a great extent, SHGs have been a forum for facilitating and capacitating disenfranchised women. As the acronym denotes, SHG are formed by women from similar socio-economic background to help themselves with support of their larger organizations. SHGs have been a popular forum of poor women in rural Bihar. Surprisingly, the preliminary observation of this research indicates that the ethos of the concept of SHG seems to be fading in rural Bihar. The new alternative of SHG, as pronounced by the rural women research participants, is: the Jeevika Group. Some of the research participants were members of Jeevika Group. Though the
Jeevika groups also act like SHGs, the ethos embedded in the term “self-help” seem to be obliterated, both literally and conceptually, in the new discourse of grouping women.

Jeevika, a project of Bihar government to promote livelihood options among rural women, is being recognized as the prime trigger behind the changing gender dynamics in rural Bihar. This project was started in 2007 in 6 districts of Bihar and is now implemented in all 38 districts of the state. The project primarily operates through savings-led SHGs of women from the poorest and socially excluded communities (Tiwari, 2010: 28). As a state run project, Jeevika has a well-defined structure of district, block, village and community level organizations. The aim is to capacitate women individually as well as collectively so that they could opt for appropriate livelihood options for themselves and subsequently, what the World Bank's research team for Jeevika calls, “undo gender” in rural Bihar (Sanyal, Rao and Majumdar, 2015). This team, comprising of three academics- Paromita Sayal, Vijayendra Rao and Shruti Majumdar, have written collectively and individually on how Jeevika facilitated “recasting culture to undo gender” in rural Bihar.

Jeevika started with formation of SHGs of marginalized rural women, and in most of the cases, as I observed while assessing the impact of Jeevika in 2012, the formation processes included forming new and “adopting” already existing SHGs. In reality, the process of adopting implied co-opting the existing SHGs. Gradually, most of the SHGs of rural Bihar were transformed into Jeevika Groups. Jeevika has altered the language of women's organizations, who now boast about their role in facilitating not their own SHGs but the Jeevika Groups of their project area. In some cases, representatives of women's organizations insist that they do not prohibit their SHGs’ members from joining Jeevika as this would mean losing the opportunity to avail the benefits offered by the government through Jeevika. Hence, in some cases, poor women are members of both SHGs and Jeevika Groups. Joining Jeevika, thus, is a channel to not only access credit at a very low rate of interest but also the benefits offered by the government. These benefits, however, are not reaching the poor women for free. The cost poor women are paying to avail these benefits is: the autonomy of their organizational entity. Jeevika has gradually transformed poor women in rural Bihar as indebted agents of the governmental agendas and politics.
This context has no room for initiating any dialogue about poor women’s real issues like checking migration, generating livelihood options, effective implementation of MGNREGA etc.

**Women and the Flux of Jeevika**

Though Jeevika members, as I had observed during my first interaction with Jeevika officials in 2012, were motivated to opt a livelihood for themselves, there seemed to be a very limited scope for women members’ own agendas. Besides, women associated with Jeevika eloquently advocated for various schemes of the state government as well as the schemes on the agenda of banks like replacing the Public Distribution System (PDS) with cash transfer. At present, one of the top priorities of Jeevika officials is making Bihar ODF, i.e., Open Defecation Free. Jeevika officials are actively engaged in a shaming campaign to de-motivate those who defecate in open. They are also expected to promote other governmental schemes as well as participate in the rallies called by the state, and now, also by the central government. Members of Jeevika from all over Bihar were summoned to gather in East Champaran to attend the “Satyagrah se Swachhagrah” campaign, launched by the Prime Minister on April 10, 2018. In this programme, as some research participants of Saharsa shared, Jeevika members took oath as Swachhagrahis and are now also working as Swachhagrahis.

Thus, Jeevika members, who introduce themselves as [Jeevika] didis (older sister), could be summoned to participate in the rallies of the Chief Minister and also in the Swachhagrah campaign of the Prime Minister. They are expected to work as Swachhagrahis and motivate people to actively join the prohibition of alcohol campaign. To a great extent, Jeevika has converted poor women of rural Bihar into state-agents who are expected to morph themselves as per state-requirement. Nevertheless, Jeevika is a celebrated initiative of the state government and is often referred as a project that brought revolutionary changes in lives of women in rural Bihar. It is not surprising that this “revolution”, like many other “revolutions” of neoliberal regime, is not an outcome of an initiative taken by any particular groups' passion for change but rather a strategically planned activity. To a great extent, NGOization of women's movement in the past century was one such phenomenon that created a ground for the emergence of the government's non-governmental
.avatar in the form of programmes like Jeevika. I have written elsewhere about how NGOs played a crucial role in mobilising women while convincing poor that they can improve their condition by strategizing their saving habits and making their products marketable. The idea was to facilitate self-help groups into becoming small entrepreneurs and to gradually incorporate them into the market-led development drive, where it is not the State but the citizen who is considered responsible for her disadvantageous conditions. Thus, NGOs initiated a rhetoric of putting the responsibility of the improvement of disadvantaged conditions of the poor on them and thereby also establishing the poor as a class that was responsible for its own oppression. Such rhetoric was also instrumental in diverting poor from the structural factors responsible for their marginalization and these factors were not the outcome of poor's inability to save or market but of the market led model of development.

With the advent of Jeevika model, the movement of women's non-governmental organizations have transcended to a new era. Jeevika has defused the distinction between the GO (Governmental Organization) and NGO (Non-governmental Organization). The paradox of Jeevika is the fact that it is a non-governmental organization of the Government. And as an NGO, Jeevika is also engaged in a project of mobilising poor women to take the onus of their disadvantageous condition and to work collectively for improving their lives by actively participating in various governmental projects' promotion and propagation. This key role problematizes Jeevika's complex status as a non-governmental organization of the government. While Jeevika is refrained from availing the status of a governmental institution, it is expected to be responsible for promotion, implementation and success of numerous governmental programmes despite very limited stake in decision making processes of programme implementation. A daunting manifestation of such an arrangement could be strangulation of the possibilities of organic evolution of women's movement for closing the gender gap, which remains considerably wide in Bihar despite the wave of engendering politics and development.

**Response of Left Behind Women**

In the age of Jeevika, it would not be inapt to argue that “left behind” women of rural Bihar are left with minimal autonomous organizational support. Some of the
women participants of Siwan and Saharsa discussed about the women's organizations they have been associated with. However, they are also Jeevika didis. And considering Jeevika's mediating role between the poor women and the government, preference for Jeevika over the autonomous women's organizations becomes an inevitable choice for poor women. On the other hand, the political party in power envisions Jeevika as a readily available and easily alterable cadre base. A village leader in Simari Bakhtiyarpur brilliantly summarised this flux:


(Does any political party have a mass base today? None. How will the government pull crowd in rallies if it will not make Jeevika? People from good families would not go. Its only the poor who will go. And even among the poor, men have migrated to earn. Its only women who are left behind. Hence they will be called.). (italics mine).

Thus, as the aforementioned statement indicates, most of the political parties are losing their cadre base in rural Bihar and “making” Jeevika, a forum of rural poor women, is an unavoidable strategy for the government. Jeevika has become an interlocking channel between the government and the poor women in Bihar. This context has certainly left a deep imprint on the women's organizational capacity in rural Bihar. Almost all members of Jeevika we interacted for this research complained about the demeaning response they face in the society while motivating people to participate in rallies or not to defecate in open. Many of them were not convinced about their role as Jeevika didi. Yet, all of them had a hope in Jeevika. The fundamental questions of poverty, unemployment, women's rights etc. has already been subsided from the politics of women's organizations during the wave of NGOization in late twentieth century. The most compelling question for the poor women in rural Bihar now is to ensure their access to their means of subsistence. Women participants of the research often struggled in recognizing livelihood options available for them in their village. Very few of them worked as agricultural labour and few as domestic worker. Stories of corruption in MGNREGA was a popular issue of day to day conversation among research participants in Simari
Bakhtiyarpur of Saharsa. Few women participants in Simari Bakhtiyarpur had once worked for MGNREGA and they envisioned MGNREGA as a promising programme, which, as a Dalit woman of Pahadpur Mushahari phrased, is confined in government's files and has ceased to exist for the poor in real. She labelled migration as the only promising livelihood option for male youth in her community. The state's unresponsive approach towards generating employment in rural Bihar is glaringly apparent. Yet, this issue seldom emerges in the discussions of Panchayats, Jeevika and other forums of not only women but all the “left behind” people in rural Bihar.

Most of the participants identified remittance as the prime source of their household income. Yet, the discourse of local governing bodies as well as women's organizations, seem to be almost oblivious of daunting issues like poverty, unemployment, caste and gender. However, despite all odds, the dominant perception about Bihari women, which often compress varied dimensions of their persona in monolithic gender identities like “left behind women” and “proxy representatives of local governing bodies”, is being challenged. Most of the migrant men remit money in the account of their wives who, in the wake of demonetization and cash crunch in ATMs and Banks, are compelled to visit the banks and ATMs regularly. In case of women members of local governing bodies, many women have contested and won elections from unreserved seats in the past ten years. They are also consolidating along caste lines to influence electoral politics and are showing a more conscious understanding of their space in the political economy of the twenty-first century Bihar. Issues of gender, however, rarely emerge as a main concern in the politics of women representatives. Fundamental issues evolving from people's day to day struggle as marginalized groups like poor, woman, minority and dalit are often subsumed by the dominant discourse shaped by government's grand projects like “Satyagrah se Swachhagrah” and complete prohibition on alcohol. Preference for the agendas set by such programmes tends to be a prescription for upward mobility and also for creating space in the nexus of power within the rural politics. In other words, distancing from issues of poor women for the propagation of government's development drive manifest a process of sanskritization for the representatives from marginalized groups like women and dalit. In this context, engendering of politics and development does not necessarily instigate a gender sensitive atmosphere. However, in most cases, poor women are not passive
recipients of patriarchal hegemony. Despite minimal exposure and limited mobility, many women leaders are able to understand, comprehend and critique the striking absence of women's issues in the wave of engendering of development and politics. I conclude this paper with a woman ward member's daunting one-line response to the processes of engendering development and politics in Bihar. While asked about the impact of reservation in local governing bodies, implementation of Jeevika, and government's other incentive of engendering development on rural women, this ward member of Sahasrawan (Siwan) annoyingly responded:

“Sarkar ta kulhe mehraru sabke ekke kaam me jotale ba- ki ghare-ghar jaayin, aa jaake sabke samjhayin, ki bahar na jayin, ghara hi karin.”

[The government has engrossed all the women in only one programme and that is: visit home to home and convince people to not to defecate in open and defecate inside home only.]

**Notes**


References


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