

6. Women Support for Nitish Kumar: Myth or Reality?

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The 2010 Assembly election was a landmark moment in the electoral history of Bihar. For the first time ever in the history of Bihar, voter turnout among women exceeded men turnout. After the election, there was a lot of discussion about the crucial role played by women. Jha (2015), Singh (2013), Kumar (2013) and Agarwal (2010) have pointed out that women were the key to Nitish's victory in the 2010 assembly election in the state. It was argued that Nitish made a lot of endeavour in his first term as Chief Minister (2005-2010) to empower women through policies like 50 percent reservation in village panchayats across the state¹. His efforts for improving female literacy rates² by focusing on girl's education, offering cash rewards to girl students for their achievement in school exams and distributing books, uniforms and bicycles to young girls to ride to school have been extensively lauded. Satish Kumar (2013) considered the 'Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojana' to be a form of women empowerment. The Chief Minister has also launched various employment and social security schemes for women which probably gave him an edge

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¹According to the 73rd Amendment Act to the Indian Constitution in 1993, a minimum of one-third of the seats at the panchayat are reserved for women. Bihar was the first State in India to voluntarily raise the reservation of seats for women in panchayats and district boards to 50 per cent. Bihar's initiative of raising the women's quota to 50 per cent at the panchayat level was followed by other Indian States such as Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand.

²The state was honoured with "Decadal Literacy Award" in 2011 by the President of India.

among female voters of Bihar. It is also argued that Bihar was in the clutch of misgovernance when Lalu Prasad and Rabri Devi were at the helm of affairs in the state. The high crime rate during their rule had severely restricted the mobility of women in terms of education and employment. Nitish's special focus on improving general law and order situation, made women vote for him. Prabhat Ghosh, political analyst at the Patna-based Asian Development Research Institute, had pointed out that the growing participation of women in Bihar's assembly election should be inferred as an affirmation of the beneficial effects of carrying out various women centred programs of reservation, education, employment etc (Agarwal 2010).

This paper essentially makes two arguments related to the role of women in Bihar politics. Firstly, there has been a substantial rise in women voter turnout but it is not an isolated phenomenon taking place only in Bihar. A similar trend is visible across the country and there has been an upsurge in women turnout. Secondly, and more importantly, higher women turnout and Nitish's victory in Bihar should be looked at as two different occurrences. Though happening simultaneously, there seems to be no causal relationship between them.

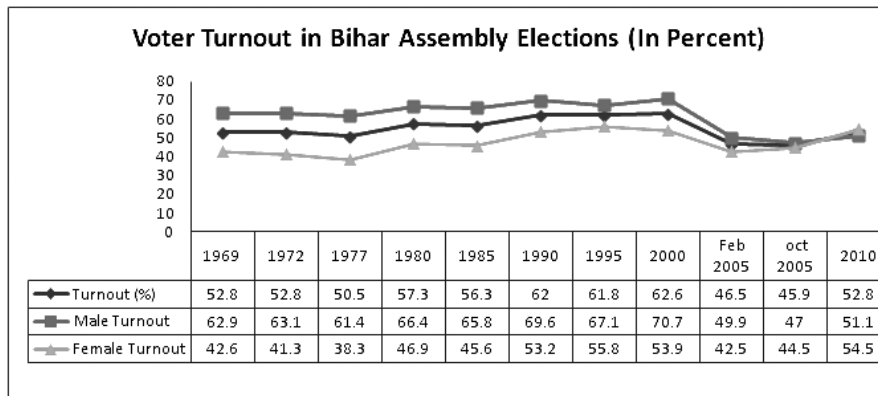
This article is structured in three sections: where the first section talks about the rise in women voter turnout, second section discusses the popularity of Nitish Kumar and his government among women and the third section examines the reasons for high voter turnout among women and why no causal relationship should be drawn between high voter turnout and Nitish's victory in Bihar.

The article will be focusing on both direct and indirect form of electoral participation among women, leadership popularity and satisfaction with the overall development of Bihar (issues such as women's security, condition of government schools etc) in particular.

It is true that the voter turnout among women is on a rise in Bihar and women in 2010 came out to vote in unprecedented numbers. If we look at the time series line graph (Figure 1) we can see that the overall voter turnout was only 52.8 percent in the 1969 assembly election and it peaked in the 2000 assembly election when it reached 62.6 percent. However in all assembly elections before 2010, the turnout among men

was always higher than turnout among women. In the 2010 election, the trend changed and women came out to vote in larger numbers. In the 2010 election, 54.5 percent of the women voted in Bihar as compared to 51.1 percent of the men. As compared to the 2005 October assembly election there was a rise of 4 percentage points among men and a massive increase of 10 percentage points among women.

Figure 1
Turnout by gender in Bihar (1969-2010)



Source: Election Commission of India

The right to vote is a basic constitutional right in a liberal democracy. Mudit Kapoor and Shamika Ravi (2014; 63-67) argue that by casting a vote voluntarily women make a formal expression of their individual choice of representatives and the larger politics. They understand this high voter turnout as an expression of 'self empowerment of women to secure their fundamental right to freedom of expression.' The data presented here however refutes this idea of self empowerment because over the years women have not been voting independently without being influenced by family members, neighbours, caste community members etc. Commenting on the increased turnout in 2010, former chief minister of Bihar Lalu Prasad Yadav had clearly refuted claims that women were voting differently from men (Mishra 2010). Between 2005 and 2010, the proportion of women who voted on their own remained almost the same (Table 1). One finds it hard to accept the self empowerment thesis of

rising women voter turnout. Despite higher turnout among women, there has been no change in the sense of self empowerment. Women still don't seem to have an independent say in their political decision making and are in fact voting under the influence of others.

Table 1
Women who voted on their own

Voted on their own	
2005	63
2010	65

*Note: All figures are in percent. Rest either gave other responses or had no opinion.
Question asked: Did you consult someone before casting your vote ?*

There rise in women turnout has not been accompanied by a rise in other forms of electoral participation. Activities such as attending and organizing election meeting, taking part in processions and rallies, participating in door to door campaigns, distributing election leaflets and pamphlets, collecting money etc have not seen much of a rise. Over the years, participation in these activities has remained almost constant (Table 2). In fact, between 2005 and 2010 there was a slight drop in women's participation in these activities.

Table 2
Electoral participation of women other than voting

	2005 Vidhan Sabha	2010 Vidhan Sabha	2014 Lok Sabha
Attended/organised election meetings	9	7	14
Joined processions/rally	7	7	7
Participated in door to door canvassing	5	3	4
Contributed or collected money	3	2	5
Distributed election leaflets/pamphlets/put up posters	6	4	3

Note: All figures are in percent.

Source: Bihar Post Poll Survey 2005 and 2010; NES 2014

But when it comes to representation of women in the legislative assembly, there has been a steady rise over the years. The number of female MLAs in the state peaked in 2010 at 36. The figure was much lower earlier at 14 and 25 in 2000 and 2005 respectively.

Gender based differences in Nitish's popularity and government appraisal

Increased voter turnout of women has brought about some sort of gender parity in politics. What does the rise in women turnout indicate? Was the Chief Minister a popular figure among women or was it a myth? Did the personal popularity of the CM translate into votes for his alliance? This question needs further probing. For answering this question, three variables are analyzed systematically: first, the preference for chief minister; second, satisfaction with the government and its governance measures; and third, the voting pattern in Bihar.

Probing into the first aspect of chief ministerial choice, one sees a steady rise in Nitish's popularity over the years. Over the last decade, Nitish Kumar has consistently been more popular than Lalu Prasad Yadav and Ram Vilas Paswan. He is clearly perceived as a better leader for the state by both women and men (Table 3). In 2005, there was marginal gender difference in preference for Nitish Kumar. This got diminished in 2010 as he became almost equally popular among both genders.

Table 3
Nitish Kumar Equally Popular among men and women

	October 2005		2010	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Ram Vilas Paswan	14	15	6	7
Lalu Prasad Yadav	28	28	26	26
Nitish Kumar	43	49	59	60

Note: All figures are in percent.

Source: Bihar Post Poll Survey 2005 and 2010

Question asked: Who is the best leader among – Ram Vilas Paswan, Lalu Prasad Yadav and Nitish Kumar ?

Both men and women considered the JD (U) government to be better than the previous RJD government. The chief minister was ranked highly by women on the work done by him. There was almost equivalent satisfaction among men and women with the work done by Nitish Kumar as the Chief Minister. From the above analysis, one can see that Nitish Kumar was very popular among both men and women. There seems to be no gender difference in his popularity. Women do not seem to stand out in their preference for Nitish, nor do they seem to vote any differently as compared to men for. Deshpande (2009; 83-87) has argued that women are not a homogenous group who vote as ‘gendered beings independent of social and regional-level political dynamics.’ Their voting trend is not that of an independent bloc, rather the data suggests that they vote similar to men.

Table 4 shows that popularity to vote convertibility is similar among men and women. A woman who likes a leader is almost equally likely to go out and vote for her party. In 2005, 73 percent of men who indicated a liking for Nitish Kumar voted for the NDA as compared to 75 percent of the women who liked him. These figures became exactly equal in 2010 - 60 percent, and men and women who liked Nitish Kumar were equally likely to vote for him.

Table 4
Popularity to vote convertibility

	October 2005	2010
Men who like Nitish and voted for NDA	73	60
Women who like Nitish and voted for NDA	75	60

Note: All figures are in percent.

Source: Bihar Post Poll Survey 2005 and 2010

Possible explanations high women turnout

From the foregoing analysis, it is evident that drawing a causal relationship between high women voter turnout and Nitish’s victory in 2010 seems doubtful. The two said phenomena are different in nature and causation must not be drawn between them. In 2010 there was an overall support for Nitish Kumar, irrespective of gender. Women would

possibly be the biggest beneficiaries of the improved law and order situation in the state. However, kidnapping and hooliganism seems to be an equal consideration for both men and women while voting. It is difficult to argue that women were voting on different issues.

But the question which then arises is that what made women turn out in large numbers to vote in 2010 assembly election? Is Bihar the only state to witness such a turnout or are their similar trends elsewhere also? There is no denying that Nitish Kumar has taken several proactive steps for the female electorate of Bihar. Several women centric schemes have been launched to ensure their participation and involvement in the public sphere. Bihar was the first state (in 2006) to grant 50 percent reservation to women for over 8000 panchayats in the state (Singh 2013). The list of steps taken to appeal specifically to women voters is fairly long. He gave scholarships, introduced a direct cash subsidy for procuring school uniforms and launched a bicycle scheme for increasing female attendance in schools (Mukhaymantri Balika Protsahan Yojana, Mukhyamantri Poshak Yojna and Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Scheme). The state had spent Rs 174.36 crores by 2009 to make 8.71 lakh schoolgirls proud owners of bicycles (Agarwal 2010, Jha 2015, Singh 2013, Kumar 2013). There has been extensive spending on these schemes to reduce the massive school dropout rate among girls (Kumar 2013). While statistics vary, figures have shown that following these schemes the girls' dropout rate has fallen by over half. Not only has Nitish been successful in stemming the school dropout rate but his emphasis on girl's education has led to higher enrolment of female students in primary, secondary and high schools. Apart from this, he also reserved 50 percent seats for women in the recruitment of primary school teachers (Singh 2013, Kumar 2013).

Election Commission of India shows that there has been a decrease in the gender gap and an increase in women's turn out in both national and state elections. In Lok Sabha election 2014, this gap became almost negligible. This gap has reduced from 17 percentage points in 1957 to 2 percentage points in 2014. Bihar is not an isolated case with high women turn out. This trend seems to be present across states. Kumar and Gupta (2015) argue that this recent upsurge in women turn out is linked to rising literacy levels among women and the rapid spread of information

which enables more women to come out and participate in public life. They also argue that apart from literacy, rising high media exposure has led to a spread of information and greater awareness about rights and issues.

There has been a general overall well being for women and an unprecedented 86 percent women in 2010 had said that women's security had improved in the state. This not only facilitated but also gave them opportunities for education and employment. An improved law and order situation probably generates a conducive scenario for greater participation of women in public affairs.

Conclusion

After reading through the data, one can presume that higher women turn out in Bihar is not a solitary phenomenon but this upsurge has been taking place across the country. While overcoming the gender gap is a landmark achievement in the larger process of democratization, one should not over read it. Nitish Kumar won the 2010 election due to the high popularity that he commanded among his electorate, the overall satisfaction with governance measures and improved law and order situation in Bihar. During the last five years he has come up with various other schemes for women like reservation in the recruitment of police constables etc. Historically women have never been a separate political category whose vote depends on different dynamics. They are equally influenced by other socio political regional dynamics. Even in the upcoming election, it is highly unlikely that women would emerge as a separate political bloc.

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