

Can affirmative action improve gender parity in India? The case of mukhiyapatis in Bihar

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Apurv Chauhan argues that patriarchal expectations undermine the political empowerment of women at the local government level in Bihar.

The political empowerment of women in India has been much emphasised and in 2009 women received a [50 per cent reservation](#) in *panchayats*. A *panchayat* is an ingenious form of local governance in India that aims to make democratic decision-making a local activity. The head of a *panchayat* (*the mukhiya*) is an elected representative who serves a term in office with a respectable budget to spend on local developmental projects. Needless to say, in the poorest regions of the country, becoming a *mukhiya* is a ticket to quick prosperity—the accompanying rise in social status is a bonus.



When half the *mukhiya* positions in the country were reserved, women not only received a greater presence on the political landscape but also had a greater role to play in local decision-making. Despite such initiatives, the notions of patriarchy remain firmly ingrained and keep women marginalised. This post is based on my recent field experience in the state of Bihar between March and September 2013. I intentionally keep this entry anecdotal with sporadic theoretical contemplations—the intention is to present some observations and invite a discussion on the inherent issues.

The month of March is wonderfully pleasant in the Gangatic flood plains of Bihar, as life emerges from chilly winters and embraces sunshine. I was in a small village in northern Bihar on an ethnographic field visit. I spent nearly six months living in the community, encountering *mukhiyapatis* and *mukhiyaputras* – literally, these translate to the husband of the *mukhiya* and the son of the *mukhiya*, respectively – for the first time.

As a part of my fieldwork, I wanted to contact the *mukhiya* of the *panchayat* and brief him/her of the purpose and the scope of my work. During my initial visits to the village, commemorative plaques informed me that Mrs Sita Devi was the *mukhiya* (all the names in this post have been changed). Hoping to learn more about the village from her, I visited the *panchayat bhawan* where she supposedly held ‘office’, only to find it locked. To find the *mukhiya* absent wasn’t completely unexpected so I decided to persist and visit her at her home.

It was a relatively warm morning for March and a group of youngsters were playing marbles under the shade of a

large banyan tree outside the *panchayat bhawan*. I approached them and asked for directions to Devi's house. I wasn't surprised when they asked me if I knew who her husband was, for it is very common in the cultural setup of rural Bihar for a woman to be known only through her husband. But this wasn't just any woman I was looking for—it was the *mukhiya* I was after. So I persisted and explained that I was looking for Sita Devi, the *mukhiya*. But that query too was of no avail. So I then approached a man working in the nearby fields and asked him for directions to the house of Sita Devi, the *mukhiya*. He was clearly amused by the question and, while tugging his *pagdi*, asked me what village I had come looking for. After I satisfied him that I knew which village I was in, he told me that he did not know anything about a Sita Devi, and that the *mukhiya* of his village was Ram Kishore. It was at this point that I began to suspect that something other than a mere ignorance of the *mukhiya*'s name was at play, but I controlled the desire to ask this kind man further questions.

Later that day, at the village's lively teashop, I gently pushed the question to a conversant group of peasants: Who is the *mukhiya* of the village? Back came the resounding and unanimous reply that it was Ram Kishore. During the course of this conversation, I learnt that Kishore is Devi's husband—what I later found district bureaucrats referring to as a *mukhiyapati*. These *mukhiyapatis* raised interesting questions for me, and in the sections that follow I intend to explore some of these with the inclination of making use of the social psychological theories that I work with.

The fundamental question that these *mukhiyapatis* present is, whither women representatives in local governance? A satisfactory answer to that question requires scholarship that I do not possess so I would rather engage in a related question that bears more on the social psychological side of affairs: what sustains this phenomena in the local context of the village? In the six months I spent in the village, I did not see anything that would suggest the villagers found it odd that Kishore was acting as their *mukhiya*. Local bureaucrats were equally at ease with *mukhiyapatis* and one of them even suggested to me during a casual off-the-record conversation that the government should consider formalising *mukhiyapatis* so as to streamline things.

Clearly, the concept of the *mukhiyapati* is well integrated in the local knowledge system. In his theory of social representations that makes sense of how society creates, maintains, develops, and evolves its knowledge system, Serge Moscovici argues that society tends to familiarise any novelty as and when it appears. It can be argued that a novelty was introduced when the local constituency that I was in was randomly reserved for female representation. This particular village had never seen a female *mukhiya* before. Now that it was mandatory to have one, some realignment in the knowledge system was necessary, and the simplest strategy was to have the prospective male leaders engage in their usual electoral slugfest behind the masks of their wives or mothers. The women involved knew that their husband or sons were contesting the elections and the villagers knew that they were voting for these men—all while the Indian government could reap laurels for its efforts to promote gender parity. (Incidentally, this phenomenon played out on a larger scale in the political landscape of Bihar many years ago: in July 1997, the chief minister of Bihar, Laloo Prasad Yadav, stepped down from his seat as a consequence of corruption charges while his wife, Rabri Devi, took his place as the first female chief minister of the state. Related news reports [here](#) and [here](#).)

This dynamic may not be true in every case of a *mukhiyapati* across India. Nevertheless, I would like to present this field observation with a leading question. Paulo Freire in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* considers the first step in the long path of social change to be a heightened awareness of the injustices that prevail. Similarly, here at LSE, Professor Catherine Campbell and her colleagues [argue](#) that social change calls upon a willingness of the oppressed to seek change. Given the [apparent acceptance](#) of the *mukhiyapatis* in several parts of India, is affirmative action by the government a sufficient step toward gender parity in India?

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P.S. This blog entry derives from a stimulating conversation I had with my father, Dr Ashok Kumar. He is the best social scientist that we lost to the discipline of medicine.

