

The Economy and Society of Bihar during Early Twentieth Century: A Historical Analysis

Dr. Ashok Kumar Singh,
Associate Professor,
Dyal Singh College (Eve.),
University of Delhi.

Bihar, with its rich and the valuable legacy that history has bequeathed to its people, a state paradoxically rich and poor at the same time where the process of non-performance and inaction has made deep inroads, occupies an important place in any scheme of study concerning socio-economic changes in our society. It is precisely in this context that some of the features of *Biharisociety* demand special attention. First, it was extremely dependent on agriculture as a means of livelihood and carried on its shoulders the dead weight of centuries of economic stagnation. Second, it was one of the states where the dominance of a few landowning communities was clearly discernible. Finally, it underwent a severe dislocation of existing socio-economic relations during the colonial period.

In terms of its land tenure system, Bihar was a permanently settled zamindari area. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the economy of Bihar remained more rural and agrarian in character than that of the country as a whole. The occupational pattern of the state also indicated the same. Over 80 percent of the state working force was engaged in agriculture. Nevertheless, low productivity due to uneconomic size of average land holding characterized the agricultural scene in Bihar. Inadequate irrigation facilities further aggravated the situation by making much of agriculture dependent on the vagaries of the monsoon and primitive methods of farming.¹

Several other scholars have corroborated the above arguments and have drawn similar findings. Girish Mishra and Braj Kumar Pandey have rightly pointed out some additional facts and argue that the state of Bihar was neglected by the British because of its active role in the 1857 uprising and the recruitment to the army from the province remained minimal.² They have further observed that because of the above factors the remittances from the army to the villages

¹ See Prasad, Kedar Nath, *The Economics of a Backward Region in a Backward Economy: A Case Study of Bihar in Relation to other States of India*, Vol. 1, Scientific Book Agency, Calcutta, 1967, pp. 146-216.

² Mishra Girish and Braj Kumar Pandey, *Rammanohar Lohia and His Thinking*, Delhi, 2002, pp. 176-180.

were not sufficient to fulfil the cash demands of the peasant households in any substantial manner.³Not only that, the people from Bihar were also at the receiving end during the British Raj as far as getting government jobs were concerned.

It has been established substantially by methodical research that India's agricultural production and organization underwent fundamental and far-reaching changes during the colonial rule. Because of their ignorance of the Indian land holding system, the British Raj, influenced by its own ideas borrowed from the mother country, introduced new forms of land tenures as a result of which peasants in Bihar were deprived of their secure hold over the lands they had been tilling for generations.⁴ Not only that, they were subjected to perpetual danger of dispossession, rent enhancement and several other kinds of legal and illegal recoveries. It was due to this atmosphere of insecurity and uncertainty that peasants could not make any investments in agriculture.⁵In Bihar, the rights and privileges of the common cultivator were completely ignored. At the same time, neither the government nor the Zamindars had any incentive to improve the provision of facilities for irrigation, drainage and flood control. Mishra and Pandey observed that till the first three decades of the 20th century, there was no significant large scale or medium scale industrial units in Bihar with the capacity to influence the economy of the state.⁶ The colonial economic policies were influenced by imperial considerations which adversely affected the growth of traditional handicrafts and trades. Both had declined drastically and further aggravated the unemployment situation in the non-agricultural sectors.

With the passage of time it became evidently explicit that the first sector of the Indian economy to undergo colonial transformation was agriculture. The purpose was to maximize land revenue and to ensure adequate supply of raw materials. Unlike the preceding regimes, the British assessed land revenue on the land rather than on the crop actually produced and under most forms of revenue settlements revenue went on increasing from year to year. The basic source of state revenue was land tax and even in 1900 land revenue contributed more than one-third of the total revenues. It entailed growing tax burden on the peasantry leading to progressive

³ Ibid.,

⁴ Ibid.,

⁵ Ibid.,

⁶ Ibid., (TISCO being an exception but could not make any substantial impact on the economy of the state).

impoverishment of the country. As a result, large numbers of people were forced to live a life of destitution and misery.⁷

Bihar remained as before predominantly agricultural, with over 70 percent of the population deriving its livelihood from cultivation of land. Girish Mishra further points out that even after the establishment of the sugar mills during the 1930s in certain parts of the state, the proportion of the earning population dependent on agriculture went up from 78.7 percent in 1931 to 87.3 percent in 1951.⁸ In fact, up to the middle of the 20th century, the economy of the state was overwhelmingly rural, dependence on land was increasing, agricultural productivity was stagnating and there was a complete absence of rapid industrialization. Land and its ownership remained the primary economic resource.

Over the centuries, the upper castes of Brahmans, Bhumihaar Brahmans, Rajputs and Kayasthas although numerically not large, had established their ritual superiority and social prestige throughout the province. Their dominance in Bihar life was much greater than their number would suggest. Ramashray Roy has argued that the numerical weakness of the upper castes is more than compensated by their ritual status, social prestige and economic power.⁹

In a predominantly agrarian society where land remained the primary economic resource and thus formed the most important source of economic power itself. The ownership of the land in the state, to a large extent, was concentrated in the hands of the upper castes who thereby dominated the economic field. B.B. Mishra has observed that this was mainly due to historical facts.¹⁰ The lower castes, on the other hand, depended for their livelihood on farm labour. Ramashray Roy is of the view that the economic position of a particular caste is highly co-related with its ritual status in the caste hierarchy.¹¹ He has further drawn our attention to the fact that the economic inequality reflected in land-ownership had its repercussions in other fields as

⁷ Bagchi, Kumar Amiya, *Private Investment in India, 1900-1939*, CUP, 1972, p. 26; Irfan Habib, "Colonization of the Indian Economy", *Social Scientist*, Vol. III, No. 8, March 1975, pp. 28-29.

⁸ Mishra and Pandey, *op. cit.*,

⁹ Roy, Ramashray, "Caste and Political Recruitment in Bihar", in Rajni Kothari (ed.), *Caste in Indian Politics*, Orient Longman, Delhi, 1970, p. 229.

¹⁰ Mishra, B.B. *The Indian Middle Classes: Their Growth in Modern Times*, OUP, London, 1961, p. 55

¹¹ Roy, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

well.¹² The upper castes were the first to take advantage of new opportunities in various fields which were created as a result of contact with the outside world. In respect of literacy and English education, the Kayasthas excelled all other communities and were followed by Brahmans, Bhumihars and Rajputs.¹³ The lower castes, on the other hand, were left far behind and the gap between the two was very wide.¹⁴

Thus, the Brahmans, Bhumihar Brahmans, Rajputs and Kayasthas who constituted the upper zamindari castes of Bihar and they consisted of big as well as small landlords, rich and middle peasants. The Ahirs, Kurmis and Koeris were the tenant and agricultural castes. The untouchable (especially the *chamars* and the *Dusadhs*) castes were at the lowest rung of the social ladder and the main suppliers of menial and agricultural labour. But while we differentiate between upper, middle and low-status groups, what is important as pointed out by Gyan Pandey, is that we must bear in mind the distinctions made by the members of the local society themselves.¹⁵ What has been observed in the context of the Bhojpuri region appears to be almost applicable to the whole of Bihar. The basic social division in the region as perceived at least by the locally dominant elements, Pandey writes, was that between the *Sharif* (or the respectable classes) and the *Razil* (or labouring people).¹⁶ The former comprised the Brahmans, Bhumihars, Rajputs and Kayasthas. All the rest- from the Ahirs, Kurmis and Koeris, to the unclean labouring castes, Chamars and the like-were classified as *Razils*.¹⁷

One sign of a community's *Razils* status was the fact that a far larger number of its women went out to work than among the *Sharif*.¹⁸ In other words, while at the bottom level of the rural hierarchy women do both intra-mural and extra-mural work, the latter being paid for while the

¹² Ibid.,

¹³ For literacy in certain castes, see Lacey, N.G., *Census of India, 1931*, vol. VII, Bihar and Orissa, Part I Report, Patna, 1933, p. 217.

¹⁴ Ibid.,

¹⁵ Gyan, Pandey, "Rallying Round the Cow: Sectarian Strife in Bhojpuri Region, 1888-1917, in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *South Asian History and Society*, OUP, Delhi, 1983, p. 71.

¹⁶ Ibid.,

¹⁷ Ibid., Although Pandey has included both Muslim as well as Hindu castes of *Sharif* and *Razil* in his description, for our convenience we are applying his views only in the context of Hindu castes with which we are concerned in this study.

¹⁸ Ibid.,

former is not, immurement of women characterizes the top level.¹⁹ Thus in Bihar in 1911, whereas there were but 8 female workers to every 100 male workers among the Babhans, the numbers were 52 among the Kurmis and 54 among Ahirs.²⁰ Gyan Pandey has pointed out that it was the implication of social inferiority in the term *Razil* that appears especially to have aroused the resentment of the certain of the lower orders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.²¹ He has further elaborated his views and remarked that with the advance of impersonal market forces, bureaucratic procedures and law courts, many of these resentments found expression in the form of social mobility movements for caste uplift and the assertion of self-respect in the face of Zamindari and more generally, what Pandey calls, *Sharif* oppression.²²

Thus the concentration of superior ritual status, economic resources, and educational and other modern skills in the hands of the upper castes created a condition of cumulative inequality and seriously restricted the avenues of social mobility for the lower castes. Under the impact of colonial rule which opened up new vistas of upward mobility and the working of democratic institutions, although limited, the legitimacy of the traditional system of social stratification came to be challenged. The dissatisfaction against the then existing social order prompted the underprivileged caste groups to seek the redressal of their grievances through organized action. It is here that the activities of the caste associations and the impact of modern politics motivated these sections of the society to raise banner of revolt against upper caste domination and reclaim their rightful place.

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¹⁹ Srinivas, M.N., *The Changing Position of Indian Women*, OUP, Delhi, 1978, pp. 12-13.

²⁰ O' Molley, L.S.S., *Census of India, 1911*, Vol. V, Bengal, Bihar & Orissa & Sikkim Part 1, Calcutta, 1913a, pp. 576-80.

²¹ Pandey, *op .cit.*,

²² *Ibid.*, pp.71-72

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