

# Chronic Poverty and Social Conflict in Bihar

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## **1. Introduction**

Chronic poverty trends cannot be examined without considering the impact of various social conflicts afflicting a region. It is true that all forms of poverty cannot be explained by conflicts as much as all conflicts cannot be attributed to poverty. But, in many economically backward states, poverty and conflict have largely a two-way relationship; poverty is both a cause and consequence of conflict.

There is a broad consensus on the definition of chronic poverty as severe deprivation of basic human needs over an extended period of time. But there is no unanimity as to what constitutes the basic needs. Over a period of time, the 'basic needs' has expanded to encompass not only food, water, shelter and clothing, but access to other assets such as education, health, participation in political process, security and dignity. Those who are chronically poor are poor in several ways and often suffer multi-dimensional poverty - food scarcity; lack of resources to send their children to school or provide health care for the sick (Hulme, Moore and Shepherd 2005).

Conflict is a struggle, between individuals or collectivities over values or claims to status, power and scarce resources in which the aims of the conflicting parties are to assert their values or claims over those of others (Goodhand and Hulme 1999: 14).

## 2. The Poverty-Conflict Interface

On the face of it, poverty and conflict are different phenomena that plague society, but in reality, there is a close relationship between the two. Those who dismiss the link between poverty and conflict generally argue that poverty may lead to conflict when other factors are present; it is not a sufficient condition. According to Nelson (1998), “The precise links between economic grievances and ethnic conflicts are elusive, variable and strongly conditioned by a wide-range of non-economic factors. Nelson cites the works of specialists in conflicts and relevant headings of some of their works which are dismissive of poverty-conflict linkages; Walker Connor (1994) writes about “The Seductive Lure of Economic Explanation,” while McGarry and O’Leary (1998) in their work on Northern Ireland label their discussion “Mammon and Utility: Liberal Economic Reasoning.”

Esman’s (1994, cited in Draman 2003: 8) view is quite emphatic:

“To argue that the Israeli-Palestinian struggle is basically about economic values, or that the Quiet Revolution is mainly about employment opportunities for educated Quebecois or that Malays are concerned primarily with closing the economic gap (with the Chinese in Malay) utterly trivializes and distorts the meaning and the stakes of these conflicts.”

He also argues that:

“Strong economic expansion in Canada in the 1960s aroused high expectation from the people of Quebec thereby exacerbating conflict, yet recession in the late 1970s raised doubts about Quebec’s ability to survive as a nation thereby dampening the quest for separation. Similarly, two decades of accelerated growth in Malaysia did not reduce ethnic tension in that country” (cited in Draman 2003: 8).

He notes “the conditions under which economic distress exacerbates conflict and economic growth mitigates conflict are less apparent” (cited in Draman 2003: 8).

Cramer (2001) and Justino (2001), cited in Draman (2003) argue that the effort to establish a link between poverty and conflict has been undermined by the inappropriate comparisons between countries based on cross-sectional analyses. “One of Cramer’s key arguments is that in trying to understand the role of inequality in the production of civil conflict one of the most significant obstacles is the poor quality and

weak comparability of the data. On this basis, Cramer questions the confidence in any alleged general pattern linking inequality with obvious economic or political outcomes” Draman (2003: 8).

However, there are a number of theoretical and empirical studies that have established the link between poverty and conflict. Proponents of Frustration-Aggression theory “suggest that individuals become aggressive when there are obstacles (perceived and real) to their success in life” (Van de Good *et. al.* 1996, cited in Draman 2003: 8).

Closely associated with the Frustration-Aggression theory is the Relative Deprivation theory, which stresses that sometimes people perceive themselves to be deprived in relation to others and this perception creates inter-group hostility. This often happens when conditions improve more slowly for one group than for another (Draman 2003: 9).

Draman (2003) sees the relevance of these theories in discussing the relationship between poverty and conflict in Africa. However they can equally be applied to backward states in India, for as he points out, “with poor governance structures and unequal access and distribution of economic resources, some segments of the population tend to have better opportunities than others. This inevitably alters power relations and in turn leads to the persistence of poverty amongst certain groups with very serious consequences for social stability. When people perceive that poverty as being inflicted on them, then the frustration-aggression thesis becomes relevant in understanding why men rebel.”

Some other studies suggest that social conflicts in the developing world are fuelled by greed and opportunities for looting the resources of the state rather than grievance (Collier 1999, cited in Draman 2003: 9).

A close look at the developments worldwide would reveal that there is a very high correlation between poverty and conflict Draman (2003: 11). Many analysts believe that the participants in many of Africa’s violent demonstrations in recent years have been moved by the poor economic conditions under which they live. Copson (1991, cited in Draman 2003: 11), for instance, argues “when guerillas join a rebel group, they may obtain food and clothing as well as opportunities for recognition and advancement that are normally unavailable to them in an urban slum or a farming community.” This seems to be happening “in West Africa, where numerous rebel movements have become sources of opportunity for unemployed young men.”

Many analysts have clearly demonstrated how conflict is linked to poverty in a variety of ways (see Stewart and Fitzgerald 2001; The African Development Bank 1998-2000).

Draman (2003: 5) notes that “there is a lot of disagreement about the specific relationship between poverty and conflict. While one school of thought thinks that poverty causes conflict, the other school of thought argues that only the reverse is true. Admittedly, the relationship between poverty and conflict is blurred. I argue that poverty is both a cause and a consequence of conflict. The relationship is two-way: poverty leads to conflict and vice versa.”

While the need to address poverty and social conflict within a unified analytical framework is firmly established, the conceptual refinements have not taken place yet. There could be many reasons. The concept note on Poverty and Conflict (PAC) Programme (2005) at the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA), Sri Lanka provides one explanation:

“In the past, international development co-operation tended to maintain a hands-off attitude towards social conflict. This was partly in view of the sensitive nature of social conflict. It also stemmed from conceptual distinction and institutional separation between humanitarian aid/relief and development assistance. This hands-off attitude towards social conflict and firmly rooted dichotomy between relief and development assistance has increasingly been challenged both in social theory and development practice.

While a consensus appears to be developing among various actors involved in development programmes regarding the need to address poverty and conflict within a unified analytical/ intervention framework, such a unified network is yet to be developed. Tools such as Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment are still in an early stage of development.”

This paper on poverty-conflict interface in Bihar draws upon field experience and a few specific case studies. It analyses the causes of the caste-class churning in a larger historical perspective; presents the current state of the poverty-conflict interface in Bihar; and then provides suggestions to address the issues and concerns emerging out of this discussion.

### **3. Poverty in Bihar: A Statistical View**

If poverty is defined as deprivation of basic human needs – food, safe drinking water, sanitation, health services, shelter and education – then more than two-third of Bihar’s population would be subsumed under this category. Official statistics tell part of the story. Bihar has the lowest literacy rate in the country. Next to Orissa, Bihar has the highest percentage of people living below the poverty line. It has the lowest per capita income among the major states of India. “Bihar’s per capita income, which was about 60 per cent of the average for India during the early 1960s, declined to about 40 per cent in 1993-94 and further to 34 per cent in 1997-98” (Sharma 2005: 960). The growth rate of state domestic product for Bihar was just 2.69 per cent per annum from 1991-92 to 1997-98 compared with 6 per cent for all the major states of the country (Ahluwalia 2000, cited in Sharma 2005: 960).

While the population growth rate in India declined from 23.9 per cent during the 1980s to 21.3 per cent during the 1990s, corresponding estimates for Bihar increased from 23.4 per cent to 28.4 per cent during the same period. Consequently, the population density of Bihar stands at a high level of 880 as against 234 for the country as a whole (Sharma 2005: 960). In absolute terms, the number of those below the poverty line in Bihar is still among the highest; Bihar alone accounts for about one-fifth of the country’s rural poor.

#### ***3.1 Poverty in Bihar: Historical Context***

It is an oft-quoted cliché that Bihar is a land of riches inhabited by mostly poor people. The large Gangetic plain with its fertile soil, the huge water resources available from a multitude of rivers that flow through the region and the hard-working human resource of the state ought to have ensured the status of the truncated Bihar (minus Jharkhand which was the industrial powerhouse of the undivided state) as the agricultural bowl of India.

Unfortunately, Bihar is today a land of misery and poverty where agriculture has turned out to be a loss-making proposition. The result is a mass exodus of hundreds of thousands of people who earned their livelihood from agricultural land.

Why have things come to such a pass? We can find some answers in the history of last two centuries.

### *Colonial period*

Bihar's tragedy can be traced to the British period when it was at the periphery of the Bengal presidency. Introduction of the Permanent Settlement meant that the Zamindars were given the right to collect rent, the revenue demand being fixed at nine-tenths of the rent to be collected. Although the revenue payable was fixed, exorbitant rent extraction by subordinate agents, the '*raiyyats*', meant that the tiller was barely able to subsist. That explains why the peasants of Bihar were abysmally poor (*ibid*: 961).

In 1883, a Member raised the issue of dire poverty of peasants of Bihar in the House of Commons of England. The question was: Has the Minister in charge of India seen the 'Notes on District of Gaya' prepared by a Bengal Civil Service Officer, Mr Grierson? The report says that if a man and his wife worked round the year, they would earn barely forty one rupees and twelve annas. If they are a family of four, it works out to 10 rupees and 7 annas per person per year. This is almost 30 per cent less than Rupees 15 that Mr Grierson thinks is the least one needs to fulfill the barest minimum needs of life. Does the Minister know that most of the landless labourers of Gaya go without proper clothes and two square meals a day? Has the Minister cared to probe the condition of poor peasants in other districts?' (Grierson 1926, cited in Choudhary and Shrikant 2001: 100-101).

The Minister furnished a reply submitted by Mr. C.J. Moore (ICS), Settlement Officer of Gaya: 'Situation of Bihar is different from Bengal. People here can make do with very little. So an income of Rupees 15 a year is deemed to be much more than what a Bihari *raiyyat* needs, whereas this amount would be much less than what a Bengali *raiyyat* requires for his basic subsistence' (Choudhary and Shrikant 2001: 101-102).

It is quite evident that Bihar received step-motherly treatment from the colonial masters. While most of the capital investments were made in Bengal, Bihar was systematically denuded of its resources. There were many Biharis who did not directly eke a living out of the agricultural land, but were engaged in different subsidiary activities such as rural handicrafts. British rulers systematically destroyed the occupation of rural artisans of Bihar by flooding the market with cheaper machine-made products manufactured in the metropolitan centres. That explains why, even in the early twentieth century, many jobless artisans of Bihar headed towards Calcutta in search of employment (Sharma 2005: 962).

Their trials and tribulations have been vividly depicted in many novels and short stories of the period.

The statistics of migration from Bihar are alarming. According to 1921 census, whereas 4,22,000 people came to Bihar, 19,17,000 went out of Bihar. Most of them went to Calcutta (and some to Assam tea gardens) where monthly income varied between Rs. 15 and Rs. 20 (Census 1921, cited in Choudhary and Shrikant 2001: 23-24). Because of these migrants, the foundation of money order economy in Bihar was laid in the nineteenth century. In 1887, Rs. 7,22,070 came to Gaya by money order (Choudhary and Shrikant 2001: 25). In 1896-97, the remittances to the Muzaffarpur district alone accounted for Rs. 15 lakh, which increased to Rupees 34 lakh in 1910. In 1911, Saran district received Rs. 51 lakh through money order. For the whole of Bihar, money order remittances were as high as Rs. 4.21 crore in 1915, which increased to Rs. 6.66 crore in 1920 (*ibid*).

The migration was not limited to Calcutta or Assam alone. Many went as far away as Fiji and Mauritius. During 1910-11, the colonial government recruited 11,676 people for indentured labour in these islands; out of them more than half were from Bihar and 3,473 were from the erstwhile Shahbad district alone (*ibid*). Many of those who did not migrate were left with no option but to take a loan for subsistence from the land-owning class, which they were never able to return even in the long run, due to their being heavily in debt. This led to a system of informal bondage that tied the cultivator to the landowner for the rest of his life.

#### *Post-colonial Bihar: Congress Era (1947-89)*

Even after independence, undivided Bihar could not benefit from its rich mineral resources (in the Jharkhand region) because of the freight equalization policy of the Government of India which fixed the rate of raw materials for industrial establishments across the country, without any special benefits for the state where the mineral deposits existed. So the state of Bihar could not leverage its locational advantage.

Politically, Bihar has been bereft of leaders who had the vision to set the state on the path of development. Successive chief ministers of the state, with rare exceptions, indulged in caste politics. This may have something to do with the fact that - as some scholars argue - Bihar, unlike Bengal and Orissa, did not undergo any social reform movement

(Renaissance) and therefore, caste remained the *raison d'etre* of political and social life in the state.

If the caste leaders would have tried to improve the lot of their own caste groups, then the condition of a large section of Biharis would have been much better as politicians from different castes – high, middle and low – have occupied the seat of power in the state at different times. But the caste leaders spawned a coterie of caste followers who became rich and powerful, while letting most of their caste brethren languish in poverty. That is why what we see today is a creamy layer in every caste group, which enjoys political and economic power, while the vast multitudes of the same caste groups continue to wallow in misery.

#### **4. Poverty-Social Conflict Interface in Bihar**

If historical and political factors largely accounted for Bihar's slide into poverty, socio-economic factors were no less responsible for this. Caste conflicts in Bihar have been an endemic factor, more so because historically, there has been caste-class congruence in the state. Upper castes have been traditionally the land-owning castes and the lower castes the marginal farmers. The Scheduled Castes, the ex-untouchables, are invariably the landless agricultural labourers.

##### *Colonial Phase*

Bihar has a history of agrarian tension dating back to the British period. The colonial government had introduced different systems of cess collection from agricultural produce. As we discussed earlier, in Bihar, the *Zamindari* system proved to be the most oppressive. The erstwhile *Zamindars* not only drove the small and marginal farmers into abysmal poverty but also indulged in flagrant sexual exploitation. The social outcastes were hardly in a position to organise themselves to take on the oppressors, but the poor in upper and middle castes did sometimes rise in revolt, though with sporadic success (Sharma 2005).

In fact, the foundation of the organised *raiyat* resistance movement against oppressive *Zamindari* system was laid by the then respected leader of Bhumihar Brahmins, Swami Sahajanand Saraswati. Incidentally, he represented the aspirations of largely *raiyats* belonging to Bhumihar castes and the resistance movement was directed mostly at Bhumihar landlords. The Bihar Pradesh Kisan Sabha, founded by Saraswati, did not raise radical demands; all that it asked for was to



abolish the tax on purchase or sale of lands and reduce the revenue demands on the big *raiyats* and similar issues that reflected the concerns of relatively better-off sections of the peasantry (*ibid.* 963).

Clearly, Saraswati was catering to the needs of his limited constituency. But the fact that for the first time he set in motion the process of protest against the entrenched *Zamindar* class, howsoever muted, was to act as a harbinger for a series of agrarian unrests to follow. In fact, Saraswati himself became a protagonist for radical agrarian reforms in the years to come.

Just as the upper caste *raiyats* rose in revolt to extenuate the oppressive revenue demands of *Zamindars*, the middle caste peasant groups also began to organise themselves against their social and sexual oppression. Over a period of time, the social movement unleashed by these middle caste groups transformed into a peasant movement.

However, all these movements did not address the issues and concerns of the most exploited sections of the villages – the landless and marginalised peasants who continued to remain voiceless and on the fringes of the society.

#### *Post-colonial phase: Era of Congress hegemony (1947-89)*

In independent India, with the abolition of the *Zamindari* system (Bihar was the first state in the country to do away with this colonial legacy), and implementation of the Land Ceiling Act, economic repression officially came to an end, but not the economic plight of the poor. Bihar was a classic example of tardy implementation of Land Ceiling and Tenancy Acts. Although a fairly large number of tenants having occupancy rights in land got title to the land in the wake of *Zamindari* abolition and subsequent implementation of Land Ceiling Acts, hundreds of thousands of sharecroppers were evicted from the land in their possession, and they were driven to the brink of penury (Jannuzi 1974).

Their case was taken up by the Communist Party of India which waged a few agrarian struggles, the most notable among them being the Sathi Farms Struggle in Champaran. There were also attempts to launch a separate agricultural labourers' movement for higher wage demands as well as for protecting the sharecroppers' rights. The sharecroppers of Purnea district, many of them tribals community, waged struggles against their eviction, by the landlords, from the tenanted land. Though the impact of these struggles was localised and limited in so far as the

economic rewards were concerned, it brought about a new consciousness among the peasantry in Bihar (Sharma 2005: 964).

Jannuzi (1974, cited in Sharma 2005: 964-965), visited some of the villages in 1950s and 60s, captured the changing scenario vividly:

“The people in these villages have been transformed, gradually over 14 years. Where once the physical, social and economic structure in these villages had been accepted as datum by the people, there was by 1968 a new capacity for even the lowest in the traditional hierarchy, the landless labourers, to articulate the need for change and to become agents for change... The inarticulate were becoming articulate, many villagers, landless and landholders alike, who earlier had referred to the immutability of their condition, were prepared in 1968 to cry out in protest against the circumstances that denied them the ability to provide the barest necessities for their children. In 1968 their expressions of anger were diffused. Their ability either to assess blame or to scapegoat any individual faction or group was limited. Yet, they were in the process of repudiating their traditional life styles and it seemed only a matter of time before a leadership would emerge to give focus to the newly articulated feeling of anger among them.”

Jannuzi's (1974) words proved prophetic. Some Naxal groups professing faith in Maoist ideology found fertile ground to start working in some parts of the state. “With the mounting frustration of poor peasants, more and more areas came under the hold of the Naxalbari type movement..... It is today strongest in the south Bihar, which, coincidentally also happens to be the region where the Kisan Sabha movement of the pre-independence days was at its peak” (Sharma 2005: 965).

This has certainly exacerbated social conflict in the countryside. How has they affected the poverty syndrome in the state?

### **5. Poverty and Conflict in Post-Mandal Bihar: Impressions based on Interviews in the Field**

Since poverty-conflict interface in Bihar is closely reflected in the caste animosities, we sought to identify villages where different caste groups (high, middle and low) were victims of massacres.

We surveyed (a) two villages where upper caste Bhumihars were killed by Naxalites, who claimed to represent largely the oppressed

Scheduled Castes, (b) one village where 59 persons who were Scheduled Castes were massacred by Ranvir Sena, which proclaimed itself as an armed Bhumihar outfit, (c) another village where the poverty-stricken Scheduled Castes are pitted against the prosperous intermediate castes, (d) one village where two powerful intermediate castes are at loggerheads, and finally, (e) a village where Muslims and Yadavs, political allies, are engaged in a hostile economic relationship.

### ***5.1 Bara and Senari: Upper castes as victims of Naxal menace***

Bara village is near Tekari block in Gaya district and Senari is in Arwal (the then Jehanabad) district. Bara was the village where one of the first Naxal-inspired massacre of about 40 landowners belonging to Bhumihar community had taken place in 1992. Senari was also a village where upper caste Bhumihars were killed by the Naxalites seven years later. How have the villages coped since then?

In both these villages, the massacre was carried out by the Naxal groups. Though the Scheduled Castes had nothing to do with the killers, they were at the receiving end of the wrath of the upper castes. The logic was that the Naxalites represented the aspirations of the Scheduled Castes. The huts, in which these poorest sections of the society lived for years, were demolished and they were forced to leave the villages. Their forcible eviction must have led to the loss of livelihood and suffering, as the neighbouring villages were not prepared to accommodate the displaced persons.

The condition of many of the Bhumihar households, which suffered because of the massacre, has also worsened. The surviving members of the families got the compensation package (cash and one job for each family) announced by the government. The bereaved families in Bara also got financial help from many international agencies as it was the first massacre by Naxalites in Bihar on such a large scale and therefore received worldwide attention. By the time the Senari massacre took place, it had lost news value for the media, both international and national.

A problem faced by many families was that since all the male members of the family had died, the jobs were offered to the women. Traditionally, the women of the upper caste Bhumihar family never went outside the home to work. Many of these women could not accept the idea of doing menial work. Since they were not educated, they could be offered only class IV jobs in offices. Some who mustered the courage

to take up jobs to earn a livelihood found, to their dismay, that either they had to travel far away from their villages everyday or else take accommodation near the workplace. It was a difficult choice for most of these home-bound women, who also had the responsibility of looking after their minor children. The net result was that many of them had to forego the job.

Some of these families also faced problems of another kind. Since most of the Bhumihar adult males present at the time of the massacre had been killed (Naxalites, as a policy, do not kill minors or women), there was no one to look after their land. Many unscrupulous elements – some relatives who lived in towns and in some cases the newly emergent landlords belonging to the middle castes - took control of the property without providing any financial support. Since most of these households are dependent on land for their survival, they are barely able to make both ends meet.

### ***5.2 Laxmanpur-Bathe: Scheduled Castes as victims of upper caste militia***

Laxmanpur-Bathe in the erstwhile Jehanabad district (present Arwal district) was in the international limelight in 1996 due to an upper caste-sponsored massacre of 59 men, women and children belonging to Scheduled Caste families. In many cases, the entire family was wiped out as Ranveer Sena, a largely Bhumihar outfit, which was responsible for the tragedy, did not believe in discrimination on the ground of age or gender. So there was no one close left to suffer the consequences of the tragedy. But in some families, a few members survived. Unfortunately many of them did not get jobs as promised by the government, though they received the financial compensation.

The Bihar Government claimed to represent the ideology of social justice and aspirations of the backward castes and classes. In fact, the ruling dispensation was at loggerheads with upper castes, especially Bhumihars who had taken an uncompromisingly hostile stance against the party in power. How was it that the victimised Bhumihar families managed to procure jobs from this government but not the victimised Scheduled Caste families? “Bhumihars managed the jobs because they had influential voices in the corridors of power, but the Scheduled Castes couldn’t because they had no one to pursue their case,” said Arvind Kumar, a practising lawyer and human rights activist.

The District Magistrate was not in a position to provide a copy of the Action Taken Report on Bathe massacre as the case was old and

was handled by my predecessors'. The Home Secretary who himself was new to the job also did not have any information about the number of jobs provided to the victims.

### ***5.3 Kurumuri: Naxal interface between Upper Castes and Scheduled Castes***

This is a village, which has not been witness to a large-scale massacre, but one where the social tension is palpable. Located at a distance of 10 kms from Piro block in Bhojpur district, it is a Bhumihar-dominated village but with a sizeable middle castes. The CPI-ML (Liberation) has a very strong influence in the region, mostly over the agricultural labourers. Sporadic killings of rival groups, Bhumihar and Naxalite activists, have been an ongoing feature of the area.

CPI-ML activists have tried to take possession of the land owned by relatively big upper caste landowners (there are no big landlords anymore, as in most cases, property has been divided and sub-divided among members of the family who live separately in towns), but without much success because of the stiff resistance put up by the Bhumihar community. The frustrated Naxal activists then mobilised the lower caste labourers, to refuse to work in the upper caste landholdings in order to bring the landowners down on their knees.

This led to no cultivation for two consecutive years. As a result, both the landowners and labourers suffered. The labourers had to go out in search of work; landowners had to fall back upon other income for their survival. The landowners then tried to bring in agricultural labourers from the neighbouring villages; this was resisted by the Naxalites. Consequently, Bhumihar landowners also mobilised armed groups to provide protection to the hired labourers.

Sensing the financially crippling impact of the stalemate, both sides agreed to a compromise. As part of the deal, the CPI-ML undertook not to attempt to grab the land of upper caste landlords and the landowners promised to give substantially higher wages than before. The deal turned out to be beneficial to both.

Though the tension persists even now, both sides realize that each is dependent on the other and it is in neither's interest to subvert the working relationship. This realization has given the poor landless labourers a sense of dignity as well as substantial increase in the wage level. It is not as if they have come out of the grip of poverty, but it has ensured that they do not go to sleep without food.

#### ***5.4 Kamta: Hegemony of intermediate castes***

This is a village where the traditionally oppressed class is today pitted against the intermediate castes. This village is adjacent to Laxmanpur-Bathe. Bhumihars have been traditionally the biggest landowning castes here. But in the aftermath of the Bathe killings - in which several Bhumihar landowners of the village were accused - many of them chose to leave the village. Not surprisingly, intermediate castes have emerged as the dominant caste groups because of their financial muscle, numerical strength and political clout.

The landless poor in the village had been traditionally at the receiving end of the upper caste landowners, but since the upper caste groups are increasingly becoming absentee landlords (because of migration to urban areas) and their number is dwindling (as many of them are disposing of their land; and the middle caste groups are the main buyers of land), the newly emergent landlords like Yadavs, Kurmis and Koeris have replaced the upper castes as the new exploiters of the oppressed groups.

#### ***5.5 Badgaon: Yadavs vs Other Backward Castes***

This is a village, located about 40 kilometres from Tekari block in Gaya, where there is no presence of Naxalites. Bhumihars were the traditional dominant castes here, but they have lost their pre-eminent position to the intermediate caste groups. What is striking about this village is the turf war between the two major intermediate castes – Yadavs and Koeris – for positions of supremacy. This village is completely insulated from the influence of Naxalites of any hue – CPI-ML, MCC or People’s War. That is why, the landless poor have to suffer injustice silently.

A tale of woe narrated by a Scheduled Caste man of the village is given below. The buffalo of a Yadav landlord happened to graze in the poor farmer’s land in the night. It is a standard practice in the village for the strong to push their cattle into the poor man’s land. It ate some chemical-laced stuff (used for killing insects) left in the field and died. The landlord accused the poor farmer of leaving the deadly stuff in his field just to harm his cattle and asked the latter to pay Rs. 15,000 as compensation for his loss. As the poor man failed to pay the money, he was prevented from tilling his land. “Tell me, where is my fault? He should have been penalized in the first place for letting his cattle graze in my field. Instead, he is penalizing me. He has deprived me of my

livelihood. He is a powerful man. Whom do I turn to?" - he said with tears in his eyes.

It is clearly evident that the newly emergent intermediate caste landlords are fast emulating the feat of their upper caste counterparts.

### ***5.6 Line Bazar (Mirganj): Muslims vs Yadavs***

This village in Gopalganj district is dominated by Muslims and has a substantial population of Yadavs as well. Traditionally, Muslims and Yadavs had a hostile relationship. During the communal riots, Yadavs were in the forefront in taking on the Muslims. With the dawn of Muslim-Yadav synergy in the Laloo Prasad dispensation in Bihar, the violent conflict ceased, but the economic war continued.

During the Congress regime, Muslims had an upper hand in this village. In fact, they had taken over huge tracts of government land and used the premises for various business purposes. With the OBC power on display in the last 15 years, Yadavs took over the government land, illegally occupied by the Muslims earlier. "All our economic activities have come to a halt and we are virtually on the streets," says an aggrieved Muslim. They cannot move the police or the court (for whatever it is worth) because they are not legal owners of the land. Travelling through the village, one hears the anguish of the Muslim families against the Yadavs. But Yadavs are unfazed. "They had enjoyed the benefits of political power for long and we were mute witnesses. Now, it is our turn to enjoy the spoils of power," one of them says.

If Muslims have such strong grievances, why do they join hands with Yadavs when it comes to voting in the elections? "We have no option. If we do not vote with them, we will not be safe. We have suffered a lot in communal riots during the Congress regime. Our lives will remain secure so long as Yadavs don't turn against us," is the answer.

It is a paradoxical situation for poor Muslims in Bihar. They realize that their right to life is secure in the 'social justice' dispensation but not their right to livelihood.

### ***5.7 Bhoodan Land: Scheduled Castes as victims of upper and middle castes***

The Bhoodan movement, spearheaded by Acharya Binoba Bhave, collected huge tracts of land from big landowners. Thousands of acres of surplus land were distributed among the landless peasants. In fact,

many Scheduled Caste families became proud owners of landed property, thanks to the Bhoodan campaign.

How have they been affected by the social churning going on in the countryside?

In Dangra village in Mohanpur block in Gaya district, many members of the Bhuyan (Scheduled Caste) community have the Bhoodan land in their possession, but they live in constant fear that the land could be snatched away on some pretext or the other, as they do not possess the title-deeds for the same. They cite several instances to justify their threat perception. A member of their community got the Bhoodan land, but after his sudden death, the land was taken away by the very landlord who had donated it. The poor man's son was told that the descendants could not inherit Bhoodan land.

Another man in nearby Kohwari village had received the official papers that legitimised his occupation of the Bhoodan land, but the landlord who had donated it, on the pretext that his full and correct name had not been written on the document, prevented him from tilling the land. He was asked to get the mistake rectified by the appropriate authorities before he was given back his land.

In another case, in Rajauli in Nawada district, a man had possessed and tilled the Bhoodan land for 10 years, and became accustomed to the idea of being the landowner. But one morning, the original landowner told him that his father had donated the land when he had a lot of landed property. Now that they had very little land left, he had decided to take back the donated land. "He told me that you should be happy that you have enjoyed the benefits of the land for 10 years without investing a rupee," says the aggrieved farmer.

In Barachatti (Gaya), several recipients of Bhoodan land were in tears that their land had been snatched away by a newly emergent landlord who had muscle power, as well as political clout.

## **6. Poverty and Conflict in Bihar: An Analysis**

As discussed earlier, both poverty and conflict have been an integral part of Bihar's history. The question is how has the situation changed over the years? Has there been a change in the intensity of poverty? Has the nature of social conflict undergone any change over the years?



Finding an answer that explains the situation for the whole of Bihar is difficult as the social and economic context of the villages differs over every 50 kilometres of the state, due to the caste composition, the extent of Naxal influence in the area, and the level of infrastructure support (irrigation, etc.) in the region. Nevertheless, certain broad generalizations are attempted below.

### ***6.1 Status of Upper Castes: Small landowners among them are badly hit***

Because of the persistent onslaught of the Naxalite groups, many upper caste landowners have snapped their ties with their ancestral land and village, and have moved to urban centres. Since urban centres in Bihar provide very little employment, many of the upper caste men have migrated to other metropolitan centres in search of work. Loss of their personal identity in the big cities makes it easier to break free from the bondage of social taboos so they are able to engage in menial jobs. Traditionally, they are not supposed to engage in any physical labour, even on their own land. In the aftermath of the violent social conflict in Bihar, the poor among the upper castes have been badly hit.

### ***6.2 Status of intermediate castes - the new landlords***

The traditional conflict between the upper castes on the one hand, and intermediate and lower castes on the other, has diminished, as the upper caste groups have lost the clout to be offensive to other social groups. The intermediate castes (mostly Yadavs, and only in a few places, Kurmis and Koeris) are powerful today in the village society, and are engaged in an adversarial relationship with both the upper castes and lower castes.

That explains the change in the attitude of the Naxalite groups in the villages. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the various Naxalite formations carried out a major campaign against the upper caste landowners, and managed to drive the majority of them away from the villages. But as the activists of these Naxalite groups, especially the underground outfits, are mostly drawn from the intermediate castes, they have hardly taken action against the depredations of the middle caste landlords.

Within the intermediate castes, a creamy layer has emerged which has become rich and powerful, which wields enormous clout in the village society, as well as corridors of power. Their number has increased significantly over the last decade because of the government

patronage. But a large section of these caste groups continue to live in poverty.

### ***6.3 Status of the lowest castes: Rise in wages, but poverty unabated***

As far as the lowest castes (extreme backward castes and Scheduled Castes) – who are also the lowest class – are concerned, in a certain sense, their situation has improved over a period of time. Their wages have increased and physical and sexual abuse has declined.

Two factors have brought about this change. The Naxalite movement has undoubtedly had an impact in bringing about the upward wage revision. As the landless poor were unorganized, despite their numerical superiority, they were on their own, not in a position to bargain with the landowners for a better deal. Naxalites provided the organizational backing, though the nature of the intervention differed depending on which Naxalite faction enjoyed supremacy in an area. CPI-ML (Liberation), which is one of the major overground Naxal outfits, believes in popular mobilization and organized resistance to confront the entrenched powerful groups. However, the banned outfits like MCC and PW believe in striking terror. Their modus operandi has been to shock and awe by resorting to brutal methods. Both the strategies have delivered. The landless poor have got a better deal.

But equally, and perhaps a more important reason for better wages for landless poor is the fact that a large number of men from these caste groups have migrated to other states. Whether they worked in the agricultural field or industrial units in far away places, they managed to get much more money - that too throughout the year. Because of the increasing exodus from their ranks, there is a short supply of agricultural labourers. In keeping with the demand-supply rules, daily wages have gone up (from Rs. 25 a day to Rs. 50, plus a mid-day meal if the landlord did not want them to go home for lunch). This has certainly made the condition of those who have been left behind relatively better.

At the same time, the situation of a lot of the landless labourers has not improved, as the number of days for which work is available has drastically reduced due to the introduction of modern agricultural implements such as tractors, threshers and harvesters. This has led to underemployment, which in turn has pushed the landless labour back into the poverty trap, despite increased wages. Unless this problem of underemployment is addressed, chronic poverty will remain a stark reality and social conflict will continue to haunt the countryside.

There is therefore, a compelling need to evolve institutional responses to address this core concern. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, enacted by Parliament, is a welcome step in this direction. The Act ensures legal entitlement for 100 days of employment to one member of a family in rural areas. That in itself is inadequate; it will not provide enough income for a family of four or five members to fulfil all their basic needs. But at least, it is a good beginning.

### **7. Poverty and Conflict in Bihar: Prescriptions**

Poverty-conflict interface in Bihar has had different dimensions in different periods of time. The caste-class convergence that characterized the social relationship in the 19<sup>th</sup> and large parts of 20<sup>th</sup> century has become a thing of the past, though the changing social dynamics is confined to higher and middle castes rather than the lower castes.

The traditional upper caste landed gentry faces difficulty as agriculture has become uneconomical in many parts of the state. The main impediment in the way of productive agriculture is the lack of irrigation facilities. The Bihar government has invested little in developing the huge irrigation potential in the state. “Where is the money? We can barely manage to pay salary to our staff,” says a senior official of the department. In fact, engineers of Water Resources Department posted in different districts are staying on in Patna and going to their place of posting once a month to collect their salary. “No one can blame us as we can do nothing by remaining at our place of posting without financial resources,” justifies an absentee officer.

The only irrigation network that exists today is the decrepit Sone Canal System which had been created by the colonial masters. It was certainly a grand project and had proved a boon for hundreds of thousands of farmers, but because of the lack of proper maintenance, there is silting of the canals, thereby adversely affecting irrigation. The Gandak canal, which came into existence after India’s independence, also faces the same problem. There are areas where canals are silted and channels linking the canals to the fields are choked.

The disuse of the canals has become the biggest curse for the farming community. In the absence of canal irrigation, they have to depend on ground water, which is, as a bounty of nature, plentifully available in the state. But electricity is needed for lift irrigation. Many of the villages have not received electricity in the last 20 years. Some of the

older people remember having enjoyed the benefits of electricity till the 1970s. Now, even the electric wires are missing.

Generator sets have to be used to lift water from the underground. Even if a farmer manages to invest in a genset or gets it on hire (in either case, it is an expensive proposition), he needs diesel to run it. With the spiraling diesel prices, this is expensive and is estimated to cost 5 times what they would have paid for electricity. Therefore, small and middle farmers find it extremely uneconomical to cultivate food crops, especially when agricultural labour has also become expensive. Those who till their own land are barely able to meet their needs. For those who depend on hired-labour, it is largely a loss-making proposition. This explains why upper caste landowners – small or big – who consider it a social taboo to wield the plough (now ploughs are passé and tractors are in) are resorting to distress sale of their land. Those who have managed to switch over to some other form of economic activity have survived the crisis. Those who have not, are in dire straits. They are the main recruits of the Ranveer Sena, which is the upper caste armed outfit to take on the Naxalites.

If poverty of the lower castes provided fertile ground for the growth and expansion of Naxal groups, increasing pauperisation of the upper castes has created the breeding ground for Senas of different hues. It is a classic example of poverty causing social conflicts and social conflicts engendering poverty.

### ***7.1 What is the way out?***

#### *Better Water Management*

In order to directly address the issues of poverty and social conflict, the state has to take up the task of providing irrigation facilities. In a number of villages, both rich and poor speak in a single voice and echo a single demand – ‘just give us the canal water’. Irrigation clearly holds the key to economic prosperity of the Bihar villages.

In some parts of south Bihar (now Jharkhand), where agriculture is a profitable venture, thanks to the Sone Canal irrigation, one can see prosperity and absence of social tension. The landowners get a reasonably good return, and the landless get the opportunity to work on decent wages round the year. In the absence of an exploitative relationship, there are not many recruits for rebellion.

Bihar is a classic state where scarcity of water is a major problem in some areas, but excess water is a bigger problem in several other areas. Large parts of northern Bihar are ravaged by floods every year. Many of these areas remain waterlogged for more than six months a year, so cultivation of any crops is not possible. That explains the large exodus of people from the area to other places in search of livelihood.

The successive state governments have only engaged in relief measures in the aftermath of the floods that cause havoc, but no preventive measures have been put in place for the optimal utilization of the flood water to benefit the state and its people.

If both the problems of excess and scarce water are tackled on a priority basis, that will pave the way for prosperity in Bihar's countryside and its peace spin-off will be immense.

Two other measures would launch a frontal attack on the poverty-conflict cycle in rural Bihar: a) strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions, and b) promoting agro-based industries.

#### *Strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions*

The Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) were supposed to provide the platform for the villagers to be active participants in the process of decision-making and implementation of the welfare schemes, but the Bihar government did not allow the elections to be conducted (even though there was a constitutional mandate to hold them within a year of the enactment of the 84<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the Constitution, and most other states stuck to the time-frame) on some pretext or the other, until the Patna High Court came down heavily on it. At the behest of the High Court, the elections were held. But many of the newly elected Mukhiyas were local criminals who managed to win the battle of ballot through money and muscle power. Many of those who had a genuine democratic mandate were killed by the criminal gangs. It is noteworthy that more than a thousand elected Mukhiyas have been killed since the 2001 panchayat polls.

In the absence of any authority to ensure financial accountability, (a Mukhiya gets to spend about Rs. 15 lakh a year), PR representatives siphon off the money. In several villages, the Scheduled Caste and extreme backward caste groups state that the Mukhiya had not even visited their *toila*, let alone undertake any development measures. In no village, has a proper Gram Sabha been held.

PRI have enormous potential to bring about social equity, provided communications are maintained. Only if villagers get to know how much money has come to the panchayat kitty and for what projects, can they hold the Mukhiya accountable. Then the poverty alleviation programmes can play a role in the upliftment of the poor. And if that happens, then armed gangs on both sides of the divide, the biggest cause of social strife in villages, would be rendered redundant.

#### *Promoting Agro-Based Industries*

Another imperative for creating prosperity in the countryside is to re-establish agro-based industries, which had flourished in the state in the past, but have since ceased to exist. After independence, a host of government-owned sugar factories had opened which provided impetus for sugarcane cultivation. Being a cash crop, the returns on sugarcane production are high. Now that the government-owned sugar factories are closed, due to reasons of mismanagement, farmers are being deprived of this great avenue to enrich themselves legitimately.

A big farmer of the Dumrao village, on the borders of Gopalganj and Champaran districts, says that he is lucky as a private sugar mill is located in the vicinity. He has deployed most of his land for sugarcane cultivation and is earning close to Rs. 10 lakh a year. “I can tell you that had there not been this sugar mill, I would not have been able to earn even one lakh rupees out of my land.” Hundreds of landless labourers in Dumrao village are also benefiting from getting work round the year. That is the difference that the state can make in the life of farmers if it encourages the setting up of agro-based industries in the state.

### **7.2 From Poverty and Conflict to Peace and Prosperity?**

Those who benefit from social stability, have a vested interest in maintaining peace and keeping conflicts in abeyance. Today, in large parts of Bihar, the impact of democratic politics and militant action has deepened to such an extent that the richest and the most powerful cannot resort to physical torture or sexual exploitation of the poorest of the poor, without facing a backlash.

It is not as if there is a positive turnaround in the situation – that social conflict has given way to social peace. The reality is that there is a balance of terror. Rich, upper and middle caste landowners know that there would be retaliation from pro-poor organizations if there is perceived injustice on any count. They are fully armed and have stocked weapons to meet any eventuality. Ranveer Sena activists say: “one

reason why there has been no massacre of Bhumihars in last few years was because of our preparedness to take on the enemy.” Many Naxal groups, on their part, assert that “the upper castes have not dared to ill-treat the landless poor because they know that there would be massive resistance.”

It is a two-way process. Because of the balance of terror, there is the appearance of social amity on the surface, but a cauldron is simmering within because of the vested interest of the rival armed groups for whom conflict has become the main source of the livelihood. In Bihar, armed groups are thriving because of the collapse of the governing institutions of the state. In order to counter them, policy interventions are needed to ensure that groups with vested interests in peace are identified and empowered. That is possible only by creating an environment of all-round economic development so that the vicious cycle of conflict and poverty in Bihar gives way to a virtuous cycle of peace and prosperity.

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