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AGRARIAN RELATIONS AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE IN BIHAR

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Bihar was one of the those regions of India where the zamindari system of land tenure was introduced in 1793 under the Permanent Settlement of land wherein the zamindars were made the intermediaries for the collection of land revenue from the peasants and for payment of a fixed amount of rent to the state. Such a land system in the state is widely believed to have led to stagnation in agricultural development. This agrarian system was inherently exploitative and there was large scale immeserisation of the poor peasants and agricultural labourers. After independence in 1947, the much hated zamindari system was abolished but the agrarian structure still had exploitative nature, of course with changed context and relations. Along with stagnation in agriculture and exploitation of the peasantry, Bihar also witnessed powerful peasant movements both in the pre-and post-independence periods. While the pre-independence movement, which was directed against the zamindars, was led by relatively better off peasants, the post-independence movement is essentially that of poor peasants and agriculture labourers. At the same time, in the wake of immeserisation there has been massive migration of rural poor from Bihar to other states. All these changes have impacted the agrarian relations and system of bondage in rural Bihar. This paper analyses the changing agrarian structure in the context of overall political economy. Apart from extensive review of literature, the paper uses the findings of a longitudinal survey undertaken in 12 villages at two points of time – 1981-82 and 1988-99.

I. CONTEXT

Home to approximately 8 per cent (8.29 crores as per 2001 Census) of the total population of India, present Bihar is the third most populous state of the country. It constitutes approximately 3 per cent of the total geographical area of India; after the recent bifurcation of the state[1] from the southern plateau of Jharkhand, it features just a large stretch of plains with neither any well-founded industry nor any major town except the state capital of Patna. It is the least urbanised state with an urban population of approximately 10 per cent. Frequently characterised as the "most backward state of India", Bihar has the lowest literacy rate, the highest percentage of people living below the poverty line (next only to Orissa) and the lowest per capita income among the major states of India.

The state ranks among the slowest growing regions of India; the growth rate of its gross domestic product (GDP) during the nineties has been very low, being just 2.69 per cent per annum from 1991-92 to 1997-98 as against approximately 6 per cent for all the major states

of the country (Ahluwalia, 2000). On the other hand, its population growth rate, which was 23.4 per cent during the 1980s, shot up to 28.4 per cent during the 1990s while in the case of India as a whole, it had declined from 23.9 per cent during the 1980s to 21.3 per cent during the 1990s. Consequently, the population density of Bihar stands at a phenomenally high level of 880 persons per square km. as against 234 for the country as a whole. The demographic situation coupled with the slow growth has led to the economic retrogression of the state. Bihar's per capita income, which was approximately 60 per cent of the all-India average during early 1960s, declined to approximately 40 per cent in 1993-94 and further to approximately 34 per cent in 1997-98. In respect of other social and economic indicators too, the state's performance has been dismal.

The socio-economic and political institutions of the state have shown considerable degeneration. The academic institutions have more or less collapsed, and the administrative machinery, which was regarded as one of the best in the country during the 1950s, is in complete disarray. Not only has casteism made inroads into politics and the bureaucracy, it has also permeated nearly all institutions.

The post-Independence era witnessed the dismal failure of the state in ushering in the changes required to accelerate economic development as well as to bring about a fair and equitable social structure. The causes for this can be traced to the very nature of the power structure in Bihar. Ownership of land and other assets, caste dominance, political power structure and the oligarchies that control the state apparatus and their resources all overlap in a way which is by no means unique to Bihar but which takes a particularly entrenched form here. This, however, cannot be taken to mean that the state has been static. Technological developments have no doubt made a significant impact, with parts of the state experiencing modest spurts in agricultural growth during the 1980s following long periods of stagnation. However, in the absence of effective transformation of the underlying structures, these changes do not appear to be sustainable. Observers have contrasted the tapering-off of agricultural growth with the immense opportunities availed by those with access to state power and patronage and noted the “rise of corruption and crime as the fastest mode of accumulation” (Das, 1992, p.25).

In the wake of widespread poverty on the one hand and exploitation by the rich on the other, the state has witnessed movements of agricultural labourers and poor peasants challenging the existing structures of power. Firstly, these movements have attempted to transform production relations in agriculture, which continue to underpin the dominant landowners even when agriculture no longer remains the main source of income. Secondly, they pose a challenge to the oppressive caste-class relations. Thirdly, by making an entry into the electoral arena, they assert and establish the right of the rural poor to exercise their franchise - a right that de facto was long denied to them by the entrenched rural caste-class oligarchies. This has intensified the perceived threat to the hitherto unchallenged political power of the dominant landholders and the political parties who represent their interests. In recent years, this threat has evoked a sharp reprisal in terms of violence against the poor on

a large scale. In the state's countryside[2], several organisations are actively working among poor peasants and agricultural labourers. At the same time, with a view to mobilise their caste members[3], landlords, big peasants and upper middle peasants have formed armed gangs, mostly caste-based. This has led to a confrontation between low-caste peasants on the one hand and landlords on the other, which has resulted in widespread violence and massacres of the poor. Militant organisations of poor peasants and agricultural labourers have also resorted to violent activities since the mid-seventies, which continue unabated till date. Peasant mobilisation has gained momentum mainly in south Bihar, but in recent years, it has extended to several districts in north Bihar and is spreading to new areas.[4]

Another response of the poor to acute impoverishment has been in the form of widespread migration to distant places in search of work — both short-term and long-term. Although Bihar has witnessed a long history of migration, the seasonal and circulating migration of labour started in large numbers from the late 1960s and has increased over the years. This is borne out by the growing presence of Bihari migrants in most parts of the country.

The following section of the paper reviews the changes in agrarian relations in Bihar over the last 100 years or so within the framework of the socio-economic change witnessed during the period. The third section discusses how these changes have been crucial in shaping the lives of the poor in the state. The paper draws from various sources including two surveys conducted during early 1980s and the late 1990s for discussions and arguments which are reported in fourth section. The fifth section makes a few concluding observations on the emerging paradigm.

II. PRE-INDEPENDENCE SCENARIO

Bihar was one of the regions (along with some parts of Bengal, Uttar Pradesh and Madras) where the zamindari system of land tenure was introduced in 1793 with the ideology of laissez faire under the Permanent Settlement of land wherein the zamindars were made the intermediaries for the collection of land revenue/rent from the peasants and for payment of a fixed amount of land revenue to the state. Under the Permanent Settlement, the revenue demand was fixed at nine-tenths of the rent that the zamindars were to collect from their tenants. The right of land was vested in the landlords, but no protection was extended to the class of actual cultivators. It was only through the Act 19 of 1859 and more clearly through the Act 8 of 1885 (the former Bengal Tenancy Act, which later became, with some modifications, the Bihar Tenancy Act) that the right of the tenants gained some legal recognition (Das, 1983, p.23). In due course of time, consequent to the growing demand for land, the zamindars started extracting exorbitant rent from the tenants while the land revenue payable by them remained permanently fixed. Often, the zamindars farmed out the right of rent collection to subordinate agents who imposed their own arbitrary assessment on the raiyats. Usually, the tenants paying low rents were evicted. After meeting the on-crop land revenue demand, the village community was left with bare subsistence, if at all; there was little to spare for effecting improvements in land cultivation and improving living conditions. On account of the small-sized and fragmented holdings, the generally low yields per acre and the limited scope for income generation from subsidiary activities on account

of the decline of handicrafts previously produced by peasants, most of the cultivators had very low incomes. A large proportion of them hardly managed to make both ends meet even in good crop years. In bad years, with no past savings to fall back on, they were obliged to borrow for sheer subsistence. Once the peasant came into debt, it was difficult for him to free himself from the trap of very high and mounting debt obligations, thanks to the exploitative terms of borrowing and exorbitantly high interest rates.

The agrarian structure — the intricately stratified system of relationship of people to land — as prevalent in the state from the period of the Permanent Settlement in 1793 to 1950 when the zamindari system was abolished has been captured by Jannuzi (1974, p.11) in the following order: the state (the 'super landlord'), the zamindar and the tenure-holder (an intermediary of the state for collection of rents), the occupancy raiyat (a rent-paying holder of land having the occupancy on the land held by him), the non-occupancy raiyat (a rent-paying holder of land not having the right of occupancy on the land temporarily in his possession), the under-raiyat (a rent-paying holder of land having temporary possession of a holding under a raiyat) and mazdoor (a wage labourer having no rights on land).

The Permanent Settlement system was conceived by Lord Cornwallis as a means of providing incentives to the zamindars to promote the development of agriculture and invest accordingly or to lease out land relatively permanently to those who were interested in investing in agriculture. Either possibility would have contributed to the development of agriculture, enabling landowners to contribute higher land revenue to the government. Unfortunately, these objectives could not be realised. India, after all, was not England; the Indian caste system simply precluded the recreation of English-type landlordism leading to capitalist agriculture. The hierarchy that was stabilised by Permanent Settlement simply reinforced the caste hierarchy, which was inimical to the agricultural revolution. It was basically because this hierarchy ascribed to a group its status according to its distance from the plough or menial work in general. It is, thus, not surprising that the agrarian structure and its classes had a clear-cut caste dimension also. The four upper castes, i.e., Bhumihar, Brahmin, Rajput and Kayastha, had a heavy stake in land. "There were princely houses belonging to each of these castes, and owing to the zamindari system, the zamindars belonging to these castes had established complete political and economic control in the countryside, unparalleled in the ryotwari areas of Madras and Karnataka".[5] The upper classes of society — zamindars as well as tenure holders — were almost exclusively drawn from the upper castes. However, a large number of the upper caste households were also tenants and peasants (these were mostly Bhumihars who organised militant peasant movements in the 1920s and the 1930s against the zamindars). The upper middle castes were largely peasants, non-occupancy raiyats and, to a lesser extent, traders and agricultural labourers while the lower middle castes were essentially agricultural labourers and, to a lesser extent, artisans and peasants. The Scheduled Castes were mainly agricultural labourers. Thus, caste stratification was almost identical with that based on the interests in land.

Clearly, the above agrarian structure was inherently exploitative and detrimental to agricultural development. Although the type of rural scenario described above was not confined to only permanently settled areas, the situation in these areas, particularly in Bihar,

was extremely bad. One reason for this was that the number of absentee zamindars was much lower in Bihar as compared with Bengal, and as such, the intensity of exploitation in Bihar was far more severe. "Even discounting the contribution of the Bengal renaissance, the facts that the system of lease to a burgeoning class of rich peasants did not evolve in Bihar, the pressure of population on the land was much higher in Bihar and there was an 'admittedly lower level of awareness on the part of the Bihar peasantry of their rights' did much to make the system even worse, the tenants even more oppressed, the landlords even stronger and land an even more valuable asset in Bihar than in Bengal" (Das, 1983, p.25). The zamindars not only made exorbitant exactions in the form of land rent but also in other forms, such as labour rent, produce rent, homage, etc. In sum, the 'pegging' of land revenue as compared with other taxes was reflected in the inflated value of land, the benefit from which flowed to the limited class of zamindars, which, by and large, either purchased more rent-receiving land with it or dissipated it in ostentatious consumption" (ibid, p.37). The system of produce rent in Bihar was a vicious aspect of rent extraction from the sharecroppers who constituted the largest group of peasants. The zamindars and their amlas also subjected the peasants to various other forms of expropriation of agricultural surplus, such as abwabs and other extra-legal exactions and a blatantly exploitative begar system. This system of exploitation culminated in the physical maltreatment and oppression (zulum) of agricultural workers in the exactions of labour rent as begar. Despite the legal provisions to the contrary, the zamindars continued to have the first claim on the tenants' labour and exacted it ruthlessly (Hauser, 1961, p. 24)

The exploitative agrarian structure did not lead to the emergence of the agrarian capitalists in the form of rich peasantry independent of landlords. There was near total stagnation in agricultural production in Bihar during the British period. The class that acquired the surplus used it on conspicuous consumption, such as luxury goods, purchase of more zamindaris, etc., and the class of peasants that could have invested in land was hardly in a position to do so because of the prevalent practice of rack-renting. There was little investment by the government on infrastructure such as irrigation, which was undertaken on a large scale in states such as Punjab, which also contributed to the stagnation of agricultural production. In view of the policy of the government and partly due to the monetary needs of peasants, the cultivation of a few commercial crops, such as indigo, sugarcane, opium, etc. increased at the expense of food grains, and as such, the per capita availability of food grains in the state declined.

The extreme exploitation combined with agricultural stagnation led to pauperisation of the peasantry on a large scale. A significant proportion of the tenants was unable to pay rent and consequently evicted from its only source of livelihood — land. Such land, appropriated in compliance with rent decrees, was known as bakasht land. There was another class of even less fortunate tenants — tenants-at-will (bataidars) who were mostly employed on zamindars' khas and bakasht lands and were mere sharecroppers having no rights on the land. This was a distinctive feature of Bihar's agrarian system as its incidence was very pronounced here, particularly in the south Gangetic districts (in Patna and Gaya districts, the incidence

of such tenancy was 44 and 66 per cent respectively) (Das, 1983, p. 39). "And perhaps the most vicious aspect of rent exaction through such tenancy showed itself in the produce rent or bhaoli system. Again, this produce rent is to be distinguished from the rent, also paid in produce by a numerous group of peasants like sharecroppers; the main point of distinction was the absence of any customary or legal rights of the latter group in the land that made them cultivate on a crop-sharing basis" (ibid). Apart from the zamindars, the upper caste priests, teachers, doctors and lawyers had a tendency to transform their land for batai cultivation. Since the bataidar had no security of tenure, the landlord could evict him any time. The area of land transferred annually in Bihar (excluding Chotanagpur Division and Santhal Paraganas) between 1923 and 1935 varied from 1.4 lakh acres to 1.6 lakh acres[6]. However, land transfer increased from 1935 onward[7] and the peasants who lost their lands either became labourers or were resettled on the zamindar's land as sharecroppers. The landlords started making exorbitant demands for a share of the produce as rent from these sharecroppers, which at times amounted to even three-fourths of the gross produce. During the period 1915-1933, time and again, landlords ruined their tenants financially by systematically suing them for arrears of rent. The expropriation of owner-cultivators and the consequent proletarianisation led to the proliferation of agricultural labourers in the state. [8]

The immiserisation of the peasantry due to rack-renting and abwabs on the one hand and commercialisation of agriculture without growth on the other led to migration to different parts of the country and even abroad as a strategy of survival in the absence of organised resistance for the same. Later, as we will see, the peasants resorted to organised resistance against feudal exploitation. Feudal exploitation being most vicious in Bihar, the state was most migration-prone. The fact that during the close of the 19th century, thousands of people migrated as indentured labour to various British colonies speaks for itself. In the early 20th century too, migration to the jute mills in Bengal, Calcutta and tea gardens of Assam took place in large numbers.[9]

The peasants settled on bakasht land owned by them were alienated by zamindars. The peasants naturally resisted such transfers. Hit by the low prices of food grains due to depression in 1930s and faced with the exorbitant rent demanded by zamindars, the tenants resisted this forced alienation of land. The bakasht disputes, thus, became the focus of peasant unrest in Bihar. The unprecedented peasant mobilisation for nearly one and a half decade in different parts of Bihar, especially in south Bihar, was the culmination of this instability. The movement that started with the bakasht disputes slowly encompassed the issues of conversion of produce rent into cash rent, reduction of the rates of rent and termination of the system of illegal exactions, such as abwabs and begar. This movement culminated into the movement for abolition of the zamindari system itself under the banner of Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha (BPKS), a provincial organ of All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS). The upper caste substantial raiyats dominated by Bhumihars comprised largely the support base of the BPKS led by Sahajainand Saraswati. Under-raiyats and agricultural labourers were not mobilised in this movement.

III. EARLY POST-INDEPENDENCE DEVELOPMENT

At the dawn of Independence, the ruling party, which precluded radical land distribution from its political agenda, opted for the landlord path of agrarian transition. This course was directed at the abolition of the statutory landlordism and provision of incentives to the ex-landlords and rich peasants for transforming themselves into agrarian entrepreneurs. The zamindari system was abolished in 1950, encouraging peasants to buy the land released in the process. Only rich tenants could retain land while the smaller peasants simply lost access to it and became either tenants-at-will (bataidars) or landless agricultural workers. The spurt in the number of agricultural workers in the wake of the first phase of land reforms was a manifestation of this changed reality. The landlord path of agrarian transition entails, inter alias, perennial irrigation and high land-man ratio. In the case of Bihar, both prerequisites were missing leading to agricultural stagnation as an inevitable consequence.

Bihar was the first state in the country to abolish the zamindari system immediately following Independence and put an end to the much-hated system of intermediaries between the actual tillers and the state. However, although zamindari was abolished, the former zamindars were not deprived of their homestead and private lands, which were quite large. Imposing a ceiling on large holdings in order to remove the inequities in the distribution of land complemented the abolition. The first Land Ceiling Act was passed in 1962 after passing several obstacles. The amendments made in 1972 and 1973 affected in this Act removed many of the earlier loopholes but several defects remained. Following the abolition of zamindari and the passing of Land Ceiling Acts, several lakhs of sharecroppers were evicted illegally from the land in their possession.

The landlords reacted to the government's apathy and lack of any serious efforts in implementing the Ceiling Act by evicting a large number of tenants during the 1960s (Jannuzi, 1974, p. 83). Consequently, in order to provide additional protection to the under-raiyats and sharecroppers, the Bihar Tenancy Act of 1885 was amended in 1970 to safeguard the interests of the tenants with regard to eviction and also to ensure that lands were restored to those unlawfully ejected. Some other agrarian legislations that were enacted by the government to safeguard the interests of the labourers and peasants were the Bihar Privileged Persons Homestead Tenancy Act and the Bihar Money Lender Act.

In this manner, the government brought in a number of legislative measures with regard to the agrarian sector. However, the implementation of these laws was far from satisfactory. The most glaring of cases are those of the Land Ceiling and Tenancy Acts. Several studies have shown how the provisions of the ceiling laws were grossly violated in various parts of the state. This is in sharp contrast with the neighbouring state of Bengal where the implementation of the laws was much more effective.[10] Similarly, the tenancy laws have also been widely violated in the state where a fairly large area of cultivated land is under tenancy. The statutory provision with regard to the payment of rent is seldom observed in the rural areas, and there is a yawning gap between what is statutorily fixed and what the sharecroppers receive. The system of tenancy is almost entirely concealed and informal, and, hence, there is no security of tenure (LBSNAA, 1991b). Apart from land reform provisions, the implementation of Minimum Wages Act in rural areas is also extremely tardy.

In effect, the agrarian structure in Bihar, despite all the laws, continued to be exploitative and detrimental to growth. Nevertheless, over the years, some important changes in the

class status of various sections of the rural society did take place. The abolition of statutory landlordism (zamindari system) largely weakened the feudal structure without destroying it. All the upper caste tenure-holders and a majority of the upper caste non-occupancy raiyats of the former zamindars belonging to upper middle castes emerged as the rich/big peasants. These neo-rich peasants now had complete sway over the rural economy and society. They continued to exploit other peasants through sharecropping and money lending. The biggest landowner became the sole arbiter in matters such as determination of wages, rights in land and other matters of the community (Jannuzi, 1974, p. 130). "In the early 1950s, the structure of power in Bihar seemed to be immutable. The traditional society of the village had only begun to be disrupted, and the pattern of life (while in many respects unacceptable to the alien observer) had been so regularised that the Bihar peasant seemed prepared to accept as datum his position in the social and economic hierarchy. His view of the world was very limited. His capacity to perceive of change in his relationship with his superiors or inferiors was minimal. This expectation of a higher standard of life was almost non-existent. A landless peasant could not conceive of himself as a holder of land. An agricultural labourer could not conceive of himself as having employment at wages above subsistence. A raiyat (or under-raiyat), tilling land without security of tenure subject to eviction at any time, could not conceive of himself as having occupancy right in land assured by law and circumstances" (ibid).

All these developments point to the fact that the agrarian structure in Bihar was not only exploitative but also largely one that hampered the process of agrarian transformation. According to Prasad (1975; 1979), who characterised it as 'semi-feudal', the vast majority of poor peasant households were 'deficit'. This forced them to take consumption loans from the land-owning class, which they were unable to return even in the long run due to them being heavily in debt and deficit. This led to a system of informal bondage, which assured to the big land-owning class a number of benefits, including availability of cheap labour, better terms for leasing out land, benefits obtained through distress sales and by acquiring poor peasant' lands almost for nothing and the like. The other method of enforcing bondage was one of leasing out land to households that were economically weak and, hence, incapable of maximising output from leased-in land. Although this reduced the direct gains accruing to the landlord, it enabled them to have semi-serfs. Homestead lands were also doled out to the poor peasants to enforce informal bondage. The economic power that, thus, became concentrated in the hands of the rural rich not only allowed them to have a dominant hold on the economic activities of the area, it also made them very powerful politically. On the other hand, they stood to lose most of these 'advantages' in the event of rapid development taking place in the area, which explained why the dominant class interests remained inimical to rapid growth. It needs to be emphasised here that the existence of a semi-feudal agrarian structure is not only exploitative but also operates as a powerful drag on the diffusion of technology and development of agriculture in Bihar.

Despite all these handicaps, Bihar experienced relatively satisfactory expansion in agricultural production — the rate of agricultural growth during the 1950s in Bihar was approximately 3 per cent per annum, which was higher than that in many other states. This

expansion has been mainly attributed to various land reform measures, which have nevertheless been inadequate in themselves. The first phase of land reforms, i.e., zamindari abolition, despite large scale eviction of erstwhile cultivators, had resulted in some loosening-up of the stranglehold of semi-feudal relations of production — as is reflected in the fact that a fairly large number of substantial tenants holding occupancy rights in land had obtained a title to the land and, thus, began striving for increasing production. This, in addition with the reduced burden of land revenue and to some extent of debt, also due to the pre-Independence inflation caused by the Second World War, resulted in some private investment in the agrarian economy (Prasad, 1987). The 1950s and early 1960s represented a phase marked by the slackening of the peasant movement. The different sections of the peasantry were confused vis-à-vis the various land reform legislations with regard to their impacts. The Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha had become defunct, and Sahajanand Saraswati had died. The peasants were not enlightened enough to protect their own interests. Even so, the large-scale eviction of tenants in some parts of the state and the system of sharecropping led to a few struggles by the peasants in some pockets. The Communist Party of India (CPI) waged a few agrarian struggles in the 1960s, the most notable among them being the 'Sathi Farms Struggle' in Champaran.

Attempts were also made to launch a separate agricultural labourers' movement on wage demands as well as struggles on the question of the bataidar's rights as also in respect of issues such as homestead tenancy, famine relief measures, taccavi loans, irrigation rents, sugarcane prices, etc.[11] The sharecroppers of Purnea district, which comprised significantly tribals, also waged struggles against their eviction by the landlords from the tenanted lands which they had reclaimed, many of which were recorded as occupancy raiyats after the struggle.[12] However, the impact of these struggles was, at best, localised and failed to have any pronounced effect on the society and polity. The level of rural poverty continued to be very high — approximately 64 per cent in the late 1960s (Datt, 1998). The agrarian structure continued to be exploitative although its form had changed after the abolition of the zamindari system.

Although all these land reforms and agricultural development programmes largely proved to be failures, they succeeded in awakening a new consciousness among the peasantry of Bihar. These programmes, accompanied by the penetration in rural areas by government officials, political workers, bhoodan workers and relief workers, had exposed the poor peasants to the developments all over the country and provided a basis for comparative judgement. By mid-1960s, they had become aware of their rights and the circumstances that had denied them these rights (Jannuzi, 1974, pp.131-134). Agricultural production had started declining since the mid-sixties, and three years of crop failures had added fuel to the fire. The results of the 1967 elections were a striking proof of the awakened peasantry. The Congress dominated by the landowning upper castes was defeated because of the withdrawal of support by the awakened middle peasantry. The upper middle castes, particularly the three numerous dominant castes - Yadav, Koeri and Kurmi - had significantly improved their economic position in the post-Independence period. These three castes have been

the important beneficiaries of the so-called Green Revolution that took place on whatever minor scale that it did in the state. The sturdy and hardy people of these castes, who are traditionally engaged in cultivation, have managed to produce more from cultivation than their upper caste counterparts. They have also cornered a significant portion of institutional credit. These developments have affected the pattern of land distribution in the countryside. Big peasants and landlords have been losing more land as compared with other classes. This process of dispossession of land has been much faster among upper castes as compared with other castes. As a matter of fact, the three upper-middle castes are the major beneficiaries of the land loss suffered by the upper caste landlords/big peasants. During the last decade or so, this process has accelerated with the upper-middle castes further strengthening their position. Thus, significant changes have taken place in the agrarian and rural class structure in Bihar in the post-Independence period.

The process of class differentiation that began in the 1950s intensified by the late 1960s. The caste-class nexus has also been changing. While the middle (upper backward) caste peasants improved their class position, the Scheduled Castes and lower backward castes that comprised mostly the poor peasants and agricultural labour were unable to do so; in fact, in several parts of the state, it deteriorated. Three years of famine in the mid-sixties further exacerbated their miserable condition. More and more poor peasants found themselves slipping into the class of agricultural labourers. This class continued to be subjected to social oppression and sexual abuse. In fact, since the late 1960s, both the upper and middle castes appear to have become more vicious towards them by perpetrating atrocities. The social, economic and cultural exploitation of the downtrodden prepared a fertile ground for a militant movement. There was a marked change between the rural scenarios in the 1950s and the late 1960s. Jannuzi who visited some villages during these periods vividly captures this changing scenario: "The people in these villages have been transformed gradually over 14 years. While it is difficult to measure and adequately document the psychological changes that have taken place, there can be no denying that the old equilibrium of the surveyed villages has been disrupted. Even in those villages in which noteworthy physical change has been at a minimum, changes in the attitude and expectation among the people are obvious. 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. Deepening frustration regarding their status and economic vulnerability was evident. The inarticulate were becoming articulate; many villagers, landless and landholders alike who earlier had referred to the immutability of their condition were prepared to 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 a traditional lifestyle, 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, 1974). This was a fertile ground to attract some groups with a revolutionary

Maoist ideology who started working in some parts of the state. The movement that began in Bhojpur district soon spread to other districts. The Socialist Party and Communist Party also responded to the situation by launching the 'land grab movement' in 1970-71. As the Naxalite movement spread, the government responded by initiating some land reform measures in mid-seventies. However, neither the half-hearted land reforms nor the armed resistance of the landlord and state repression could check the movement that was now backed by armed squads. The movement spread to several parts of Bihar. Today, it is the strongest in south Bihar, which was also the hub of the Kisan Movement of the pre-Independence days.

IV. EMERGING CLASS AND LAND RELATIONS: RESULTS FROM A RESURVEY

The above-mentioned changes in the agrarian socio-economic structure are further corroborated by a recent resurvey of 12 villages carried out by the Institute for Human Development, New Delhi, during 1999-2000. The previous survey was carried out during 1981-82 by International Labour Organisation, Geneva, and A.N. Sinha Institute of Social Studies, Patna.[13] According to that survey (1981-82), the forward castes were largely big peasants and landlords while the Scheduled Castes were mostly agriculture labourers. The heterogeneous backward castes were spread across the class grouping, but each identified subgroup tended to concentrate in one or more classes.[14] Backward Class I (lower backwards) largely consisted of agricultural labourers and artisan groups. Yadavs and Koeris were mainly peasants, especially poor-middle and middle peasants. Two-thirds of the Kurmi population consisted of big peasants and landlords, but "Other Backward II" (upper backward) were widely distributed with a relatively high proportion of non-agriculturists. Muslims were spread across the classes, with the largest concentration (about half) in non-attached agriculture labour. Thus, the interrelationship between caste and class though strong was by no means perfect. The relationship between class and landownership as well as caste and ownership of land was also strong, particularly the former. The latter relationship, though strong, was more diffused with some of the middle castes, such as Kurmis, possessing large tracts of land. It was also found that the middle castes, particularly the three dominant castes — Yadav, Koeri and Kurmi — had significantly improved their economic position and cornered a large portion of institutional credit. These developments had also affected the pattern of land distribution in the countryside. The big peasants and landlords belonging to upper castes were gradually losing land largely in favour of other intermediate castes.

The earlier survey (1981-82) also revealed that two-fifths of the rural households leased in land, which was approximately 28 per cent of the total cultivated land, and 70 per cent of the leased in area was on crop-sharing basis. Approximately three-fifths of the rural households were indebted to traditional sources of loan (money lenders, employers, etc.), the corresponding percentages for agricultural labourers and poor middle peasants being more than 80 and 60, respectively. Almost one-third of the agricultural labourers were attached to employers and almost invariably used to work for them. These features of the rural social structure, as mentioned earlier, had prompted Prasad to characterise it as "semi-feudal".

The results of the resurvey (1999-2000) show that the trends exhibited by the first survey have intensified over the years more in form than in substance. The forward castes continue to be mostly big peasants and landlords while the Scheduled Castes are mainly

agricultural labourers. Even for other castes, class configurations remain more or less the same. Notwithstanding this broad picture, the agrarian structure has undergone a significant change. All classes have lost land, but landlords and big peasants have lost at a steeper rate than other classes. Since the upper castes initially occupied a dominant position among the classes of landlords and big peasants, it is quite natural that land had slipped out of the hands of these castes. The period between the two surveys saw the biggest loss of land from the upper castes, the gainers being the backward castes, especially Kurmi and Yadav (Tables 1 and 2).

The bulk of the landholdings are marginal, and, as a result, petty production is predominant. While 43 per cent of the households are landless, another 43 per cent own less than 2.5 acre of land. However, land distribution continues to be skewed with 66 per cent of the agriculturists cultivating only 20.4 per cent of the land. All classes of peasantry have been losing land. This is manifest in the growth of the landless and less than 1 acre size-class households on the one hand and decline of those households owning more than 5 acres on the other between the two surveys. While landless or households owning less than 1 acre of land increased from 67 per cent to 73 per cent, those owning more than 5 acres declined from 13 per cent to 5.5. per cent. The number of households leasing in land has declined, but the area of land leased in has more or less remained the same. This is because tiny landlords, particularly those belonging to the upper castes, migrate after leasing out their land. Due to the initial prevalence of caste-class nexus, even today, upper castes dominate among the big peasants and landlords and lower backward castes among the poor and middle peasants.

Table 1

Percentage of Households and Average Size of Selling and Buying of Land, 1999-2000

	% of households selling land	Average land sold (acres)	% of households purchasing land	Average land purchased (acres)
Caste				(acres)
Brahmin+Kayastha Kay	26.51	1.22	7.83	1.34
Bhumihar+Rajput	30.68	0.93	7.09	0.85
Kurmi	17.86	0.24	17.86	0.76
Koeri	10.00	0.40	8.33	0.62
Yadav	9.62	0.33	13.46	0.95
Other OBC II	9.72	0.73	11.11	0.62
Backward I	5.16	0.53	10.97	0.64
S.C.	1.99	0.20	4.48	0.52
Muslim	13.13	0.92	9.09	1.09
Class				
AL	3.50	0.69	4.04	0.23
PMP	15.38	0.38	15.38	0.41
MP	17.54	0.27	17.54	0.98
BP	24.52	1.00	13.55	1.13
Landlord	29.73	1.03	12.84	1.17
NAG	5.22	0.72	5.97	0.29
Total	13.02	0.90	8.64	0.85

Note: OBC: Other Backward Castes; S.C.: Scheduled Castes; AL: Agricultural Labourer; PMP: Poor Middle Peasants; MP: Middle Peasants; BP: Big Peasants; NAG: Non-Agriculturists.

Table 2
Average Size of Owned Land in 1999-00 and 1981-82 and Percentage Fall in Average Acre of Land Across Caste and Class

	Average size of owned land (acre)		% fall in average area between two periods
	1999-00	1981-82	
Caste			
Brahmin+Kayastha	3.45	6.25	44.86
Bhumihar+Rajput	2.78	5.43	48.85
Backward I	0.75	1.31	42.73
Yadav	1.17	1.60	26.71
Koeri	1.11	1.41	21.69
Kurmi	3.45	4.28	19.48
Other OBC II	1.25	3.20	61.03
SC	0.31	0.63	50.38
Muslim	1.14	2.19	47.88
Class			
AL	0.45	1.08	58.02
PMP	0.83	0.73	-13.66
MP	1.02	1.48	31.56
BP	2.99	4.78	37.42
Landlord	2.93	6.13	52.31
NAG	0.31	1.40	77.86
Total	1.80	3.42	47.52

The most interesting fact that emerges from the second survey is the accretion of households of each caste group to the class of agriculture labour as well as to that of 'landlord'. While the accretion to the class of agriculture labour is a manifestation of land alienation from peasant classes, the accretion to the class of landlord is the outcome of land loss and migration. The upper caste peasants, who no more possess landholdings that can produce a surplus, find themselves in a dilemma as a member of the upper caste. They can neither meet wage demands nor take to the plough for fear of caste opprobrium. However, in recent years, a significant trend of poor upper caste males engaging in ploughing and other menial agricultural activities appears to be emerging (although upper caste women from very poor families do not venture to work outside the home in their own fields also, let alone in those of others for wages). Hence, they opt for renting out land and migrating. Even the non-cultivating backward castes and Scheduled Castes who have some land migrate in search of a better future. Educated landowners, by and large, migrate to seek jobs in urban centres.

Owing to the emergence of surplus-hungry, rich peasants and landlords on the one hand and the larger proportion of those falling into the class of wage labour on the other in all castes, political mobilisation by the rich took the form of caste mobilisation. This inevitably stalled, to a large extent, the mobilisation of wage labourers and poor peasants on the basis of economic interest groups. Since the only source of power with the proletariat and semi-proletariat is collectivity, the vertical political mobilisation on the basis of caste disempowered them by dividing them and, by implication, empowered the rich peasants and landlords of each caste. The latter's source of power lying in money and wealth either remained intact or increased. This disjunction between political mobilisation on the basis of

caste and mobilisation on the basis of class lies at the root of the politico-economic impasse in Bihar, which is manifested in the crisis in governance.

Although in many villages, the productivity of land has increased and some new crops have also been introduced, by and large, changes have been slow. Significantly, the increase in per acre productivity has not kept pace with the increase in population. This has happened mostly in the case of upper castes — their land holdings have increasingly become smaller and a significant proportion of them are facing acute economic hardships. As the local economy has not developed, a large number of them are migrating to other areas in search of any kind of job/employment.

The period between the two surveys has witnessed a drastic decline in the proportion of attached labour to less than 10 per cent of the total wage labour. Thus, casualisation of the wage labour is the dominant trend. The percentage of casual workers to total workforce has increased from 34 per cent in 1981-1982 to 52 per cent in 1999-2000, the increase being mainly at the cost of self-employed and attached labour in agriculture. The casualisation of workers has been most pronounced among lower middle castes (Backward I). In the light of declining patron-client relationships of different kinds in the labour market, new forms of labour relations are emerging in different districts. Real wages have risen everywhere — from 50 per cent to 100 per cent in various villages or regions. This has happened mainly because of struggles and migration. Another change taking place in the wage system is that time rate payment is giving way to payment by work contract, which is equivalent to piece-rated wage system. In south Bihar, this appears to have emerged in response to wage struggles while in north Bihar, it is the impact of supply and demand factors because of migration. Another form of labour relation is concealed tenancy. Two kinds of tenancy are in existence – crop-share as well as fixed rent. In case of crop-share, usually the landowner supplies all the inputs, and the supplier of labour - the tenant cultivator - receives a share of the output, usually one-third. In several areas, there is also the system where some parts of input costs and output are equally shared between landlords and tenants. This form of wage labour (tenants) quite often is supplied by those castes who would not otherwise work for wages in the village. The employer enjoys triple benefits in the area where a militant labour movement exists. He is no longer involved in wage disputes; wage payment is deferred to the end of the production cycle, and hence, he appropriates interest on wage; and the supervision cost is dispensed with. This system helps the labourers to develop an interest in raising the level of productivity and production. Although sharecropping still exists, the system of fixed rent tenancy (both in cash and kind) is fast replacing it, particularly in the relatively advanced regions.

Migration

The loss of land and decline in the availability of work in agriculture have made it difficult for the rural poor to eke out even a precarious living in the rural areas. In such a situation, there are two ways to survive — either stay and struggle or migrate to a place where there is a likelihood of securing employment. That the main response of the poor has been to

migrate is manifest in the findings of the 1999-2000 survey that shows a substantial increase in the number of migrants. Formerly, distress migration was largely a phenomenon of north Bihar – an area that does not have the tradition of a strong peasant movement. However, even south Bihar with its tradition of peasant movements has, of late, shown a higher propensity of migration, probably because militancy is proving futile in the absence of the growth of agricultural and non-farm employment opportunities.

While only approximately 10 per cent of all adult workers were migrants in 1981-82, the percentage has increased to about 19 per cent in 1999-2000 — in the district of Madhubani, approximately one-third of all workers were reported to have migrated. While in 1981-82, approximately 80 per cent of migrant workers reported seasonal migration, in 1999-2000, about half of them were long-term migrants (Table 3). This can be attributed to the fact that more and more migrants are taking up non-agricultural work in small and big towns as labourers in various occupations, such as those of security guards, rickshaw pullers and coolies, which require long-term migration. Many of the workers who migrate for taking up agricultural work also move to nearby towns or semi-urban areas after completing their work. It is also observed that while in relatively more developed districts, there is a higher degree of long-term migration (i.e Rohtas), the level of seasonal migration is much more in backward districts (i.e. Purnea and Madhubani). The migration is fairly evenly distributed across all castes and classes, but by and large, upper castes and Muslims and landlords/middle peasants and non-agriculturist classes report more of long-term migration than short-term (Table 4). The two classes from which migration has increased substantially are landlords and non-agriculturists. While for labourers and poor peasants, migration has since long been a coping mechanism, the desire to earn more has increasingly become an important reason of migration. Also, working outside their village enables them to slowly break out of the caste taboos that exist in the villages. While in their villages, the upper caste people do not engage in any manual wage work because of caste taboos, they take up all kinds of work, wage work or low-paid self-employed, at the place of migration. In fact, this is an important reason for upper caste youths to migrate. In the case of lower castes also, several migrate to escape from the clutches of the prevailing caste discrimination in the village.

Table 3

Changes in Magnitude and Nature of Migration of Workers by District

DISTRICT	1981-82			1999-2000		
	% of migrant workers	% distribution of migrant workers		% of migrant workers	% distribution of migrant workers	
		Seasonal	Long term		Seasonal	Long term
Gaya	10.12	64.71	35.29	19.39	67.19	32.81
Gopalganj	14.19	81.82	18.18	21.40	48.98	51.02
Madhubani	13.88	84.62	15.38	33.08	44.63	55.37
Nalanda	4.22	71.43	28.57	13.10	53.66	46.34
Purnea	6.40	92.31	7.69	12.93	76.71	23.29
Rohtas	7.84	81.25	18.75	8.54	25.93	74.07
Total	9.69	80.70	19.30	19.18	53.60	46.40

Table 4
Changes in Magnitude and Nature of Migration of Workers by Caste, Class and Land Size

	1981-82			1999-2000		
	% of migrant workers	% distribution of migrant workers		% of migrant workers	% distribution of migrant workers	
		Seasonal	Long term		Seasonal	Long term
Caste						
Upper caste	12.40	68.75	31.25	28.97	47.95	52.05
OBC II	10.18	75.86	24.14	16.93	60.81	39.19
OBC I	8.02	84.21	15.79	14.74	58.11	41.89
SC	6.07	90.00	10.00	14.01	58.02	41.98
Muslim	13.68	100.00	0.00	24.78	46.43	53.57
Class						
AL	7.07	90.24	9.76	11.14	71.77	28.23
POOMIDP	9.47	100.00	0.00	20.59	64.29	35.71
MIDP	4.17	33.33	66.67	12.29	36.36	63.64
BIGP	12.25	67.74	32.26	19.19	57.75	42.25
LANDLD	16.81	75.00	25.00	39.64	38.53	61.47
NONAG	16.07	88.89	11.11	37.60	46.15	53.85
Size of owned land (acres)						
Nil	7.63	91.89	8.11	16.70	64.42	35.58
Up to 1	9.15	85.19	14.81	22.15	45.21	54.79
1 to 2.5	16.33	70.83	29.17	23.59	43.28	56.72
2.5 to 5	14.56	80.00	20.00	18.46	55.56	44.44
5 to 10	7.58	80.00	20.00	14.42	46.67	53.33
10 and above	7.35	20.00	80.00	13.79	100.00	0.00

Only 15 per cent of migrant workers are employed in agriculture, the rest being engaged in the non-agricultural sector occupations, such as construction, small manufacturing, brick kilns and earth work or as rickshaw pullers, coolies, etc. Only a small proportion of workers are self-employed. A significant proportion of workers from higher castes/classes are also working as wage labour at the place of migration. The survey reports that nearly 40 per cent of all households report at least one migrant — either short-term or long-term — and that nearly all of them receive remittances. Although the proportion of households reporting remittances and receiving migration is higher among higher castes and classes, remittances constitute a comparatively larger proportion of total household income of lower caste and class households. Nearly one-third of the total household income of the migrant households is accounted for by remittances; the proportion is much higher among landless and small landholders.

Migration is essentially a male phenomenon; only 3 per cent of the seasonal migrants and 7 per cent of the long-term migrants are females. This increases the work burden of the females staying back in the villages though it does not necessarily lead to a higher participation rate among females, the probable reason being the disincentive to work resulting from the remittances received.

The villages also show an increase in the number of people commuting to nearby villages and urban and semi-urban areas. Many women report that they commute although they are not able to migrate. A large number of commuters are also seasonal migrants — at the time of their stay in the village, they prefer to work outside their village.

Marginalisation of Landholding, Educated Unemployment and Criminalisation

As discussed earlier, the landholdings are now pre-dominantly marginal and the productivity of land is low. Also, the educated youth failing to find suitable employment in urban areas, are forced to return to their villages and vegetate. These phenomena are at the root of the rampant criminalisation of society and politics for which Bihar is notoriously known today. The upper caste and other cultivating middle caste youth, because of their education and 'social status', are unwilling to engage themselves in manual labour. Hence, when confronted with marginal landholdings that cannot generate adequate surplus to be appropriated by them, they strongly oppose any wage demands. In such a situation, if the workers too become militant, mass killings and terror are the inevitable result. The growing alcoholism among the unemployed youth of the landlord and rich peasantry of the upper and rich backward castes further contributes to violence against labour. The criminal activities, more often, draw their sustenance from support of the political class. The reason for this emanates from the fact that in absence of any worthwhile economic activities, the source of surplus is either state's coffer or criminal appropriation. And in order to sustain the social collation that can translate into votes, the criminal activities of dominant individuals are given a blind eye. Hence emanates the criminalisation of politics. The focused group discussions conducted during 1999-2000 survey revealed that almost in all the villages alcoholism and criminalisation had considerably increased. A large number of educated youth were either engaged in 'political brokerage' or criminal activities. In fact, this is the most serious challenge which the Bihar society faces today.

Changing Socio-Political Consciousness

The resurvey also revealed a significant transition in the perception of the poor peasants and agricultural labourers with regard to their needs and aspirations. A majority of the poor believes that their economic conditions have improved although the degree differs widely. They continue to struggle to earn enough for providing themselves with two square meals a day, but their concerns are not limited to economic needs. The question of izzat (respect) and political rights has gained importance in their perception. Political rights, especially the right to vote that has long been denied to them by landlords and big peasants (even by middle peasants) top their list of priorities. In areas where relentless struggles were waged, they are no longer prevented from exercising their franchise and crimes such as rape of women from these poor families are not commonplace any more. There is also an increased consciousness about the basic needs of education and health. A large number of them do not want their children to languish at the lowest rung of the social hierarchy, and education is increasingly being considered as an effective means to rise in life. However, not only are these facilities acutely lacking, but discrimination too prevents them from accessing the same. There is a growing consciousness of this discrimination, and in many places, resistance too is taking place in various ways.

Thus, significant changes affecting the socio-economic structure in rural Bihar have been witnessed over the years. It is noteworthy that in their revisit of a few villages in Purnea

around the same time, Rodgers and Rodgers (2000) too observed the profound changes that were taking place, which could be attributed mainly to migration in rural Bihar.

V. CONCLUSIONS AND EMERGING PARADIGM

Jettisoning the Gandhian concept of 'land to the tiller' and opting for the 'landlord path' of transition, the ruling class abolished statutory landholding (zamindari system). The system, however, allowed the ex-zamindars to retain land in various ways. The consequent delay in the process of land reform led to large-scale benami transactions. On the other hand, the tenants were made to buy the land under their cultivation. This meant that only the substantial tenants could retain ownership of land, the rest becoming either tenants-at-will or agricultural labourers. Thus emerged the new surplus-hungry landlords and big peasants as the economically dominant classes in rural Bihar. This class of landlords and big peasants also became the politically dominant class. Since the middle castes comprised the largest proportion of substantive tenants under the zamindari system, the inter-caste power relations started shifting in favour of the middle caste rich peasantry. This trend became increasingly dominant with the transfer of land from the upper castes to the middle castes.

The emergence of the new surplus-hungry landlords and big peasants went hand in hand with the pauperisation and proletarianisation of a large number of peasants who inundated the rural labour market. The acquisition of more and more surplus by these landlords and rich peasants without any investments for raising productivity and production levels inevitably led to the exploitation of the agricultural labourers and poor peasants. On the other hand, the increasing marginalisation of landholdings led to the emergence of a class of poor landlords among the traditionally non-cultivating castes. Adding to the caste taboo against manual work in land was the educational status of the members of such community. The landholdings became too small to produce surplus. Hence, the nominal surplus appropriated by the poor landlords cut into the necessary product to be appropriated as wages. This is what manifested as the incapacity of these landowners to pay even the statutory minimum wages. When the workers demanded their due wage, these masters, unable to pay, had to militantly suppress the workers' movement for higher wages. The resistance of the working poor to their excessive exploitation along with social oppression provoked reprisals from the landlords and rich peasants. When this exploitation in the form of depression of wages and other means became acute, the labouring poor began resisting these further. This sparked off atrocities in the form of mass killings of agricultural labourers, mostly Dalits, by the rich peasants and landlords of middle and upper castes. By mid-1960s, the labouring poor were forced to take to organised militancy, leading to the emergence of militant movements of the poor peasants and agricultural workers, popularly known as the Naxalite movement.

This peasant mobilisation in the state had significant implications for the rural labour and the socio-economic and political structure of the state in general (Sharma, 1995). One obvious impact of this massive mobilisation has been an increased consciousness among the poor peasants and agricultural labourers regarding their socio-economic and political conditions. This growing awareness has also had an impact on the state. Although the state

is far from becoming sympathetic to the cause of the poor peasants and rural labourers, in the face of the growing unrest among them, it has had to initiate some measures with regard to their welfare. The drive for the acquisition of surplus land over the ceiling limits in the mid-1970s was essentially a response of the state to the violent outbreak and unrest among poor peasants and labourers in some of the districts of south Bihar. The occasional pronouncements of the government, more so in recent years, giving assurance that it would take effective steps to safeguard the interests of the tenants were largely prompted by the peasant mobilisation and their growing political importance as a pressure group.

An important achievement of these peasant movements is the raise in agricultural wages in the areas of their influence. These movements also contributed in keeping alive the land reforms agenda and, in some cases, also proved effective in producing the desired results. Indeed, if a substantial portion of the surplus land had been acquired in Bihar in the mid-1970s, it was largely due to the pressure generated by the movement launched by poor peasant organisations. It is well documented that the sharecroppers' organised movement in Madhubani and Champaran, particularly in the former, has proved causal in providing the peasants with security of tenure and a raise in their share of the produce.

The movements have greatly contributed to the elimination of several forms of exploitation in the rural labour markets. Notably, there has been a significant reduction, and in most cases even elimination, of begar and atrocities on women in several areas under the influence of radical peasant organisations.

The most important achievement of the movements has been the weakening of the semi-feudal system in the rural areas. The semi-feudal forces are not only on the defensive but have suffered a considerable decline. In several areas, upper caste men have started ploughing their lands themselves - an act that was unheard of some years ago as touching the plough was taboo for most upper castes families. This can be attributed, to some extent, to the economic compulsion of small/marginal farmers who are unable to afford payment of the prevailing wages. It is also attributable to the fact that now, they cannot intimidate poor labourers to accept low wages. Accordingly, in many parts of south Bihar, the process of substitutability of hired labour by family labour can be observed. Of course, to some extent, this has affected wage employment for agricultural labourers. However, women belonging to these families continue to be forbidden to go out of their homes and engage in productive work. Quite often, the extreme poverty in which they live forces the women to cut down on their own food intake and feed their children. There is a distinct change in the pattern of landownership: the upper castes have lost substantial lands and the purchases are generally from intermediate castes - Yadavs, Koeris, Kurmis - and in some cases, even from lower backward castes and Scheduled Castes. The increasing economic power of the middle castes in combination with their numerical strength, has also led to their political dominance In fact, now the hold of upper castes on political power has almost broken.

The increased migration of labour from the state has contributed its share to the changing rural labour markets and social structure. It has helped the migrants and their families not only in meeting a part of their consumption needs but also to raise the agricultural wages because of the withdrawal of surplus labour by way of migration, particularly in most parts

of north Bihar. It is noteworthy that remittances from migration contribute significantly to the household income. It is significant that even the upper castes, in the wake of stagnation in agriculture, have migrated in large numbers in search of employment.

These two developments — mobilisation of the poor peasants and increased migration — appear to be the most important agents of change in rural Bihar during the last two-and-a-half decades. A striking feature of the poor in Bihar is their high degree of sensitivity with regard to their economic and social condition and access to basic amenities. In particular, they resent the indifference of the government for failing to provide adequate educational and health facilities. Schooling is increasingly being viewed by parents as an opportunity for upward mobility. The demand for basic amenities forms a part of the rising aspirations of the poor for a happier and brighter tomorrow. They dare to challenge the practices that underpin the social and economic authority of both the older and newly emerging dominant classes. An important aspect of this change has been the struggle of the rural poor to exercise their franchise — a right that has long been denied to them by those who once wielded enormous power throughout the state. Thus, they do not just aspire to achieve economic empowerment but also to strive hard for acquiring wider political, social and human rights — an objective that they have succeeded in realising to an extent.

In this situation, the surplus-hungry landlords and rich peasants confronted the militant movement of the poor peasants and agricultural workers with their political mobilisation on the basis of castes. Identity politics on the basis of caste became the dominant trend. To the extent the identity politics of caste succeeded in the vertical mobilisation on the basis of caste, the horizontal solidarity on the basis of class failed. This inevitably stalled, to a large extent, the mobilisation of the poor on the basis of their class. Since the only source of the power of the working poor is their collectivity, the vertical caste-based political mobilisation inevitably disempowered them economically as well as politically.

The sources of power of the landlords and rich peasant lying in money/wealth remained intact or increased. This disjunction between the political mobilisation on the basis of caste and economic mobilisation on the basis of class lies at the root of the crisis of governance on the one hand and the impasse of the militant movement of the labouring poor of rural Bihar on the other. The movement of the labouring poor, however, also suffers from some serious internal drawbacks. Confronted with the successful caste-based mobilisation by the exploiting classes against the backdrop of a strong caste-class nexus, some of the organisations leading the movement, such as the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC), have been lured into identifying class with caste. This is what lies at the root of indiscriminate violence and inter-group killings among the militants. There has been influx of a large number of criminals also in the movement who are not driven by any ideology but simply by the greed and impulse of crime. Overemphasis on the wage issue too has led to the alienation of some sections of the poor and middle peasants from the movement. If the movement of the rural proletariat and semi-proletariat has to succeed in realising its cherished goal, it must transcend the present impasse resulting from assuming the identity of caste and class while taking on the reality of the caste-class nexus.

The socio-political impasse of Bihar is, thus, clearly rooted in its failure to affect an agrarian transition through the 'landlord path'. The Gandhian path of 'land to the tiller' recommended by Kumarappa Committee to affect the abolition of tenancy still remains the only viable way to do away with the feudalistic constraints on social development. Once tenancy is abolished, the development of the agricultural infrastructure with stress on irrigation will have to be given priority because capitalist growth of agriculture is critically dependent on assured perennial irrigation. Rural electrification is crucial for both agriculture as well as non-agricultural diversification. Needless to say, other infrastructure investments will further help in boosting agricultural growth. All this necessitates heavy public investment. The availability of cheap institutional credit to the farmers for productive proposes is another critical need. However, on balance, the emphasis should be on productive public investment rather than only the provision of subsidy to accelerate agricultural growth. It is unfortunate that militant peasant and agricultural movements are perceived by the state more as a law and order problem rather than a development issue. Class contradictions in the industrial or agrarian sectors remain dormant in a situation of growth and become militant-manifest in that of stagnation. This worldwide experience needs to be internalised by policymakers in Bihar. Widespread criminalisation of the society and politics mainly due to lack of avenues of productive employment is probably the most important challenge which the entire civil society and intelligentsia must seriously ponder. Unless drastic actions are taken in this regard, severe catastrophe will be the inevitable consequence.

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Notes

1. The state (along with Orissa), which was a part of the Bengal Presidency, was bifurcated from Bengal in 1912 after a movement by the local elites against the Bengal 'dominance. In 1933, Orissa was carved out as a separate state from Bihar. The third division took place in November 2000 when the mineral-rich and industrialised part of the plateau region was carved out and a separate state of Jharkhand was created.
2. Some of the most important peasant and rural labour organisations active in Bihar are Mazdoor Kisan Sangharsh Samiti (MKSS) of the CPI (ML) Party Unity, Bihar Pradesh Kisan Sabha (BPKS) of the CPI (ML) Liberation, People's War and Maoist Communist Centre (MCC). Beside, the peasants and agricultural labourers wings of the CPI and a few voluntary organisations have their pockets of influence. However, over the years, the militant organisations have considerably gained at the expense of these organisations that believe and participate in parliamentary elections.
3. Kuanar Sena (Rajputs), Bhumi Sena (Kurmis), Lorik Sena (Yadavas), Brahmarshi Sena (Bhumihars), Sunlight Seva (Rajputs, Brahmins and Pathan Muslims), Savarna Liberation Front (Bhumihars), etc. are the oft-heard caste-based armed organisations of the landlords/big peasants/upper middle peasants with their areas of influence in different parts of the state. But these gangs are mostly operating at informal levels.

The Kisan Sangh, which is patronised by a few politicians, is somewhat a more structured organisation of the landlords/big peasants/middle peasants belonging to a few dominant castes like Kurmi, Yadav, Bhumihar and Rajput in three or four districts. Of all the private armies, the Ranveer Sena (dominated by Bhumihars) is most dreaded and has taken part in several massacres during the last few years and is more organised than the other groups.

4. The peasant mobilisation and militant movement have spread to almost all the districts of south Bihar although it is strongest in Jehanabad, Bhojpur, Aurangabad and Gaya districts. In recent years, it has spread to several north Bihar districts, such as Saran, Champaran East, Champaran West, Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, etc.
5. See Report of the Backward Classes Commission, Second Part (Vol. III to VII), Chapter IX, p. 15, Government of India, New Delhi.
6. See Chaudhuri, Binay Bhushan, "The Process of Depeasantisation in Bengal and Bihar" in Sen, 1979, p.31.
7. From 1.74 lakh acres in 1936, the land transfer increased to 1.94 lakh acres in 1937 and 2-66 lakh acres in 1940. See Sen, 1979, p.32.
8. An enquiry into the conditions of Khirhar village in North Bihar in 1939 found that the most numerous class was represented by the landless labourers who formed 72 per cent of the rural population. See Sarkar (1939).
9. According to the 1921 Census, more than 20 lakh people from Bihar had migrated and a large number of them belonged to upper castes as well who could not engage in manual work in the villages because of caste taboos.
10. See Prasad (1986) and LBSNAA (1991a) for some glaring cases of failures of land ceiling acts .
11. Karyanand Sharma, the famous peasant leader of the erstwhile pre-Independence days, was the leader of these struggles by the Communist Party of India.
12. The struggle was launched under the leadership of the legendary Nakshatra Malakar.
13. The first survey (1981-82) was a part of the larger study on 'Dynamics of Employment and Poverty in India' which was carried out in a stratified random sample of 12 villages in the then plains of Bihar, which incidentally comprises present Bihar after the formation of the state of Jharkhand consisting of plateau region. Along with this author, the members of the research team were Pradhan H. Prasad, Gerry Rodgers and S. Gupta. For details, see Prasad, Rodgers et.al (1986). The resurvey in the same villages was carried out during 1990-2000 by the Institute for Human Development with support from Actionaid and National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD). For details, see Sharma et.al. (2002).
14. In the study, the various castes have been categorised in nine categories : i. Forward I (Brahmin+Kayastha); ii. Forward II (Bhumihar+Rajput); iii. Backward I (lower backward); iv. Yadav; v. Koeri; vi. Kurmi; vii. Other Backward II; viii. Scheduled castes; ix. Muslims. While category (iii) is that of lower backward castes, most of which are service castes, categories (iv), (v), (vi) and (vii) represent the upper backward or middle castes. Among them, Yadav, Koeri and Kurmi are not only numerically large, but over the years have also become economically and politically dominant in most parts of the state.
15. Class in this study has been defined broadly on the basis of generation of surplus value in agriculture and its appropriation through the labour process. At the lowest rung of this classification is (i) attached agricultural labour households (those hiring out agricultural wage labour, regardless of other activities and tied to their employers through loan and/or land); followed by (ii) unattached agricultural labour households (similar as above but without ties); (iii) poor-middle peasants (engaged in cultivation without either hiring in or hiring out of wage labour and not practicing leasing out of land); (iv) middle peasants (engaged in cultivation with hiring in but without any hiring out of wage labour, not practicing leasing out of land and participation of both male and female household labour in self-cultivation); (v) big peasants (same as middle peasants except that women members of the household do not take part in self-cultivation); and

(vi) landlords including gentlemen farmers (the former characterised by the practice of leasing out land and the latter by the practice of providing only supervisory labour in cultivation though not practicing leasing out of land). These six agriculture-based classes are finally supplemented by another class of non-agricultural households (who are not dependent on agriculture and mostly include artisan households).

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