

The Evolution of Agrarian Society in South Bihar

South Bihar is presently in a state of great social ferment. It is also one of the epicenters of rural poverty and rural violence in contemporary India. While not explicitly seeking to trace the origins of the present crisis in the region, the Work nevertheless touches upon some of its historical antecedents. More specifically, the Work is a regional historical study of demographic trends, agricultural practices and production, trade and rural society in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries of the British India districts of Gaya and Shahabad, presently comprising the districts of Rohtas, Bhojpur, Gaya, Nawadah, Jehanabad and Aurangabad.

The erstwhile districts of Gaya and Shahabad could be broadly divided into three distinct eco-zones: the wheat and barley growing gangetic diara, which frequently reaped a bumper 'bhadoi' harvest of rice and maize as well; the sparsely cultivated highlands towards the south of the districts; and, sandwiched between these two eco-zones, the low-lying and extremely fertile rice bowl.

Spatially distinct, and largely following its ecological lay-out, the traditional cropping pattern was also extremely complex. Indeed, the practice of 'paira' and mixed cropping made the cropping statistics difficult to compile, making the early Agricultural Statistics of British India suspect for this region, and thereby making our inquiry even more difficult.

Traditional agricultural practices were finely tuned to the terrain and to the seasons. Rice cultivation in South Bihar was a precarious operation dependant on an indigenous system of irrigation of great antiquity, and on the Rain Gods, which in turn spawned a rich agricultural folklore based on keen astral observations.

The Sone Canals gave a measure of agricultural security to the region. While stabilising annual yields, they also led to extension of the cultivated area in Gaya, although this extension was limited in Shahabad. The canals also resulted in an unexpected increase in rice acreage, at the cost of true rabi crops like wheat and barley. The rabi area did not diminish however, for the practice of 'paira' and mixed cropping not only persisted but also expanded along with the extension of rice acreage.

From around the beginning of the second decade of the twentieth century there was, however, a sharp and sustained tendency for a fall in rice acreage which is not easily explained. The decline cannot be attributed to price or to an intruding competing crop. The neglect and decay of the traditional irrigation network and attendant social relationships, probably a sine qua non for the delicately programmed rice cultivation, are possible explanations. The puzzle is not entirely solved, however, for the decline was greater in Shahabad, which was less dependant on the indigenous irrigation system than Gaya.

Sugar, opium and oilseeds were the main non-foodgrain crops in these districts. While linseed cultivation, the most important oilseed, increased over the period, opium, once considered to be a very valuable crop, was practically wiped out by 1920. Sugarcane cultivation spread rapidly consequent on the opening of the Sone canals, but tended to level off after sometime although it maintained its enhanced acreage. Commercial agriculture does not appear to have been primarily a forced process in the region, foisted on the cultivator on account of rent and credit obligations. The commercialisation of agriculture revealed the extent to which the better off cultivators were responsive to market forces as well as to technological change. Commercial agriculture never acquired great importance in the area, however, it being basically a zone of petty cultivation and subsistence agriculture.

Agricultural practices and technology remained by and large unchanged despite repeated and persistent attempts by government to promote scientific agriculture. The spectacular successes of 'Muzaffarnagar wheat', 'Khari sugarcane' and the 'Biheea iron-roller sugar mill' however indicate that there were no innate sociological barriers to innovation. Indian agricultural technology, although not as productive as that of China, was not really backward when compared to pre-industrial European productivity levels. As the visiting perceptive agronomist, Augustus Voelcker, pointed out, extant agricultural technology had innumerable subtle linkages in society. As a result innovation was always viewed sceptically. In an age where innovations were few and far in between and did not come in packages, there were good and valid reasons for the persistence of time tested devices.

The complex inter-relationship between tenurial structure, scientific experimentation, practical demonstrability and the organic nature of

technology was not easily understood by government, and this failure lay at the root of its dismal record in this sphere, especially in respect of plough technology. Landlords as a class contributed little to the spread of new technology. Most success stories of acceptance of innovation were enacted by better of agriculturists on lands held by them on cash rent.

There was a sustained secular upswing in agricultural prices practically throughout the period, and the terms of trade moved sharply in favour of agriculture. The construction of All Weather Roads and the Railways tended to integrate the markets in the district on the one hand, while increasing the pulls of external markets on the other. The latter at least partly explains why the amplitude of yearly fluctuations showed no definite tendency to decline despite increased stability in annual yields per acre. There were basically three inter-dependent tiers of trading activity -- long distance trade conducted by ' arhatiyas', trade between major trade centres conducted by 'ladu beparis', and trade within the village dominated by the 'grihasta bepari', who was also the chief source of agricultural credit and frequently an agriculturist himself.

The vast improvement in the communication network and the deepening of the market occasioned by the emergence of an intermediate rural strata gave a fillip to trading activity. In this process old trade routes lost their pre-eminence, traditional commodities like indigenous cotton cloth and paper lost their former importance, while trade in agricultural commodities and imported industrial goods grew.

Although crop yields and foodgrain availability are difficult to estimate precisely, it can nevertheless be asserted that the two districts not only produced sufficient foodgrain for self-consumption, but a substantial surplus for export as well. Foodgrain availability improved with the coming of canals and railways, although the latter cut both ways, as they took surpluses out of the area in good years.

The two districts could therefore be considered to be by and large immune to serious famine, especially in the post Canal and post-Railway era. The traditional 'pyne and ahari' (channel and tank) system of irrigation, the 'bhaoli'(produce/kind) rental structure, the complex but highly adaptable ('paira') cropping pattern, and the existence of some sort of a moral economy, were all time-honoured adaptive practices to ward off famine.

Exchange entitlements, however, have a relative autonomy of trends in foodgrain availability. While serious and successive harvest failure pressured all sections of society in one way or the other, the labouring poor and high caste marginal peasants were particularly disadvantaged. Distress continued to be particularly severe in the inaccessible and agriculturally backward southern tracts, which felt the benefits of Canals, All Weather Roads and Railways least of all. On account of its remoteness government never quite managed to provide adequate or timely relief to this area. Famine and scarcity killed mainly by magnifying the forces of death prevalent in pre-famine years, and not by outright starvation as such.

Although the forces of modernisation stabilised crop yields, assisted in the transportation of foodgrain in times of crisis, enabled the distressed sections to emigrate, and provided employment and gratuitous relief to the indigent, thereby alleviating distress in times of harvest failure, the forces of modernisation also tended to undermine some of the traditional mechanisms which acted as insurance against famine. There was no serious famine after 1870, but the post 1920 experience shows that these districts became famine prone subsequently.

The double-edged impact of the forces of modernisation is also evident in demographic trends. Rather predictably, demographic patterns, like cropping patterns, followed the ecological lay-out. The northern portions of the districts were far more populous than the backward and hilly southern thanas, attaining densities comparable with the highest in the world. Rather curiously, however, the demographic logic in the two zones was also distinct. The southern thanas showed a remarkable stability, while population rose in the northern thanas right up to the last decade of the nineteenth century, before falling off and declining. Although there was considerable immigration to, and emigration from, the districts in times of growth and distress, (involving mainly labourers to Shahabad and labourers out of Gaya, while higher caste agriculturalists migrated from Shahabad to seek their fortune overseas), the population growth rates were basically determined by natural propagation, that is by the difference between birth and death rates.

It is ironic that the forces which contributed to the growth of population, such as the improved communication network, canals and the development of agriculture, should also have been responsible for its subsequent decline. These developmental works also brought disease in their

wake, namely the 'Shahabad fever', facilitated a rapid spread of bubonic plague (traditionally considered to be a creeping epizootic in the Medieval West), while traditional high mortality diseases like cholera, small-pox and stomach related infections continued to claim a large number of human lives. Towards the end of the nineteenth century the demographic expansion in the areas affected by developmental works was halted, and the sex ratio, traditionally weighted against males, was now tilting against females, who perished in large numbers during the plague epidemics.

In the opening years of the nineteenth century, Francis Buchanan described a four tiered rural social structure comprising the landed elite, the trading class, artisans and cultivators. By 1920 this social structure had yielded to a three tiered one, namely, the old landed aristocracy, the high and middle caste agriculturists and the labouring poor.

The big estate system had always been a very porous one, involving a number of intermediaries between landlord and peasant. The 'thikadar' was a power in his own right, while the village 'patwari' was always a little inscrutable, whose great power and influence could be wielded in surprising directions. As landlord incomes diminished on account of the rapid fragmentation of estates, inflation and the demands made on their dwindling income by an extravagant lifestyle, landlords attempted to do away with one set of intermediaries, namely the 'thikadars', especially after the Court of Wards had established that direct management could be both efficient and profitable. This however reduced their distance from the surplus appropriation network, and they came to be seen more and more as grasping landlords rather than as rulers of men as such, for the estate staff such as 'amlas' and 'gomashtas', were merely instruments in the hands of landlords. There was a curious paradox in the fact that British rule ultimately undermined the very forces it consciously sought to foster, and with whom it forged a tacit alliance. The logic of the loss of political power and monopoly over the use of force, the development of the rule of law, the growth of communications and agriculture, tended to undermine the old structure on which the traditional authority and leadership of the old landed aristocracy was based.

The old landed aristocracy did not, however, decline as a social force or fade away. But it had to now contend with new social forces which took advantage of the changing environment. The rise of an intermediate strata of middle and high caste agriculturists was facilitated not only by agricultural

expansion, terms of trade and the new modernising and economic forces, but above all by the codification of customary law determining surplus appropriation and distribution : tenancy law.

Tenancy Law had an almost revolutionary impact on social relationships as old rights were redefined. There seemed good reasons why the landlord should have profited most from this redefinition-- his theoretical share was much higher than his actual share, the new premium on the written word and his economic and social clout. The over zealousness of landlords to take full advantage of these new rights while abandoning their traditional roles as investors in irrigation works and as providers in years of scarcity, however, drew a spirited resistance from atleast a section of better off agriculturists. Indeed, the 'landlord reaction', which was manifest towards the terminal point of this study, merely added fuel to fire. Landlord and peasant now locked horns in an increasingly bitter tussle on issues like commutation of produce-rents, the 'Sir' and 'bakasht' claims of landlords, and retention/extension of occupancy rights by the peasant. The bitter tussle between landlord and peasant culminated in the Kisan Sabha movement led by Swami Sahajanand Saraswati in the 1930's. At first the Kisan Sabha and the Congress were practically indistinguishable from each other, and even when the two fell out there was considerable overlap between the two in terms of the social strata they sought to mobilise. The Congress, however, was basically a small landlord Party in Bihar, which prevented it from adopting the radical posture of the U.P. Congress led by Jawaharlal Nehru. The Kisan Sabha, on the other hand, appealed chiefly to the cultivating strata of tier II of rural society. As long as these parties articulated issues like Bakasht, restoration of confiscated land, forcible cultivation, etcetra they enjoyed immense popularity among the emergent intermediate strata of rural society. The Congress and Kisan Sabha movements, whatever the conflict between the two, had a symbiotic relationship, and their grass-roots political activities sustained each other. An irreconcilable cleavage between the two crystallised only around 1940, when Swami Sahajanand, under the influence of Marxist ideology, sought to make the Kisan Sabha basically a party of the labouring poor. The labouring poor, comprising some 20% of the rural population, however, still lay outside the arena of conflict, and could not yet sustain a mass movement. Moreover, purely ideological appeals like anti-war propaganda, which Swami Sahajanand now advocated in lieu of the earlier appeals, appeared vacuous to the social strata to which these appeals were addressed. The popularity of the Kisan Sabha in the late 1930's was never based on the support of the labouring poor, with whom the

intermediate strata had a relationship of exploitation. Indeed, when antagonists of the Kisan Sabha sought to embarrass the Kisan Sabha in its formative years, they could find no better way of doing so than by speaking on behalf of this social strata. Largely absent from the revenue records, and surfacing only in times of economic crisis, this group included both free labourers and bonded labourers. They lived on the margins of subsistence and emerged as the most vulnerable section of rural society. In the early years of the nineteen forties Swami Sahajanand Saraswati was, like Thomas Munzer, a rural messiah trapped in a historical time warp.