

BOOK

I am a civil servant by profession, specialising in finance and macroeconomic matters, with research experience and an abiding interest in social transformation and rural history. I hope to exploit the synergies arising out of these two roles to study the transformation of rural economy and society over almost two centuries in South Bihar, and to address issues which are of contemporary relevance. Since the proposal will address contemporary issues, it would adhere to what Geoffrey Barraclough defined as 'contemporary history'. It will take current issues as its starting point (endemic caste and class violence, the persistence of poverty, narrowness of democratic decision-making, demographic explosion, agricultural backwardness, market distortions, etc., the list would be fine tuned as the study goes on), and work back in time to as early as the time before Pax Britannica left its imprint on rural society. The work would inexorably involve a re-assessment, of imperialism, nationalism and the functioning of democratic and developmental institutions.

The hub around which my work would grow is my doctoral dissertation, which is an in-depth study of the old, undivided districts of Gaya and Shahabad in South Bihar, India, from 1860 – 1920. These districts have since been sub-divided into a number of districts: Rohtas, Bhojpur, Gaya, Nawadah, Jehanabad and Aurangabad. The broad themes of the dissertation were demographic trends, agricultural practices, technology and production, trade and rural society. I also attempted comparisons with medieval Europe and China at comparable stages of development. I have already published a small part of the dissertation through three articles on long-term demographic trends, agricultural geography, and bubonic plague in academic journals. Most of the remaining portion of the dissertation, to the extent it dovetails with the present proposal, would hopefully be published as part of the study presently contemplated, which will also try and locate developments in the region with reference to global patterns.

The project would involve some amount of archival research, library work, analysis of election data, interaction with scholars across a wide range of disciplines (political scientists, psephologists, sociologists, anthropologists, demographers, medical experts, agronomists, development economists and historians: south asian, medieval european and Chinese), and field visits to the area of study, including interaction with local officials. I

feel that my experience as a researcher and civil servant would enable me to successfully tap diverse and innovative sources of information.

South Bihar was putatively one of the more tranquil and well-administered regions when it came under the Crown in the mid-nineteenth century. Presently, however, it is in great social ferment, being one of the epicenters of rural poverty and violence in contemporary India. The Study will try to trace the origins of the present crisis in the region, and touch upon some of its historical antecedents. More specifically, the Study would deal the following themes:

1. The rural infrastructure: communications, development of the market, water-harvesting, material life.
2. The economy: agriculture, industry, services, technology; issues relating to growth and development.
3. Demographic patterns: growth rates, vital statistics, disease.
4. Social and power relations, including issues of law, nationalism, imperialism, peasant societies, banditry & democratization.
5. Famine, foodgrain availability and exchange entitlements.
6. Cultural changes: the urban and external interactions.

The study would have a broad sweep in terms of themes, issues, and historical comparisons, but it would be grounded strongly in regional rural history. I have at the back of my mind the broad vision informing Barrington Moore's classic on different routes to modernisation, and Fernand Braudel's on the Mediterranean. While I have no scholarly pretensions, I hope my work would reflect the range of themes and issues which I have handled and studied over the years, which would be apparent from the attached 'personal statement'. I recognise that, in an age of global economic, financial and cultural integration, information technology, and the dwarfing of geography, so to speak, rural history in itself is of limited contemporary interest. What I hope to do is to address issues of contemporary interest through a study of an unfinished and ongoing rural transformation, and locate this within global changes at work. The Study, therefore, while continuing to be classified as essentially a work of rural history, would nevertheless appeal to a wide range of scholars interested in issues of growth, modernisation and social transformation.