

Pursuit of a Separate State: Colonialism and the Biharis' Quest for Equality

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Abstract:This research paper delves into the historical context of the quest for an independent Bihar during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It explores the multifaceted discrimination faced by Biharis in various domains, including employment and education, which galvanized their call for regional autonomy. The discriminatory practices against Biharis in public services, particularly in the subordinate judicial services and educational appointments, are examined in detail. The skewed distribution of government jobs, where Bengalis were favoured over Biharis, is analyzed, emphasizing the systemic injustice and regional disparities. Furthermore, this paper underscores the significance of Hindu-Muslim unity within the movement for the demand for a separate Bihar. The socio-political movements during this period highlighted a united front among Bihari intelligentsia, irrespective of religious affiliations, against the systemic discrimination by the colonial authorities. The research underscores how the demand for a separate state was not merely a regional

sentiment but a response to the larger issue of discrimination and the pursuit of equitable opportunities in a diverse, multi-lingual, and multi-cultural landscape. The unity among Biharis, transcending religious boundaries, was a powerful force driving their quest for regional identity and autonomy. This paper provides historical insight into a significant episode in India's struggle for self-determination and regional representation.

Keywords: Regional Identity in Bihar, Sachchidanand Sinha, Creation of Modern state of Bihar, Bihar Model of Secularism.

Introduction

The partition of Bihar from Bengal in 1912, during British colonial rule in India, represented a pivotal moment in the development of a distinct regional identity rooted in sub-nationalism. This movement was predominantly led by the westernized Bihari elites who played a central role in shaping its course. The character of this regional and economic consciousness in Bihar was profoundly shaped by the interplay of three major factors, as identified by Shaibal Gupta, the Bihari intelligentsia, Bengali settlers, and British imperialism. First and foremost, the Bihari intelligentsia, comprising educated individuals from the region, served as the intellectual vanguards of the

separation movement. Their vision and articulation of Bihar's unique identity and interests were instrumental in mobilizing public support. Secondly, the presence of Bengali settlers in Bihar added complexity to the dynamics of the movement. These settlers brought with them their cultural, linguistic, and political influences, which both enriched and complicated the process of defining Bihar's distinct identity. Lastly, the backdrop of British imperialism played a decisive role. The policies of the colonial administration, often driven by divide-and-rule strategies, had a significant impact on the trajectory of the separation movement. It was within this context that the Bihari intelligentsia, influenced by their exposure to Western ideas, seized the opportunity to assert Bihar's unique regional identity and economic interests.

The partition of Bengal by the British government marked a momentous event in Indian history. The campaign for the detachment of Bihar from Bengal started to gather pace in the latter half of the 19th century, as Aryendra Chakravartty explains. This movement was primarily driven by two significant factors. Firstly, the people of the region began to perceive Bihar as a neglected and marginalized area, one that had diminished in importance to the rulers of India. This sense of neglect fuelled the desire for a

separate identity and recognition. Furthermore, the unearthing of the ancient Mauryan capital of Pataliputra near present-day Patna in 1895 had significant implications. This discovery not only evoked feelings of a magnificent historical legacy but also acted as a haunting reminder of a bygone era that appeared almost impossible to resurrect. This historical connection played a pivotal role in shaping the aspirations of the people of Bihar and their call for a distinct identity. The year 1894 held significant importance, as it marked the first occasion when a formal memorandum was presented to Sir Charles Elliott. He was visiting the historic city of Gaya, which was deeply intertwined with the ancient history of Bihar. The formal proposal was presented by the Committee of Reception to Sir Elliott and read as follows:

"We crave leave to submit that it is the fate of Behar that it forms, for administrative purposes, a mere appendage of the larger province of Bengal. Perhaps by reason of the very position which that province occupies, as the most advanced in India, the interests of Behar and its people are liable to lost sight of; but we earnestly hope that its importance as a separate province, containing a separate people, will be always consistently recognised in matters of

legislation and administration".

Before the British East India Company's dominion in Bihar, Orissa, and Bengal, this region, notably Patna, was synonymous with affluence and eminence. Nevertheless, with the advent of English authority, the area's prosperity took a downturn. Additionally, the integration of Bihar, Orissa, and Bengal into the Bengal Presidency under a unified administrative framework fostered a common perception that the British administration primarily centered its attention on Calcutta, the capital of British India, seemingly disregarding the broader welfare of the entire region. Notably, the propagation of the English language and its influence within the Bengal Presidency was largely confined to the British administrative hubs in Calcutta. This phenomenon gave rise to a Bengali middle class that not only dominated administrative roles but also occupied various contemporary positions in hospitals, courts, and educational institutions. Meanwhile, Biharis, who had once held an almost exclusive monopoly on white-collar government jobs until 1835, grappled with employment challenges, primarily stemming from their limited access to opportunities for attaining proficiency in this new language. Moreover, commencing in the mid-nineteenth century, Bengalis began cultivating a sense of cultural superiority. This

perception was not solely shaped by their early exposure to English education but was equally rooted in their deep connection to the Bengali language and literature, which stood as defining components of Bengali culture. Frequently, this perspective led Bengalis, as they ventured into northern India, to maintain a certain distance from local communities, where such conduct was often construed as a manifestation of professional and cultural superiority. The perception of cultural and intellectual superiority was breeding discontent among the Bihari intelligentsia, who were yearning for equal opportunities in the new power structure of the Colonial establishment. In the 19th century, Biharis encountered discrimination on various fronts, frequently to the benefit of Bengalis. This discrimination was conspicuous in employment opportunities, access to English education, and the cultural dynamics of the era, as articulated by Mahesh Narayan and Sachchidananda Sinha:

"The reason why Behar has for years demanded separation from Bengal is perceptible to the meanest understanding. A Government in Calcutta is not always in touch with Behar Problems. In the very nature of things we can at the best receive but step-motherly treatment from the ruler of Bengal and Behar. The

Lieutenant-Governor can pay us one or two hurried visits during the whole tenure of his office...and his surroundings being wholly Bengalee, when our interests clash with those of Bengal, it is unnecessary to say which of the two prevails.

Distinguished English-speaking Biharis such as Sachchidananda Sinha and Mahesh Narayan, who were instrumental in promoting the concept of a distinct state for Bihar, expressed significant dissent against this situation. In 1894, they took the initiative to launch a newspaper named "The Behar Times". This publication served as a medium for disseminating editorials and columns that staunchly advocated for the cause of an autonomous Bihar. The movement for the autonomy of Bihar saw a significant surge in the period leading up to the partition of Bengal in 1905. During this time, figures like Sinha, Narayan, and other Biharis strongly emphasized that the best means to achieve political unity among the diverse communities in the country was to separate Bihar from Bengal. Unfortunately, their hopes were dashed when the British government decided to partition Bengal based on religious divisions rather than administrative considerations.

During the late 19th century, Biharis experienced systemic discrimination under British colonial rule,

particularly in the domains of administration, education, and various other fields. The preference for Bengalis over Biharis was apparent and had a significant influence on the call for the creation of a separate state of Bihar. In terms of administration, English-educated Biharis encountered growing challenges in securing government positions, as these roles were predominantly reserved for Bengalis. The British authorities exhibited a preference for Bengalis, especially within the Bengal Presidency, where Calcutta served as the central administrative hub. This preference not only deprived Biharis of equal employment opportunities but also instilled a sense of regional neglect. Discrimination also extended to the realm of education, where Biharis had limited access to English-medium schools, a primary pathway to government employment. These schools were primarily concentrated in Calcutta, which constrained educational prospects for Biharis.

The prevailing injustices fuelled a growing sense of frustration and disenfranchisement among the English-speaking Bihari intelligentsia. Prominent figures like Sachchidananda Sinha and Mahesh Narayan utilized platforms such as *The Behar Times* to express their grievances and advocate for the establishment of a separate state of Bihar. They

contended that a distinct Bihar would provide Biharis with the opportunity to address their own socio-economic and political challenges, rather than being overshadowed by the more privileged Bengalies. This grassroots movement, born out of discrimination, ultimately played a pivotal role in driving the demand for a unique identity and political autonomy for Bihar, ultimately leading to the partition and formation of the state of Bihar in 1912. This research paper aims to highlight the various forms of discrimination encountered by Biharis and the significance of the 'Bihar Model for Hindu-Muslim unity' in the province's separation.

Domains of Discrimination

A century ago, Bihar thrived as a region where both agriculture and manufacturing prospered. Its towns served as vital hubs for trade and agriculture, and its people enjoyed prosperity. However, over time, the decline of trade and manufacturing left them in a state of enduring poverty. During the 19th century, agriculture stood as the bedrock of Bihar's economy, and the region was renowned for its fertile soil and robust agricultural practices. This period witnessed a diverse range of crops being cultivated, including rice, wheat, pulses, sugarcane, and indigo. The extensive network of the Ganges and its tributaries provided

abundant irrigation, contributing to high agricultural yields. Bihar's fertile Gangetic plains supported a flourishing agrarian society. Nevertheless, by the late 19th century, signs of agricultural decline became evident. Various factors played a role in this downturn. The newly English-educated Bihari intelligentsia recognized Bihar's economic deterioration and periodically voiced their concerns through channels like newspapers and petitions to the Colonial Government. The economic backwardness had also led to the migration of Biharis in search of employment and opportunities. It was estimated that more than 85% of the Hindustani servants who came to Calcutta were Bihari, and they were often the first to bear the brunt of economic hardships, especially during times of insufficient rainfall. The decline of indigenous industries in Bihar had a profound impact on the lives of its villagers. What was once a cheerful and vibrant outlook transformed significantly. While occasional efforts were made to revive these fading industries, they largely met with failure. The Behar Times, in particular, stressed the urgency of the situation, emphasizing the need for organized and systematic efforts to address this issue. It was during this period that the discrimination faced by Biharis became particularly noticeable and was a driving force behind

their demand for a separate state.

Biharis encountered substantial hurdles when attempting to secure government positions, particularly within subordinate judicial and educational services. Their presence in these roles was notably scarce, and even those who managed to obtain positions often received disproportionately lower salaries compared to their peers from other regions. This imbalance was starkly evident in the prevalence of Bengalis occupying government positions in Bihar, underscoring the unjust practices in the recruitment and selection processes. The British colonial administration demonstrated a preference for candidates from Bengal over Biharis, particularly in critical administrative roles, further perpetuating the dominance of Bengalis. This preference was rooted in the belief of British authorities that Bengalis possessed superior English language skills and education, essential qualifications for government employment. Aspirants from Bihar found themselves at a disadvantage as they had limited access to quality English education, and the colonial government had inadequately established educational institutions within Bihar. Consequently, Biharis faced significant challenges in competing on an equal footing with Bengalis, who enjoyed a more favourable position in the employment landscape.

The Bihari intelligentsia held deep concerns regarding their underrepresentation in public services. Despite a limited number of appointments in the Executive branch of the Provincial service during the late 19th century, Biharis felt that their presence was significantly below what they considered their fair share. The Behar Times, in 1898, compiled data from the quarterly Civil list, revealing a stark imbalance in the employment of Subordinate Judges in Bengal. Within this category, there were 7 Subordinate Judges receiving a monthly salary of Rs. 1,000, 18 earning Rs. 800 per month, and 88 with a monthly salary of Rs. 600. Additionally, they believed that 4 officiating appointees were also receiving a monthly salary of Rs. 600. In total, 80 Subordinate Judges in Bengal collectively earned Rs. 42,000 per month. Alarmingly, out of this total, only 3 were Biharis, each drawing a salary of Rs. 600 per month. This meant that Biharis constituted a mere 5 percent of the total number of Sub-Judges employed in the province and received only 4 percent of the total salary expenditure on Subordinate Judges. Such a glaring disparity was undeniably disheartening for the people of Bihar.

In the Educational Services, the situation was equally dire for Biharis, as they held a mere 3 out of 103 appointments. Promotions from the Subordinate

Service to higher positions were exceedingly rare. When such promotions did occur, the elevated officers were placed at the lowest rank in terms of pay, regardless of their previous positions in the Subordinate Service. This placement happened without considering the relative positions of the provincial officers who were removed from their cadre during promotions. Often, this was due to the mere chance of holding collegiate posts rather than being based on superior qualifications. Bihar's educational landscape added to the challenge. With only one college in the province, Biharis faced a significant disadvantage. Vacancies for collegiate and equivalent appointments were scarce and typically filled by senior candidates from Bengal. This scenario further marginalized Biharis in terms of career opportunities and advancements in the educational services.

Discrimination against Biharis during the 19th century extended beyond public services and encompassed appointments in educational institutions. This unequal treatment resulted in profound resentment among the Bihari populace. In the field of education, the dominance of Bengalis in appointments was conspicuous, especially in key positions within schools and colleges. The colonial administration displayed a preference for candidates from Bengal for

these roles, creating an imbalance in access to quality education and employment opportunities for Biharis. Biharis often found themselves marginalized in terms of faculty and administrative roles in educational institutions, while Bengalis enjoyed a more privileged status. This unequal representation had widespread implications, limiting the influence and opportunities for Biharis in the realm of education and impeding their access to quality instruction and administrative positions. The deep-seated resentment within the Bihari community transcended regional pride; it mirrored the larger issue of systemic bias and injustice they encountered. The discrimination in educational appointments further fuelled the demand for increased representation and fairness in recruitment processes. The people of Bihar sought to address these disparities and secure a more equitable position in all aspects of public life. This drive for justice and equal opportunities was an integral part of their struggle for autonomy and recognition. The Quasid writes:

"The Union of the administration of Bengal and Behar,... is no more suitable, than for a crow and bulbul, or an Englishman and Frenchman, to live together".

The Bihari community strongly advocated for the appointment of educated individuals to provincial

courts, which prompted the issuance of an official circular. Unfortunately, bureaucratic indifference to the concerns of the Biharis resulted in the circular remaining dormant, with no practical implementation. The Editor of the publication acknowledged the positive response of the Muslims, especially in Bihar, who had shown their readiness to participate in this endeavour. However, the primary grievance of the Biharis stemmed from the perceived overrepresentation of Bengalis in various administrative positions, which had a detrimental effect on other social groups in British India. Although an earlier circular had recommended the selection of educated natives of Bihar for court positions in the province, this guideline was initially followed by administrative officers but eventually lost its effectiveness. Bengalis once again gained prominence in these roles, and they took an active role in scrutinizing and reporting on other employees, leading to their dismissals and the appointment of their own relatives and associates. This occurred without due consideration for the fact that individuals from Bihar were relatively new to these positions and were still in the early stages of their education. The Biharis were aggrieved by this situation, which further fuelled their demand for fair representation and justice in the

employment sector.

An illustrative example highlights the case of the Bengali headmaster at Bhagalpur's station school, which led to demands for his removal. In a detailed article, the editor of Nadir-ul-Akhbar elaborated on the substantial disparities in language and traditions that prevailed between Bengalis and the people of Bihar. This formed a persuasive argument in favour of replacing the Bengali headmaster with a Hindi-speaking individual. In this context, Quasid's articles shed light on the disparities that Biharis faced in terms of state patronage concerning appointments in non-Bengali speaking regions. Quasid's observations indicate that the trend was deeply unfavourable to the local population. The influence of Bengalis, who received preferential treatment when appointed to roles in non-Bengali-speaking areas, is highlighted. Quasid underscores the tendency for newcomers from England to initially arrive in Calcutta, where they often interacted with Bengalis. Subsequently, when these individuals were posted in Bihar, they were often accompanied by Bengali colleagues who were then elevated to prestigious positions. These Bengali appointees, in turn, tended to favour their fellow caste-members, leaving the impoverished Biharis at a disadvantage. One

particularly egregious aspect that Quasid emphasizes is the appointment of Bengali Head Masters in schools across Bihar. Given the significant linguistic and cultural differences between Bihar and Bengal, this practice was viewed as highly unjustified and detrimental to the local population's interests. The presence of Bengali Head Masters in Bihar's schools not only contributed to the perpetuation of this disparity but also hindered the development of local educational institutions. Moreover, Quasid points out that the construction of a railway line connecting Bihar and Bengal exacerbated the situation. Bengalis from Calcutta came to Bihar for work, but they often treated it as a temporary visit, as they returned to Bengal via the railway after completing their assignments. This shift in the dynamics implied that Bihar was no longer seen as the land of their adoption, as it may have been in earlier times. This resulted in a further disconnect between the Bengali community and the local populace in Bihar. Discrimination against Biharis during the British Raj took on both overt and subtle forms. While some manifestations were visible, others were more discreet. Examples of subtle discrimination included the neglect of the Hindi language at Calcutta University and biases against Bihari students in the allocation of scholarships, among other less

conspicuous practices. These forms of discrimination, although less apparent, were deeply impactful and contributed to the overall discontent and grievances of the Bihari community.

The Bihar Model for Hindu-Muslim Unity

The quest for a distinct Bihar province aligned with the increasing communal tensions in India. Hindu-Muslim riots were becoming more frequent, and communities were becoming increasingly polarized. However, the movement for a separate Bihar was unique in that it fostered camaraderie between the two communities, as they came together for a common cause. The first signs of this unity were evident in a report published in the *Murgh-i-Sulaiman*, titled "Behar for Beharees". This represented the initial instance when the request for Bihar's separation from Bengal was formally articulated. The newspaper passionately emphasized the necessity of the government's choice to appoint educated individuals from Bihar rather than Bengalis, especially in the Education Department. The crux of the matter revolved around the significant language barrier faced by young students. Bengali explanations provided by instructors proved to be just as perplexing and challenging as English. This language obstacle presented a major hindrance to effective learning, particularly for younger learners.

However, perhaps the most vital aspect of this appeal was the call for non-discrimination based on religion in the employment of Biharis. The newspaper insisted on the principle of equal opportunity for all Biharis, regardless of their religious affiliations. This plea was deeply rooted in the need for fairness and impartial treatment, transcending religious divides, and ensuring that employment opportunities were accessible to all without bias. This call was a crucial component of a broader movement aimed at rectifying systemic disparities, fostering inclusivity, and establishing a more equitable atmosphere in Bihar. It emphasized the significance of cultivating unity and inclusiveness in both the employment sector and education, with the ultimate goal of creating a fair and harmonious society where linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity were sources of celebration rather than division. Sachchidananda Sinha, in an article published in the Behar Times, expressed that "to us it does not matter whether it is a Hindu or a Mohammedan who gets the appointment so long as he is a Behari". This sentiment underscored the movement's commitment to equal opportunities and unity among Biharis, regardless of their religious background, in their pursuit of social justice and regional autonomy.

The Bihar model of Hindu-Muslim unity in the

quest for a separate Bihar from Bengal stood as a remarkable exemplar of communal harmony. It brought together people from diverse religious backgrounds who shared a common objective: regional autonomy and equitable representation. This unity transcended religious divides, underscoring the joint pursuit of socio-economic and political rights. The movement demonstrated that, in the face of systemic discrimination, communities could set aside religious differences to champion a shared cause. The call for a separate Bihar thus symbolized peaceful coexistence and served as a powerful assertion of regional identity and the demand for just treatment. Regarding Hindu-Muslim unity in Bihar, the Indian Patriot remarked:

"Behar is a unique example of Hindu-Muhammadan unity in public affairs. The patriotism of Behar is strongly territorial and towards the healthy development of such patriotism the Hindu and the Muhammadan leaders of that province have exerted themselves with conspicuous success, and their faith is amply realised in the unity of which the Behar Conference is an unmistakable expression. Towards the consummation of Hindu-Muhammadan unity the example of Behar cannot be without its effect in other parts of India".

Bihar's intelligentsia recognized the pivotal role of religious unity in their quest for improved prospects for Biharis and the establishment of a distinct state. This enlightened perspective was evident in their newspaper contributions. They understood that transcending religious divisions was essential for a united front against systemic discrimination. The collective opinion of the intelligentsia in the press showcased a broader understanding that regional progress could only be achieved by forging bonds of communal harmony and working together to rectify the disparities faced by Biharis. This emphasis on religious unity was a testament to their commitment to equitable opportunities and a separate state, reflecting the depth of their vision and dedication to the cause.

Under the leadership of Bihar's statesmen, a consistent approach of moderate politics prevailed. This moderation extended not only in their dealings with the government but also in their interactions with various segments of society. This spirit was vividly demonstrated during the political and industrial conferences in Muzaffarpur in 1909. Remarkably, half of the delegates at the political conference were Muslims, indicating a shared objective and a clear understanding of what pitfalls to avoid in the pursuit of peaceful progress. The exceptional mutual

understanding, harmony, and cooperation that characterized public life in Bihar were a direct result of the influence and example set by its leaders. They fostered a commendable spirit of compromise and cooperation in public affairs, where Hindus and Muslims acted in a national, rather than sectional, spirit. This atmosphere of mutual respect and consideration allowed for the exchange of ideas and opinions without division along religious lines, creating a harmonious and united Bihar. According to a report in the Beharee newspaper, the Muslims of Bihar have chosen to let the Bihar Muslim League wane, as long as it is established as an integral part of the All-Indian Muslim League, rather than maintaining it as a separate entity.

During a critical juncture in Bihar's political history, Maulana Mazharul Haque emerged as a prominent and influential leader in the late 19th and early 20th century. His role in shaping Bihar's political landscape was marked by a commitment to moderation and communal harmony. Maulana Mazharul Haque, known for his dedication to equitable representation and the promotion of moderate politics, navigated the complex political terrain of his time. He emphasized unity among diverse communities, particularly Hindus and Muslims, and actively worked

towards fostering cooperation and compromise, transcending religious and sectional divisions. As a prominent leader, Maulana Mazharul Haque championed peaceful progress and actively engaged in public life as an exemplar of moderation. His pragmatic approach and dedication to a unified and inclusive Bihar laid the foundation for a harmonious and cooperative political atmosphere in the region. His leadership was a testament to the importance of moderation and collaboration in addressing the socio-political challenges of the era, significantly influencing Bihar's socio-political landscape. Mazharul Haque's contributions extended to fostering Hindu-Muslim unity in Bihar. He countered the colonial government's attempts to stoke communal tensions, instead emphasizing harmony and cooperation among different communities. His establishment of Sadaqat Ashram served as a hub for promoting communal harmony, social justice, and political awareness. The Ashram played a pivotal role in organizing campaigns against British colonialism and communal discord, symbolizing Mazharul Haque's commitment to a united and inclusive India.

The call for a distinct Bihar state in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was more than just a regional ambition; it was a clear and resonant demand for

justice, fairness, and proper representation. Systematic discrimination against Biharis, with a predominant favouring of Bengalis by the British colonial government in various fields, served as a significant impetus for this demand. This discrimination had far-reaching implications for the socio-political landscape of Bihar. In the realm of administration, Biharis faced substantial challenges in securing government jobs and public service positions. The dominance of Bengalis, who were perceived as better equipped with English language skills, left Biharis at a disadvantage. The unequal distribution of government jobs perpetuated regional disparities and economic inequalities, motivating Biharis to advocate for fair representation and autonomy. In the sphere of education, the concentration of English language influence in Calcutta limited the opportunities for Biharis. Their historical monopoly on white-collar jobs until 1835 was eroded, and limited access to quality English education further hindered their competitiveness in the job market. The emergence of a Bengali middle class in various professions exacerbated these disparities. One of the most significant aspects of the demand for a separate Bihar was the emergence of Hindu-Muslim unity. This unique dimension of the movement embodied a politics of

moderation, where each community sought to accommodate the religious sentiments of the other. It represented a remarkable departure from the communal tensions of the period. Led by figures like Maulana Mazharul Haque, the intelligentsia fostered a spirit of compromise, cooperation, and harmony among Hindus and Muslims, transcending religious divisions in pursuit of their shared goals. In summary, the demand for a separate state of Bihar was a response to deep-rooted discrimination against Biharis, particularly in administration and education, and it was marked by a remarkable demonstration of Hindu-Muslim unity, underlining the pursuit of equitable representation and social justice in a diverse and multi-cultural context.

The quest for a separate Bihar state encompassed a complex struggle with profound implications. It emerged as a reaction to systematic discrimination against Biharis in various fields, a call for regional autonomy, and a remarkable example of communal harmony in the face of colonial challenges. Leaders like Maulana Mazharul Haque played a pivotal role in countering the colonial government's divisive narratives, emphasizing unity and cooperation among diverse communities. This struggle not only aimed to address regional identity and representation but also

stood as a call for communal unity in a diverse and multicultural landscape. It was a powerful assertion of the Biharis' determination to overcome discrimination and secure a brighter future for their people. The leaders of Bihar, with their commitment to moderation and unity, provided a model for the larger Indian struggle for freedom and harmony. In conclusion, the demand for a separate state of Bihar remains a significant chapter in the history of India's struggle for freedom and equality. Its legacy endures as a testament to the resilience, unity, and progressive spirit of Bihar in the face of adversity, and it continues to inspire those who value justice, equity, and communal harmony.?

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