

The Pre-Colonial Society of Bihar

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Abstract: In this research article I have studied the social condition of the people which seems to be quite challenging as the main stream Persian chronicles of the Mughal empire give vague picture of the Mughal society of Bihar suba. Therefore, I have consulted the traveler's accounts, family accounts of the zamindars, regional and local histories in vernacular languages, the District Gazetteers, Survey accounts and secondary sources. Generally, it appears that the medieval society of Bihar was divided among three classes- gentry class, middle class and common people or poor people. The noble or gentry class grabbed the maximum economic resources of the state and enjoyed the privilege position during the period. The second category was the middle class like the merchants, traders, sahkars, sarrafs, banjaras or karwani, Multani merchants, etc., who were rich and played significant role in supporting emperors and nobles financially at the time their needs. The third category was the largest and the poor population who were menial workers, labourers, small peasants, etc., and they also played important role and provided all kind of services to the nobles, emperors and pre modern phenomenon or

institution he immediately conjures up the picture of something which has existed immutably since 'times immemorial' and became vulnerable to destruction only with the arrival of the colonial system. One of the modern historians, L. Gopal says that the economic exploitation of the country took place in a large and systematic manner later on as India became poor after the establishment of the Muslim power.

The first and perhaps the most powerful counter argument came from D. D. Kosambi in his brilliant Introduction to the Study of Indian History, Bombay, 1956. Kosambi (on the views of Marx that Indian history consisted merely of the regimes of "successive intruders", without their affecting any change in the basic social structure), saw that such intrusions could not be without some effect. He recognized in particular that "the Islamic raiders broke down hidebound custom in the adoption and transmission of new technique." Kosambi felt that the change represented no more than the intensification of a process of feudalization that had already been set in motion in ancient India. Although his position was different from Mohammad Habib who argued that the changes resulting from invasions were so sweeping as to constitute an "urban revolution" that was accompanied secondarily (in point of time) by a "rural revolution". Habib pointed out about double liberation- the liberation of town artisans from exclusion and repression on the basis of caste and the liberation of peasantry from the rural chiefs, so urban and rural revolution. But according to Irfan Habib, the liberation of peasant from such caste

prejudices as the Sultanate ruling class did not care to enforce, was matched by a process of large-scale creation of slave-labour in the towns recruited through raids on the country side. This was partly responsible for the rapid expansion of the urban craft and service sectors; and such enslavement was no liberation. Secondly, if the power of the rural chief and intermediary was curtailed. Had the peasants condition improved, it is difficult to imagine, how the great peasant revolt of the Doab during the reign of Muhammad bin Tughlaq could have taken place.

In this backdrop, I have studied the society of Bihar during Mughal period. It seems that the Mughal society was divided into two major classes that were rich and poor but we also get references of the middle class which included limited population in the suba of Bihar. The Mughal Persian chronicles, farmans, nishans, akhbarats, etc., have very little information about the life of the common people, their day-to-day activities particularly their social and religious life, local fairs and festivals, etc. These sources give the passing references about the medieval society. The European traveler's accounts do provide us a lot of information about the life and condition of common people, but as their records are generally biased and critical of Indian traditions and cultures, we have to use them carefully. However, we have consulted these records and indeed found them quite useful for our study. We have also consulted family records of the zamindars, regional and local histories available in Urdu, Hindi and Maithili and gazetteers, as these records are full of information about

common people and the information available from these sources help us to make our study really useful. One of the important examples of regional source of Ujjainia chieftaincy is Bodhraj of Pugal. Bodhraj has written the history of Bhojpur (Ujjainia chieftaincy) and title of his work is Bhojpur mein Paramaron ka Itihas 1577 tak. The writer belonged to Pugal in Bikaner (Rajasthan). He records the history of the Parmar Rajputs and visited Jagdishpur the headquarters of Ujjainia chieftaincy in 1663 for the collection of material and stayed there for six months.

The Hindu society continued to follow quite rigidly the age-old practice of caste system and therefore, the social status of the Shudra community could not improve. The Shudra community comprising the Sakas, Abhiras, Chandalas, Savaras, Dravidas and Utkalas, lived far- away from the habitations of upper caste Hindus. The Shudras even communicated in a language of their own and not in Sanskrit, Avahattha, Paisachi, Sauraseni or Magadhi. Dharmasvamin, a Tibetan Buddhist monk and a pilgrim, who visited Bihar specially Bodh Gaya during 1234-36, narrates a harrowing experience of his life when he failed to get help from an untouchable who was present at the place of the incident. He writes that once when he was about to be drowned in a river near Nalanda, he shouted for help and an untouchable who was present there shouted back and showed his inability to help him as he belonged to a low caste. Having experienced this unfortunate incident the monk narrates the pitiable condition in which the untouchable lived in the society. He writes, "it was improper

for a man of low caste to touch with his hands a person of high caste. If a person of low caste were to look at a person of high caste eating, then the food had to be thrown away. A sign of low caste was the absence of perforation (hole) in the ears. Others had holes in their ears. If a person of low caste approached the place where one was taking food, that person had to say 'duram gaccha', i.e., "go away".

It also appears that the slavery was prevalent in the medieval society of Bihar as well as it was in other parts of India. Besides serving as domestics, the slaves also helped their masters in agriculture and trade and commerce. Some of the slaves even carried out administrative work of their masters quite efficiently. The so-called slave dynasty of the Sultans of Delhi is the high mark of their achievements in medieval Indian history but in general the condition of the slaves who were working in karkhanas and were domestic servants was not comfortable.

The life of the Hindu widow was very pathetic. She lived a miserable life as she was denied all the pleasures of life. The old custom of sati was still quite prevalent. The widow was sometimes even forced to commit sati. However those widows who had children were not allowed to burn as they had to bring up their children. Tavernier who was in Patna and had gone to meet Lashkar Khan the then governor of Bihar, saw a beautiful young widow who had come to seek permission of the governor for committing sati. The governor, tried to persuade the lady not to do this inhuman activity but she did not agree. Ultimately on her persistent pleadings and horrified to see her getting her

hand burnt with a torch in a heroic manner in his presence, the governor in a way gave her permission and allowed her to go from his office. Tavernier narrates the incident as under: -

I remember another strange occurrence which happened one day in my presence at Patna, a town of Bengal. I was with the Dutch at the house of the Governor of the town, a venerable noble, nearly eighty years old, who commanded 5000 or 6000 horse, when a young and very beautiful woman, scarcely more than twenty-two years of age, entered the reception room where we were seated. She with a firm and resolute voice required the Governor's permission to burn herself with the body of her deceased husband. The Governor, touched by the youth and beauty of the woman, sought to turn her from her resolution, but seeing that all that he could say was useless, and she only became more **obstinate**, and asked him with a bold and courageous voice if he believed that she feared fire; he enquired if she knew any torment equal to fire, and if she had never happened to burn her hand. 'No, no,' this woman then replied to him with more courage than before; 'I do not fear fire in any way, and to make you see that it is so, you have only to order a well-lighted torch to be brought here.' The Governor, horrified at the language of the woman, did not wish to hear more, and dismissing her told her in a rage that she might go to the devil. Some young nobles who were by him asked him to allow them to test the woman and to order a torch to be brought, persuading him that she would not have the courage to burn herself with it. At first

he was unwilling to consent, but they continued to urge him the more; so that at length, by his order, a torch was brought, which, in India, is nothing more than a cloth twisted and steeped in oil, and fixed on the end of a stick like a chafing dish; this, which was well lighted, she ran in front of it, held her hand firmly in the flame without the least grimace, and pushed in her arm up to the elbow, till it was immediately scorched; this caused horror to all who witnessed the deed, and the Governor commanded the woman to be removed from his presence.

The above-mentioned incident and such other references of sati during this period indicate that though Mughal rulers were opposed to the practice of sati and also tried to restrain this activity but were not willing to take any strong action against those who were involved in encouraging this activity or issue an order to ban this practice. Apparently, it seems that the Mughal administration did not consider it appropriate to interfere much in the age old social and religious customs and practices of the Hindu community unless the community itself took the initiative.

Tavernier observes another an interesting custom prevalent in the Hindu community of Bihar. When any one yawns, they crack their fingers, while crying Ginarami, that is to say, remember Narami, who possess among the Hindus as a great saint. This cracking of the fingers is done, it is said to prevent any evil spirit entering into the body of the yawner.

Abul Fazl the official historian of Akbar's reign in his

Ain-i-Akbari provides some very fascinating details regarding a God stone or idol. The Hindus of Bihar revered the saligram, a little black stone or idol, as a divine thing and offer prayers and devotion to it with great reverence. The Hindus considered a stone in the highest regard if it was round, tiny, and unctuous, and depending on the variety of its form, it was given various names and characteristics. They typically had one perforation, while some had two or more and some didn't have any at all. They had gold ore in them. Some claimed that a worm was born inside that ate its way through, while others insisted that it entered from the outside. The Hindus had written a considerable work on the qualities of this stone. According to the Brahmanical creed, every idol that was broken lost its claim to veneration, but with these, it was not so. They were found in the Sone River for a distance of 40 kos between its northernmost extremity and the south of the hills. Gaya was the place of Hindu pilgrimage and it was also called Brahma Gaya being dedicated to Brahma. Here Abul Fazl could not differentiate between the Gautam Budha and god Brahma.

The Muslims were divided into two major communities, the Sunnis and the Shias. The Sunnis were the largest population among the Muslims and held more power and influence in the society. The Turks, the Afghans, the Mughals and the Iranians also formed the Muslim population of Bihar. Among the Muslim community of Bihar two different types of marriages were practiced. The first was sharayee and the second was urfi. The sharayee

marriage was very much prevalent among the poor section of the Muslim society while the urfi type of marriage was done in the affluent section. The sharayee marriage was done in a simple way and the 'Mehr' (was the obligation, in the form of money or possessions paid by the groom, to the bride at the time of marriage), was of small amount but the urfi marriage was performed with great pomp and show and the 'mehr' amount was quite large.

The women did not have much liberty in the society. During her childhood she had to remain with the parents, after marriage she was dependent upon her husband and in old age she was looked after by her sons. She had no share in the property of her father or husband. In the Muslim society the condition of the widow was slightly better. After the death of her husband the widow had to go through 'iddat' for four month ten days and during these months she had to live normal life and she had to take simple food. But after that the Muslim widow could remarry if she so desired but generally the widow remarriages were not very common; they lived either with their parents or with their-in laws.

John Marshall has given some very interesting information about certain diseases and their treatment by doctors. He tells us that once while he was in Patna a doctor went to examine a Muslim ailing lady who was sitting behind the purdah or curtain. To examine her, the doctor took a handkerchief, soaked it in water and then handed it over to be rubbed all over the patient's body. After the handkerchief got wet or moistened with sweat, it was taken

to a vessel and dipped in fresh water. In this manner the doctor was able to know the quantity of saltish element being present in the body which helped him to diagnose the disease, and start treatment to cure the patient.

The birth of a son was considered as an event of great joy and birth of a daughter a source of pain to the family in the Hindu society. It seems that the birth of a daughter was welcomed but the birth of son was preferred in comparison to daughter in Muslim society. Among both Hindus and Muslims communities, marriages were arranged by the father or elder male members of the family. In Medieval Mithila the marriage was settled through the ghatak (is a middleman who establishes links between the two families in a marriage). In Hindu families generally the marriage of the girl was performed before she reached the age of puberty. According to Careri the Muslims girls were also married very young. Manucci tells us that in urban areas the girls were married when they reached the age of 12 or 13 years but they went to their in-law's house, which was called as Rukhsati, only when the girl attained some age.

The purdah system was prevalent among both the Hindus and Muslims communities of Bihar. However it was practiced only by the women of higher and middle classes families. The Muslim women observed purdah more strictly than Hindu sisters. The Peasant women and the lower strata of the society did not observe purdah. They used dupatta to cover their head when they went out or came face to face with stranger. However, the Rajput ladies of some higher families also did not observe purdah as

Marshall saw a Rajput lady on horseback going on one of the roads of Hajipur.

Ralph Fitch a European traveler who stayed in India during 1583-1594, has given some interesting information about the inhabitant of Patna. He writes that Patna (in 1586) was 'a very long and great town with a flourishing trade in cotton, the men of Patna were tall and slender and had many old folks and the houses in the city were simply made of earth and covered with straw. Similarly the Scottish physician Francis Buchannan who visited Ara, headquarters of the district of Bhojpur and Tilouthu, a village in the district of Rohtas in 1812-13, reports that most of the houses were built of clay and covered with tiles. He further informs us that very few houses had wooden doors.

Both Hindu and Muslim women were fond of ornaments. Gold and bejeweled ornaments were used by the rich women and the ornaments made of silver, brass, copper, glass, lac and cowries were used by the poor women. Chandaramanichura, ghungru, Har, Mani kundal, mangtika Moti mala were some of the ornaments used by the women of Bihar. Ralph Fitch writes that Bichia (toe ring) was commonly worn by women in Bihar. The Hindu and Muslim women alike were very fond of tattoo marks as it was believed to be a sign of good fortune and they got these tattoo marks engraved on different part of their bodies e.g., chest, arms and legs. This practice continued up to the third decade of the twentieth century. For amusement and entertainment, the women of upper strata of society engaged themselves in gossiping, listening

music, playing cards, etc. Chess and chaupar were popular among all sections of the societies. Both Hindu and Muslim communities also enjoyed pigeon flying and cock-fighting. Abul Fazl writes that the fighting cocks are famous and the game is abundant. The other means of amusements for the people were folk dances, and singing in chorus. The village people used to gather at the chaupal and sing their popular ballads and also danced in company. The circus or acrobats were entertainment for the rich and poor classes of the society. The tight rope walks, puppet and acrobatics shows were other means of amusements for the people. Besides that, festivals and fairs were the most common form of amusement of all sections of the society.

The aristocratic class led a happy and luxurious life. They took delicious and varieties of food items and drank water cooled by saltpeter during summer season. They generally lived in double-storied houses and some preferred single-story houses with flat roofs so that they could enjoy the cool breeze. They rode on good horses or elephants and also used palanquin for their convenience. It is said that generally a noble had several wives and these wives lived a luxurious life and they had several maids to attend on them. Each wife had a separate apartment to live in. Thus, the nobles had luxurious living but they suffered from one disadvantage. Unlike the nobles of England whose power and pelf depended on their hereditary possessions, the influence of the Mughal nobility depended on the pleasure of the emperor. Another disadvantage of the Mughal nobility was the escheat system. All the wealth

of Mughal noble escheated back to the Mughal state after his death. The son of a Mughal noble had to start his life afresh.

The life of the middle-class people like physicians (vaids and hakims) teachers, (pandit, Mulla), were hard pressed. But the intermediary zamindars, the rich peasants and the karkuns lived a comfortable life. They built houses for themselves and also purchased lands. In due course of time, they became wealthy zamindars.

The merchants had to pay a number of taxes e.g. import and export taxes, transit duty and some other abwabs which the Mughal emperors had abolished but these were exacted by the imperial officers. The foreign merchants had to sell their articles to the Mughal officials at below the market price which they inwardly resented very much. In this way they were put to great financial loss. Sometimes they had to sell their articles to a particular person selected by the Mughal governor. Marshall informs us that he had to sell the lead to a person selected by the provincial governor of Bihar. He further refers to pottery industries of Siwan in Saran District (presently Siwan is a District in Bihar), and writes that the Siwan Pottery was very fine, thin and light.

The masons, weavers, tailors, carpenters, goldsmiths and such others comprised the industrial workers. According to Pelsaert, these workers were sometimes forced to work in the noble's mansions for the whole day and thereafter they were paid only the half of the wage or sometimes nothing. Usually they took khichari as their meal

in the evening. It was cooked out of green pulse mixed with rice. In the daytime they munched little parched pulse or gram. Their houses were built of mud with thatched roof. They had little or no furniture except some earthen pots to contain water and also for cooking. They lived a miserable life and they faced the tyranny of the Mughal officials. It was so intense that they were deprived of even the bare necessities of life. No workman paid any attention to his calling because it did not provide him happiness of life.

The condition of the peasants was also deplorable. They were exploited by the revenue farmers and the jagirdars. The former exploited them for getting more income and the latter exploited them because they were not sure of holding a particular area permanently. The land revenue policy of Mughal government deprived them of their surplus produce. They were left with little money to make their both ends meet. Abul Fazl referring to the common people and the peasantry, states that mostly they went naked, wearing only a cloth (lungi) around the loins. Irfan Habib is of the opinion that the peasants of Mughal times were more fortunate with ghee while his modern descendant has more salt and three entirely new articles of food viz., maize, potatoes and chilies. But it does not prove that their condition was comfortable. Famine and epidemics were two major scourges in the life of the villagers. Partial failure of crops due to lack or excess of rains or other reasons was a frequent occurrence. The peasant often tried to keep in reserve some grains to tide over the crisis. The village represented an established way of life in which both

joys and sorrows were to be borne with equanimity by the people.

Akbar's court historian further gives some important information about the suba of Bihar. Agriculture was well developed and flourished, especially the cultivation of rice was of very high quality and the production was in huge quantity. Kisari (*Lathyrus sativus*) was the name of a pulse, resembling peas, eaten by the poor, but was unwholesome. The production of the sugarcane was abundant and of excellent quality. Betel-leaf, especially the kind called Maghi, was delicate and beautiful in color, thin in texture, fragrant and pleasant to the taste. Fruits and flowers were in great plenty. Milk was rich in quality and was cheap. The houses mostly were roofed with tiles.

Conclusion:

Bihar suffered the rigidity of caste system during Mughal period. Another social evil was sati custom which was practiced in the Hindu society. The condition of the Muslim widow was far better than the Hindu widow. The society was divided between poor and rich and the middle class was very limited population in Bihar. The livelihood for the poor classes was very tough and challenging. They faced all kind of hardship for their survival.

The upper social strata, such as the monarchs and ruling class (nobility), were in a superior position in Mughal Bihar as they had control over a handsome economic resource of the state. Wealthy peasants, independent chiefs, semi-autonomous chiefs, and other middle-class people all lived in comfortable conditions. The artisan class, which

included tradesmen, masons, washer men, carpenters, etc., had harder life. It indicates that a sizeable lower section of the population was severely poor and facing economic distress and caste discrimination throughout their lives.

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