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**Land, Caste and Political Power
Reflections on the Caste Struggle in Bihar**

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Land, Caste and Political Power: Reflections on the Caste Struggle in Bihar*

Abstract

Since history Bihar politics has been predominantly structured around the dynamics of caste and class that exhibits different patterns of political mobilizations and social coalitions. Castes not only operate as a powerful basis for political mobilization, but also intervene into the consolidation, factionalism and political shifts contrary to the belief that caste system is uniquely immobile, fixed and rooted in religion. 'Politicization of castes' points to the ability of caste to act as a dynamic associational (civil and political) resource. It is through this complex process that the political actors negotiate their power and status in competitive politics. This paper will try to unfold the story of the power struggle between various caste communities, especially between upper castes (Brahmins, Bhumihars, Rajputs, Kayasthas) and dominant backward castes (Yadavs, Kurmis, Koiris) in Bihar as well as their organizational associations with political parties and groups, including the Naxalites. The analysis will highlight the land reform legislations in Bihar and how these had affected the dominant backward castes after independence. Even after getting partial land transfer and political benefits, the dominant backward castes were struggling for social, cultural and political power in Bihar.

Even in the midst of tensions between backward caste groups and Dalits, the two shared a common hostility towards the upper castes. It was the force of this faultline which the Naxalite groups sought to use by uniting them both against upper castes, what they called their common enemy. It was their way of concretely applying Mao's thought to Indian social reality i.e. their understanding of Mao's ideas as summed up in his text- "On Contradictions".# However, the Naxalites were not able to fully grasp the nature of hostility against the upper castes by these different social groups i.e. backward and lower castes.

*This paper is a revised version of a talk titled "Naxalism and Political Power: Struggle of Caste Communities in Bihar" delivered at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, 27 January 2020.

#According to Mao, "Opposition and struggle between ideas of different kinds constantly occur within the Party; this is a reflection within the Party of contradictions between classes and between the new and the old in society. If there were no contradictions in the Party and no ideological struggles to resolve them, the Party's life would come to an end..." Mao Tse-Tung, On Contradiction, *Mao's Collected Works*, August 1937, https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-1/mswv1_17.htm, 23 September 2019.

On the one hand, the dominant backward castes were forcing the upper castes to recognize their newly acquired prosperity and aspiration; while on the other hand, the Dalits were interested in ending the cultural and psychological oppressions of both these upper caste groups. That is why in the long run Naxalite were not able to build a United Front with the help of these two oppressed caste groups who were fighting between themselves and also a common enemy.

Keywords: *Caste Association, Land reforms, Political Power, Backward Caste, Naxalites, Dalits, Triveni Sangh*

Introduction

The political history of Bihar, for almost the last eight decades, played a crucial role in contemporary politics in India. Bihar has always suffered from caste conflicts and violent tussles. British rulers used this caste-division in pre-independence Bihar and today, in the changed conditions of free India, new caste elites who dominate land and capital are utilizing it for their own political interests. Some of the socialist populist tendencies that focus on pitching one caste against the other continue to exist in the politics of Bihar. Ironically, the communists at the national level who denied the existence and importance of caste system gradually got caught up in the caste-based conflicts and their political equations.

To speak metaphorically, it would be no exaggeration to say that Bihar and its castes seem to complement each other perfectly—divinely ordained, primordially expressed and socially accepted by all. The ‘Caste’ seemingly presents a case of static, unchanging, enduring social status which continues to conform to the dynamics of power relations. However, the immediate reality of the caste system is reflected in a multiverse of separate communities divided and constituted by historically shifting power relations.¹ Seen from this perspective, private caste armies, state actors and Naxalites appropriate, articulate and reproduce newer

¹ Sumit Sarkar, *Beyond Nationalist Frames: Relocating Postmodernism, Hindutva, History*, Permanent Black, New Delhi, 2002, p. 58.

forms and interpretations of traditional hierarchical caste structure in Bihar. Therefore, it is important to elaborate the characteristics of some of the actors who have engaged in re-inventing norms and conventions of politics and society in contemporary Bihar.

Caste polarization and agrarian politics in colonial Bihar

A close observation of the social structure and its interaction with politics in Bihar brings forth a situation uniquely existing in the state. Bihar presents a political model which is different from that of any other state particularly in terms of the nature of the social infrastructure, its historical evolution and interaction with other facets of the political system. Politics in the state is conducted almost ubiquitously through the idioms of caste which is made possible because of the availability of various castes and their combinations. Bihar represents a picture of highly cleavaged society more than any other state in India. It was not only because the number of castes and sub-castes were very large and complex, but the political assertions of each of these deeply impacted the political process. The various caste groups of Bihar did not wait until the country's independence to mobilize their caste men for political purposes but began to do so as early as in the 1920s and have continued ever since.² However, the precise nature of the interactions between caste and politics has been changing according to the changes in state level policies. The social transformations also engendered by the process of economic development caused continued shifts in the power structures of the state.

The caste configurations in Bihar reveal a fluid multifarious social segmentation rather than more simplified picture of the *varna* (order, class or kind) system. Largely speaking the social structure of the state has been spread across three hierarchical layers, the upper castes or forward castes, the backward castes and the Scheduled Castes or the Dalits [see Table 1]. The first layer includes only four castes namely, the Brahmin, the Bhumihar, the Rajput and the Kayastha. This layer constitutes the elite twice-born or *Dwija* who traditionally enjoyed predominantly high ritual and social status. The second layer includes a number of castes dominated by largely three, Yadav (single largest caste in Bihar), Kurmis and Koiris. This layer constitutes the most numerous caste groups in Bihar and is between the upper castes

² Report on the General Elections 1930 by H.E. Horsfield, ICS, Election Officer, Bihar and Orissa, Superintendent, Govt. Printing, Bihar and Orissa, Patna, 1931, Bihar State Archives, Patna, p.12.

and the Dalits. The lower most layer, Dalits, formerly untouchables, have a hierarchy within them which continues to still exist.

TABLE 1

The Caste Composition of Bihar (1931)

Caste	Caste wise (%)	
Upper and Lower Shudras	Yadavs	12%
	Kurmis	04%
	Dhanuks	1.5%
	Kushwaha (Koeri, Kachhi, Muraos)	08%
	Teli	3.2%
	Other EBCs	26%
S.C (Dalit+Mahadalit)	Dusaadhs	05%
	Chamars	05%
	Musahars	2.8%
Muslims	Sayyids, Sheikh Mughals, Pathans	7.5%
Forward castes (<i>Dwija</i>)	Brahmins	05%
	Bhumihars	05%
	Rajputs	04%
	Kayasthas	01%
Adivasis (STs)	Gond, Munda, Murmus and others	10%
Others		-

Source: *Census of India, 1931, Vol.-vii, Bihar and Orissa, Part I-Report*, accessed on 10 October 2020 at 10:30 PM

During the 18th century and early 19th century there was no significant assertive politics on the part of dominant backward castes at the provincial level in Bihar, although dominant status can't be ascribed to a single caste in Bihar. Almost all landlords in Bihar plains belonged to upper castes who owned a sizeable portion of land in the state. Before the 1920s, there were very few among the backward castes that owned substantial land holdings. However, a few Yadavs, and Kurmis owned land which was less than 20 per cent at the village and local level. Following the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793, a new form of landlordism with an intricate stratification of zamindars, tenant landlords, tenants and sub-tenants and agricultural labourer at the bottom came into the picture. The upper castes owned

more than 78 per cent of the total land area and thereby dominated the economic, political and cultural life of Bihar.³ These upper castes owned maximum land and were not directly involved in cultivation; they leased out land for cultivation to other backward castes while some of them also hired agricultural labourers for cultivation of land. This dominance of upper castes in the state remained unchanged and unchallenged throughout the 19th and early 20th century. Land settlement in fact established the position of the upper castes as landlords and thus this continuing dominance of upper castes made permanent the existing order that impeded the growth of political consciousness in Bihar.⁴

The administrative system introduced by the British had given preference to the English language as a pre-requisite for a good job. Through the new educational system and the introduction of the print culture every caste had its own middle class, however small. Mainly, it was this middle class which sought to control their respective caste communities as well as desired to bring change in power relations in Bihar's society. The most beneficiary caste among these was a section of the Kayasthas as they had acquired English education and participated in the administration. The Kayastha caste, being the most literate and with traditional background of modern education, were first to organize themselves.⁵ In 1894, the local branch of the 'All India Kayastha Mahasabha'⁶ was established in Bihar.⁷ The Mahasabha influenced most of the educated upper castes. It started organizing caste members and helping them to acquire English education. The English educated Kayasthas showed the way by launching the Bihar Kayastha Provincial Sabha (formed in 1889) to promote literacy among women, permit widow remarriage and remove sanctions against overseas travel. Indeed, the leadership of the Bihar Kayastha Provincial Sabha played the main role in the early political movement, launched at the turn of the century, for separation of Bihar from Bengal.

³ NK Singh, Many Faces of Caste Politics, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 18 April 1972, p.798.

⁴ Sumitra Kumar Jain, *Caste and Politics in Bihar*, Commonwealth Publishers, New Delhi, 1989, p. 16.

⁵ Census of India 1931, (Bihar and Orissa), p. 262.

⁶ The *Akhil Bharatiya Kayastha Mahasabha* was the oldest caste association for the integration and all-round development of Kayastha caste. It was established in 1887. The *All India Kayastha Mahasabha* is a registered caste association under the Indian Society Act. The Mahasabha believed in the ideology that Kayasthas should have a balanced development in all directions, so that the age-old legacy, glory, and prestige of this caste remained.

⁷ L. Carol, "*Kayastha Samachar - From a Caste to the National News thesis*", *IESHER* (10) 1973, pp. 280-92.

The same year the Bhumihars too followed in organizing the *Pradhan Bhumihar Brahmin Sabha* to improve moral, social⁸ and educational⁹ reforms of the community and to present the demands of the community to the government. After the Kayastha caste, they were the most influential caste in Bihar. There was a large number of zamindars and Rayots who belonged to this caste. In 1899 the Bhumihar Brahmin Sabha emerged as the strongest caste association. With its establishment they created a series of Bhumihar Brahmin colleges, schools and hostels in various parts of the state. By 1899, The Maithili Brahmins, under the leadership of Maharaja of Darbhanga and the Rajputs under the leadership of a few educated zamindars started their own caste associations. The Bhumihar Brahmin Sabha focussed almost entirely on asserting claim to Brahmin status by starting schools to teach Sanskrit and rid the community of Brahmin priests.

The lower castes did not take long to form their own caste associations.¹⁰ In the early 20th century backward and lower castes formed their caste associations to gain political presence

⁸ *The Behar Herald*, 29 January, 1910: “The Maharaja of Benaras presided the *Bhumihar Brahmin Sabha* at Muzaffarpore. It passed resolutions against the extravagant expenditures on marriages. The Maharaja said: “...But a merciful providence came to our rescue and sent to us a handful of white people from a far off isle across the seas, who offered us the hand of friendship which our forefathers instinctively grasped with that tenacity with which a drowning man grasps at a rift. England came to our rescue and rescued us. It brought back to India peace and prosperity, and saved our existence being wiped away. If we were true Aryans, and if the blood of our sacred *rishis* still flows in our veins, we shall ever remain grateful to the English people...we can never repay them the heavy debt of gratitude we owe them...”.

⁹ *The Behar Herald*, 28th October, 1899: “A deputation of the Brahmin Sabha, Muzaffarpore, waited on the Maharaja of Benares on the 18th October 1899 to request His Highness to patronise the Sabha in its efforts to improve the educational status of the Bhumihar Brahmin in general. ‘He cordially received them and promised help. He also approved of holding a meeting of Bhumihar Brahmins at Benaras under his presidentship. An influential meeting of the Bhumihar Brahmins was held at Bhagwanpur under a large *shamiana* (tent) on the 24th with Bindeshwari Prasad Sinha alias Lalji Sharma of Subhai Gudh’ and thanked the Maharaja of Benaras for cordially receiving the deputation”.

¹⁰ British Administrative Reports also authenticate the caste claims by various castes during Census. P.C. Tallents, *Census 1921*, Vol. VII Bihar and Orissa Part I, (Report) by ICS. Superintendent of Census Operations, Bihar and Orissa, Superintendent, Govt. Printing, Bihar and Orissa, Patna 1923, chapter XI – Caste, Race and Nationality, 236-37: “The caste is still the framework of the fabric is shown also by the fact that the attempts at social reform which come into view to make the strongest appeal run on caste lines. Many of the lower castes also had “Caste Sabhas” to promote their social uplift, some of them more-less irregular in their activities while others had regular publications of pamphlets and articles of their caste association.. Even the *Dom* caste held its caste association meeting at Patna in July 1921, and in that meeting they passed a resolution that they would as a caste, abandon the drinking of intoxicating liquor under penalty of five rupees and that no child of less than three years allowed to marry, while the *Dhobi* caste decided to give up meat eating as well as the drinking of intoxicating liquor. How far these caste association meetings, which were held at the provincial capital, expressed the feelings of the caste as a whole it was impossible to say for the meetings were only of local representatives. The *Dosadh* caste had a more elaborated caste organization in the shape of the *Dushashan Bansiya Kshatriya Maha Sabha* founded in 1891 which met usually once a year and was attended by approximately 2000 to 3000 people. There were managing committees in various districts consisting of a president, secretary and members. The president of the All India Dushashan Bansiya Kshatriya Maha Sabha was elect annually. The spread of education was the first platform in caste association but it also encouraged the abandonment of evil practices (drinking of wine and the eating of meat at marriage), the postponement of marriage for boys till the age of 15 and for girls till the age of 10 and the prohibition of remarriage both of

and power and aspire to dominate Bihar's social and political structure. But the early politics of the province predominantly centred around caste associations of the upper castes only. Competition for securing the benefits of available opportunities in this period was confined to only the upper castes. The members appealed to the rich caste members to assist in the spread of education and securing jobs for other members. And through this, a network of educational, social and cultural institutions emerged for the benefit of their own caste fellows. Rich landlords started giving scholarships to the needy students belonging to their own caste for availing opportunities to higher education and gainful government employment. This patronization became a characteristic feature of early social, political and cultural life of Bihar.¹¹ These caste associations also tried to do away with those customs and barriers that came in the way of education or were a source of division within caste. For example, prohibition of sea-travel was condemned by people like Sachidanand Sinha, from the Kayastha caste association. He himself did not undertake the prescribed penance after returning from England.¹²

During the 1920s, these kinds of caste associations also bridged the gap between members of sub-castes. This was done by building matrimonial relationships between sub-castes. Sachidanand Sinha himself married a girl from another sub-caste of Kayastha¹³ to encourage other educated Kayastha youths to emulate his example. Although the initial objectives of these caste associations were social in nature, they cleared the ground for the transformation of social identity into a political one also. The limited opportunities led to inter-caste competition, generated mutual discord and antagonism among various castes in later course of time. Later on politics emerged as an alternative source of power and prestige.¹⁴

With the rise of political organizations, these caste associations lost much of their vitality, yet casteism continued and became more pronounced. So much so, having contributed little to the national movement these caste associations were very much involved in the movement for separation of Bihar from Bengal. Government services as well as other professions like

widows and widowers. The caste movement was typical of what was going on in other backward castes. The *Kurmis*, the *Kahar*, the *Dhanuks* and others claimed the right to wear and in some cases wore the sacred thread called *Janeu*. Not that this attitude found universal favour even amongst the aspiring castes, for a case occurred in Monghyr district in which a *Dhanuk* caste who had assumed the sacred thread found they had thereby deprived themselves of the chance of marrying his children into the family of a wealthy caste member of more conservative views".

¹¹ Shashi Sekhar Jha, *Political Elite in Bihar*, Vora Publishers, 1972, pp. 77-79.

¹² Sachidanand Sinha, *Some Eminent Bihar Contemporaries*, *Sachidanand's Private Thesis*, Patna, 1944, p.16

¹³ Sachidanand Sinha's biography, New Delhi, 1969.

¹⁴ R. Roy, 'Caste and Political Recruitment in Bihar', in R. Kothari (Ed.). "*Caste in Indian Politics*" p. 237.

law and teaching were dominated by Bengalis. This was perceived as an obstacle for the educated Kayasthas. The Bengalis were accused of self-promotion. The Kayasthas were also dependent on the former for their livelihood. This attempt at preserving the social status of particular castes was resented and resisted by other caste contenders. This in turn strengthened caste solidarity while hardening the inter-caste antagonism. It was this inter-caste rivalry which transformed itself into the political sphere which continued to sustain casteism in Bihar.

The British authorities also intervened in Bihar's caste orders in various ways. On the one hand, they gave the Brahmins extraordinary importance by taking their advice in interpreting customs and traditions in the social structure; this gave Brahmins a lot of supra-local influence of the kind they did not enjoy hitherto, though present in South India and Maharashtra.¹⁵ On the other hand, the introduction of the Morley-Minto reforms in 1909 created separate electorates that gave a fillip to backward castes in their quest for self-respect and self-worth. Gradually the dominant backward castes, especially in Bihar, began to organize themselves as separate groups clinging to their own identity. This gained momentum from 1917 onwards, and various associations of backward castes began to emerge. Most caste associations were directing their primary attention to improvements in their social and economic status; indeed, political questions were barred from consideration by the various caste conferences and *sabhas*. However, many of the caste associations which were initially organized for non-political purposes later assumed political importance, while retaining their initial interests in social and economic advancement.

Through the upper caste associations, the dominant backward castes too were aspiring to move up the social ladder and imitate what is referred to as 'Sanskritization' in sociological literature by the late nineteenth century.¹⁶ Although they were frequently identified as the

¹⁵ Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001, pp. 10, 170-71.

¹⁶ Yadavs were traditionally agriculturalist, herdsmen and milkmen. The Yadavs attempted to raise their social status in the caste hierarchy through their attachment to Lord Krishna. They are regarded as pioneers in the formation of caste association, giving fillip to horizontal mobilization of caste. The *All India Yadav Mahasabha* came into existence in 1922 to advance the socio-political interests of the Yadavs. Kurmis are known as hardworking agriculturalists. In the 19th century the Kurmis were considered as a tribal totem. They were even declared a criminal tribe by the British government due to their alleged predatory practices. In fact, in 1894, the Kurmis started a movement to get accepted within the fold of the caste society. They also formed the *All India Kurmi Mahasabha (Sadar Kurmi Kshatriya Sabha)* and held its first session in 1894 to raise their social and political status. One of the major decisions of the Kurmi Sabha was to challenge the order of the British administration, which debarred Kurmis from being recruited in British Police Service. This kind of politicization of Kurmis also led to the gradual expansion of the Kurmi caste. Koiris are also known as great horticulturists

driving force behind the 'democratic surge' in India, the dominant backward castes often behaved arrogantly as the new *malik* (lord) and *sarkar* (government), especially in rural Bihar. This new sense of dominance was apparent from the increasing incidents of atrocity against the Dalits.

These backward castes began to claim their place in the Kshatriya category. These were the Yadavs, Kurmis and Koiris who were regarded as pioneers in the upward mobilization of castes.¹⁷ The formation of the Triveni Sangh¹⁸ comprising the Yadavs, Kurmis and the Koiris in the 1930s was a pointer in this direction. They effectively put pressure to end the practice of forced unpaid labour (*begar*). Also, they demanded reservations in employment as they were almost unrepresented in government jobs. A Yadav leader, Babu Swaymber Das and a Kurmi leader, Vimlacharan Singh, both from Triveni Sangh, moved a resolution in the Bihar and Orissa Legislative Council on 21 August 1931 to demand reservations for the Yadavs, Kurmis and Koiris for the Bihar and Orissa Provincial Civil Service.¹⁹

The Triveni Sangh initiated an anti-cow-slaughter movement and forged a tenuous agrarian unity with the upper landowning castes in the late nineteenth century.²⁰ The new situation posed by the backward castes started leading to tension and scattered incidents and violence from early 20th century.²¹ However, all this show of dominance failed to establish a political identity. It was probably because of the small number of backward caste leaders in Bihar Legislative Assembly, their limited voting rights and the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha started by Swami Sahajanand Saraswati. The Kisan Sabha was formed to dismantle caste

and engage primarily in agricultural operations in the capacity of small landowners and poor peasants. Unlike Kurmis and Yadavs, they are generally considered non-aggressive and disinterested in caste riots. They also attempted to attain higher social status by claiming to be descendants of Lord Ram's son Kush. They also formed the *Kushwaha Kshatriya Mahasabha* as their nodal caste association and held the first session of the association in March 1920. Koiris have also actively participated in the increasing horizontal mobilization of caste associations of backwards castes in Bihar.

¹⁷ File no. 333/30-Public; 7222/33-Public, Home Department, Government of India, National Archives of India, New Delhi.

¹⁸ The Three caste associations – *Yadav Kshatriya Sabha*, *Kurmi Kshatriya Sabha*, and *Koiri Kshatriya Sabha* – came together in Shahabad district and formed an umbrella organization called Triveni Sangh on 30 May 1933. This caste umbrella was floated by the dominant strata of the backward castes to work for the uplift of the backwards and Dalits in general. Their primary agenda was *izzat ki ladayi* (struggle for dignity).

¹⁹ Girish Mishra and Braj Kumar Pandey, *Sociology and Economics of Casteism in India: A Study of Bihar*, Pragati Publications, Delhi, 1996, pp.14-20.

²⁰ Gyan Pandey, 'Rallying round the Cow: Sectarian Strife in the Bhojpuri Region, c. 1888-1917', in Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies II: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1983, pp. 62-63.

²¹ *The Goalas Movement: Its Causes and Character from the District Magistrate of Bhagalpur to the Commissioner of the Bhagalpur Division in the Proceedings of the Government of Bihar and Orissa*, Department of Political Home (special), file no. 171, Bihar State Archives, Patna, 07 July 1925.

polarization and landlordism in Bihar. The initial purpose behind the formation of the Kisan Sabha was to prevent caste tensions and violence in rural Bihar. About this Sahajanand said:

Caste association and donations given for caste and religious purpose are essentially devices by the rich to control organizations and to protect their landed and trading interests, and to generally continue their supremacy rather than for any altruistic purpose.²²

The Kisan Sabha was successful to a certain extent beyond the caste lines as theirs was not a movement for "land to the tiller", but for "land to the tenant". The main beneficiaries of the Kisan Sabha movement were the dominant backward castes. Lower caste *mazdoors* sometimes participated. But despite this, they generally lost out.

Caste politics and peasant mobilization before independence

In the 20th century, Bihar witnessed several movements to liberate the poor and downtrodden from the clutches of the highly exploitative and oppressive social, economic and political structure. During the 1930s-40s, a new political consciousness began to emerge among the various caste communities and working class in Bihar; at the same time the dominant backward castes mobilized other lower castes to establish their political influence in the political structure. Apparently this could be one of the reasons that Bihar was the first and the only state to take the principled decision to abolish *zamindari* system soon after India's Independence. However, there were many other issues confronting the poor peasants of Bihar. The rent and its payment, *begar* (forced labour), *abwab* (illegal exactions), *baksht* (land disputes), etc were a fertile ground for backward caste tenants and peasant struggles. It was against this background that the All India Kisan Sabha first came up in the western part of Patna district in 1927.²³ On the line of All India Kisan Sabha,²⁴ the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha (BPKS) was formed at the annual gathering of the peasants during the Sonapur Fair of 1929 under the leadership of Swami Sahajanand Saraswati.²⁵ The original purpose behind the formation of the BPKS was not to promote caste cleavages or peasantry related tensions but to prevent the eruption of serious rifts between various caste communities in the

²² Arvind N. Das, *Agrarian Unrest and Socio Economic Change 1900-1980*, New Delhi, 1983, p. 25.

²³ *Ibid*, p. 88.

²⁴ The All India Kisan Sabha was formed in Bihar in 1927 under the leadership of Sahajanand Saraswati who had formed the Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha (BPKS) in order to mobilise peasant grievances against the zamindari attacks on their occupancy rights, and thus sparking the farmers' movements in India.

²⁵ Sahajanand Saraswati, *The Origin and Growth of the Kisan Movement in India* (Unpublished Manuscript), Patna.

countryside.²⁶ Swami Sahajanand Saraswati alias Navarang Rai of Gazipur district of Uttar Pradesh had initially joined the Bhumihar Mahasabha in an apparent bid to buttress the Bhumihars' claims to Brahmanical status. But by 1925-26 the two wings within the Bhumihar Mahasabha—the moderates led by Sir Ganesh Dutt, a big landlord and the radicals led by Sahajanand, parted ways.²⁷ Soon Sahajanand's Ashram at Bihta near Patna became the focal point for peasant movement in Bihar and attracted not only Bhumihar caste but other backward castes as well as tenants who soon organized themselves with the formation of the Kisan Sabha. But soon, the growing influence of Kisan Sabha created discontent among backward caste tenants. Initially, the Congress also welcomed the formation of Kisan Sabha and appreciated Sahajanand Saraswati's work; many socialist leaders within the Congress such as Jaya Prakash Narayan joined Sahajanand's Kisan movement and took a militant posture within it.²⁸

The demand for the abolition of the zamindari system was started by the backward and lower caste peasants during the 1930s under the banner of organisations like Triveni Sangh.²⁹ Sahajanand himself opined that "zamindari system was an obstacle in the way of economic and social advancement of society and the zamindars were parasitical elements sucking the blood of toiling peasantry".³⁰ In the initial phase of the movement the Kisan Sabha took little note of the differences within the peasantry, relying more on the rich and the upper-middle class peasants who were supposedly representing the entire peasantry. Indeed, the members of Triveni Sangh observed that the upper-caste *Kayami* Raiyat and especially among them, the Bhumihar-Brahmin *Kayami* Raiyats, were in a better position to lead the rise of the Raiyats. Almost all the leadership posts were filled by Bhumihars. In this context, Walter Hauser wrote, "The leadership of the Kisan Sabha was socially dominated by the Bhumihar caste".³¹ Sahajanand Saraswati himself admitted in 1944 that the Kisan Sabha was unable to get all the peasants from backward and lower castes together and the rich upper caste and middle peasants dominated the Kisan Sangh. The upper caste rich and middle peasants were using Kisan Sangh for their benefits and gains.³²

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Arvind N. Das, *Agrarian Unrest and Socio Economic Change 1900-1980*, New Delhi, 1983, p.76.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 161.

²⁹ Official Reports on Kisan Sabha Meetings, file 16/1935, part I, Bihar State Central Records office, Patna.

³⁰ Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, *Abolition of Zamindari: How to Achieve it*, Patna, 1946, p. 11.

³¹ Walter Houser, *The Bihar Provincial Kisan Sabha, 1921-42*, pp. 77-79.

³² Sahajanand Saraswati, Presidential address 8th session of All India Kisan Sabha Bazwada, 14-15 March 1944.

The central leadership of the Kisan Sabha never tried to know the real reasons behind the absence of other backward and lower castes in the Sabha. However, the dominant backward castes were not basically interested in a movement for 'land to the tiller'. Their primary interest was in 'land to the tenant' and, the Kisan Sabha movement was not in a position to represent their interests because it was dominated by the landed upper caste elites. A Triveni Sangh's document stated that the upper caste zamindars of Bihar took more rent from the backward castes than from the upper caste Raiyats; they charged different kinds of caste *abwaabs*, humiliated and oppressed backward and lower caste Raiyats by various means. Swami Sahajanand himself showed relatively more concern towards the Bhumihars, apparently to display his allegiance to his 'own caste'.³³ Therefore, it would be no exaggeration to say that the Kisan Sabha was unable to accommodate the economic and social grievances of the backward and lower caste Raiyats. As a result, no strong relationship developed between the Kisan Sabha and the Triveni Sangh which led to a serious rift in the peasant society of Bihar.³⁴

After independence

Much before Kisan Sabha and Triveni Sangh, the upper caste zamindars of Bihar had organized themselves to resist moves for the implementation of land legislations through the 1793 Permanent Settlement and 1885 Bihar Tenancy Acts. In fact in the 1920s itself the upper caste zamindars formed the United Party to safeguard their interests.³⁵ Most of those who were the founders of the United Party subsequently joined the Congress and occupied positions of power. The Congress which enjoyed the support of the rural peasantry during the various waves of the Indian freedom struggle and was committed to implement land reforms failed to do so when it came to power under the Government of India Act of 1935.³⁶ In fact the Provincial Congress compromised with the upper caste zamindars and did not implement the agrarian programme.³⁷ Despite that the Bihar Government had to move the Abolition of Zamindari Bill in the Assembly in 1947 because of persistent demands from various backward and lower caste peasants' movements in Bihar. The bill became an Act in 1950,

³³ Prasanna Kumar Chaudhary, Shrikant, *Bahis Dhar Sangh Triveni Ki*, Loktantra Prakashan, 1999, p. 40.

³⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 39-41.

³⁵ Arvind N. Das, *Agrarian Unrest and Socio Economic Change 1900-1980*, New Delhi, 1983, p. 110.

³⁶ PS Ramu, *Agrarian Unrest in Bihar*, Deccan Chronicle, Hyderabad, 24 November 1981, also see Vinita Damodaran, *Broken Promises: Popular Protest, Indian Nationalism, and the Congress Party in Bihar, 1935-1946*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1992.

³⁷ *Ibid*.

under the name of Zamindari Abolition (Land Reform) Act, 1950.³⁸ The government of Bihar abolished interests on land, trees, forest, fisheries, bazars, mines, and minerals of zamindars and tenure holders and vested these interests legally through this Act in the state.³⁹

However, the upper caste zamindars moved heaven and earth to stall the passage and implementation of the Zamindari Abolition Act in Bihar. They launched three-pronged attack-assaults on the tenants, wooing the Congress leaders and obstructing the passage and implementation of the legislation through lobbying and filibustering in the Bihar Legislative Assembly and dilatory tactics in the judicial courts.⁴⁰ There was a systematic attempt by the upper caste zamindars in 1947-49 to demoralise the backward and lower caste tenants and tillers by physically assaulting their leaders. Several attempts were made by the upper caste zamindars to take forcible possession of *Bakasht* and other lands occupied by tenants from backward castes. And those attempts turned into violent clashes in which many backward caste tenants were killed and many were seriously injured.⁴¹ For example, a few days before the Zamindari Abolition Bill was to be introduced in the Bihar Legislative Assembly, the Revenue Minister, Mr KB Sahay was run over and injured in a car accident.⁴² However, a heavily bandaged KB Sahay came to the Bihar assembly. By performing this symbolic act he wanted to achieve the objectives of the Zamindari Abolition Bill.⁴³ Despite that the very legislative procedure of zamindari abolition took nearly five years giving ample opportunities to the upper caste zamindars to pre-empt its measures.⁴⁴

In the first phase of implementation of the Zamindari Abolition Act, only 155 zamindars were affected. By 1954 the Act was amended to facilitate its speedier implementation. The Act was again amended in 1959 to eliminate its loopholes. But as far as the upper caste zamindars were concerned the built-in-safeguards in the Act were not altered in substance by either of the two aforesaid amendments of 1954 and 1959.⁴⁵ Throughout the intervening periods of these land reform legislations, large scale eviction of occupancy mostly of backward caste tenants occurred. Because of this the area under the category of self

³⁸ https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/8123/1/the_bihar_land_reforms_act1.pdf

³⁹ Jose J Nedumpara, *Political Economy and Class Contradictions-A Study*, Anmol Publications, New Delhi, 2004, p. 104.

⁴⁰ Arvind N. Das, *Agrarian Unrest and Socio Economic Change 1900-1980*, New Delhi, 1983, p.189.

⁴¹ *The Search Light*, Patna, 12 May 1947.

⁴² *The Search Light*, Patna, 12 September 1947.

⁴³ *The Search Light*, Patna, 18 September 1947.

⁴⁴ Uttam Sengupta, "Can Dr Vinayan succeed where Vinoba Bhawe failed", *Telegraph* (Calcutta), 07 May 1986.

⁴⁵ *Report from the Flaming Fields of Bihar*, CPI (ML) Document, Calcutta, 1986, pp. 28-29.

cultivating land increased substantially. The under-tenure holders made good use of this opportunity since the actual tenants in many cases failed to provide any proof of their right of occupancy. It was mostly the backward and lower caste tenure holders who promptly acquired such lands in their names and became the occupancy tenants.⁴⁶ Even after three decades of the Zamindari Abolition Act 1950, some giants among the former upper caste zamindars like the Darbhanga Maharaj, Dumraon Maharaj of Bhojpur, Hathwa Raj of Saran, Raja of Ramgarh, Kursela Maharaj of Purnea owned thousands of acres of land over several villages in Bihar.⁴⁷ In addition to these landed aristocrats, the health minister of Bihar Government, Dinesh Singh, a Bhumihaar by caste said in 1982 that his family never had any zamindari in Purnea district, rather they were Raiyats (tenants) of Darbhanga Maharaj. However, the average landholdings with the big landlords by 2018 stood at 1.3 per cent only according to the Asian Development Research Institute (ADRI) Report 2018. Although, it is important to note that after the introduction of the land reform legislations, the dominant backward castes, i.e. Yadavs, Kurmis and Koiris, by virtue of the land they acquired as cultivators, had become a new class of 'haves' pitted against the 'have-nots' (lower backward castes and Dalits). Thus the implementation of land legislation created anger and frustration among the dispossessed [see Table 2].

⁴⁶ Pramanand Singh and Anup K Karan, "Land Reform Measures in Bihar" in Alakh N Sharma and Shaibal Gupta, ed., *Bihar Stagnation or Growth*, Patna, 1987, pp. 242.

⁴⁷ Nirmal Sengupta, "Agrarian Movements in Bihar," *The Journal of Peasants Studies*, vol 09, no. 03, April 1982.

TABLE 2

Average size of owned land and % fall in average landholding across Caste groups and Class in 1999-200 and 1981-82

1	Average Size of owned land (Acres)		% Fall in average Area
	1999-2000	1981-82	
Brahmin+Kayastha	3.45	6.25	44.86
Bhumihar+Rajput	2.78	5.43	48.85
Krumi	3.45	4.26	19.48
Koeri	1.11	1.41	21.69
Yadav	1.17	1.60	26.71
Other backward II	1.25	3.20	61.03
Backward I	0.75	1.31	42.73
Scheduled Castes	0.31	0.63	50.38
Muslims	1.14	2.19	44.86
Class			
Agricultural Labour	0.45	1.08	58.02
Poor Middle Peasants	0.83	0.73	-13.66
Middle Peasants	1.02	1.48	31.56
Big Peasants	2.99	4.78	37.42
Landlords	2.93	6.13	52.31
Non-Agriculturalists	0.31	1.40	77.86

Source: *Current Agrarian Situation in Bihar, monograph for Bihar Land Reforms Commission; Asian Development Research Institute, Patna, Bihar, 2008*

Successive land legislations and reforms such as the Bataidar Act 1955,⁴⁸ Bihar Land Reforms Act 1961⁴⁹ (Fixation of Ceiling Area and Acquisition of Surplus land), the Bihar Tenancy Amendment Act 1970,⁵⁰ the Bhoodan movement,⁵¹ the land grab movement,⁵² and

⁴⁸ The Bataidar Act 1955 empowered the District Collectors to take action for restoration of unlawfully ejected under-raiyats to their lands since 01 February 1953. Under the provision of this Act the maximum produce rent that could be realised from an under-raiyat by a landlord was fixed as seven-twentieth (7/20) of the produce. See The Bihar Tenancy Act, 1885, Clause 48D as inserted by the *Bihar Tenancy Act, 1955*.

⁴⁹ The Land Ceiling Act classified the land holdings into five categories and ceiling was fixed on them. A person would be permitted to retain possession of not more than a) Twenty acres of class I land (land irrigated by flow irrigation works, constructed by central, state or local government institutions), b) Thirty acres of class II land (land irrigated by lift irrigation works or tube wells constructed and maintained by centre, state or local government institutions), c) Forty acres of class III land (land used for orchards or for other horticulture purposes), d) Fifty acres of class IV land (diara land) or e) Sixty acres of class V land (land considered hilly, sandy or incapable of yielding paddy, rabi or cash crops). See D Thakur, *Politics of Land Reform in India with Special Reference to Bihar*, Patna, 1988, p. 107.

⁵⁰ The Bihar Tenancy Amendment Act 1970 has empowered the District Collector to take cognisance even of the threatened eviction of share-croppers. See *Bihar Tenancy Amendment Act, 1970*, Section 7 (Section 48E of Bihar Tenancy Act 1955 was substituted by section 3, in the amended Act).

⁵¹ In the 1960s the Bhoodan movement emerged as an alternative to the communist land reform movement under the leadership of Vinoba Bhave. See Acharya Vinoba Bhave, *Bhoodan Yajna-Land Gift Mission*, Ahmedabad, 1963.

Jayaprakash Narayan's *total revolution*,⁵³ emboldened the backward and lower caste peasantry to confront the upper caste gentry and the landlords. However, these acts and legislations were loophole-ridden and procedural bottlenecks such as absence of proper land records and rent rolls combined with the open nexus between the upper caste landed rich, government officials and the police impeded their implementation. These land reform acts were found 'only on paper, not in practice'.

Apparently this was around the time when the Communist Party of India (CPI) was facing a dilemma on the issue of adaptation of the Russian model or the Chinese model. Most of the CPI members believed that the Chinese line was best for Indian conditions and therefore, they should mobilize the Indian peasantry for armed revolution. On the other hand, caste politics and caste mobilization became significantly important after adult franchise became a reality for the people, especially for the backward and lower castes who were struggling to achieve political power for a very long time. The establishment of democracy in India after Independence had introduced one major change—how caste and politics interact, and that was by making all castes legally equal. It took some time for this legal equality to gain empirical momentum, and with the gradual dissolution of the closed village economy, the tempo had certainly become significantly visible. The combination of law and economic change had allowed castes that were hitherto considered low to take the fight to the upper caste communities and even to thumb their noses at established symbolic and ritual systems.⁵⁴

The dominant backward castes strived to dislodge the upper caste from position of power in two ways. The first one was to mobilize themselves as a peasant community. It was initiated by members of cultivating castes. A few well-known names were Deo Saran Singh (a Kurmi) in Bihar active from 1930-1950s, and Swami Sahajanand (a Bhumihar) who became a leading figure of the Bihar Kisan Sabha in the 1930s.⁵⁵ The second approach relied more on

⁵² The resentment built up among the evicted backward and lower caste tenants and the landless labourers in general culminated in the so-called land-grab movement of 1970. By the middle 1970 the agitated peasants started forcibly occupying lands, harvesting the rabi crops and sowing the Kharif seeds. In the late 1960s the Socialist parties like the SSP, PSP and Communist Parties actively participated in the land-grab movement. See *The Indian Nation*, Patna 19 July 1970.

⁵³ The 'Total Revolution' was an effort to create a new structure, a new culture, a new civilization and a new set of values. It placed emphasis on internal and external change, changing the entire oppressive and exploitative social frame from within and also from outside. The primary concepts in its ideology were Sampurna Kranti and Samantiya Varg Sangharsh. See *Sangharsh Rachna, Lokayan* (in Hindi), Patna, 1980.

⁵⁴ A. Beteille, *Caste in Contemporary India: In Caste Today*, ed. CJ Fuller, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1996, p. 167.

⁵⁵ Walter Hauser, ed. *Sahajanand on Agricultural Labour and the Rural Poor*, Manohar Publication, Delhi, 1994.

caste identities initiated by socialist leaders such as Rammanohar Lohia and Bindeshwari Prasad Mandal. Over the years, broadly due to these two approaches tensions sharpened between backward castes and upper castes in Bihar politics that often resulted in violent conflicts between the upper castes, Naxalites and backward castes.

But from 1947 to 1967, the upper castes managed to receive support from the lower castes tilting the balance of power in their favour. From 1963 onwards, backward castes began to play a major role in Bihar politics. The Congress debacle in the election of 1967 marked an important stage in the upsurge of the backward castes in Bihar. In 1967 Bihar Legislative election, the Yadavs, Kurmis, Baniyas, and Koiris gained remarkably and constituted 31.6 per cent of the seats in the legislature.⁵⁶

After a short duration of the non-Congress government in 1967-69, the Congress party again came to power in Bihar. In 1970, the Congress Chief Minister Daroga Prasad Rai, who belonged to the Yadav caste, told the backward castes that his party was willing to share power. For this purpose he set up the State Backward Commission in 1971, which was aimed at identifying economically and socially backward castes and give them reservation in educational institutions and government jobs. This initiative was a moral boost for the backward castes. But soon their hopes were shattered, as the upper caste leadership of the Congress removed Daroga Prasad Rai as the Chief Minister. Practically, by the beginning of the 1970s, the other backward castes were neither politically organized nor did they have any institutional structure to mobilize them for realizing their political and social ambitions.⁵⁷

Naxalism, Caste and National Emergency

Against such a background, a group of disheartened and disillusioned people from backward and lower castes, taking inspiration from the Naxalite revolt of 1967, opened a front against the upper caste feudal lords. Leaders such as Jagdish Mahato, Rameshwar Yadav, Narayan Kavi, Dr. Nirmal, Bootan and Johar Dutt were prominent among them.⁵⁸ Master Jagdish Mahato and his fellow comrades carried the fire of Naxalbari from Bengal to Ekwari village

⁵⁶ Sushil Kumar Sinha, *Other Half of the Society: Backward Caste and Politics of Bihar*, National Commission for Backward Classes, Government of India, New Delhi, 2007, pp. 81-82.

⁵⁷ Sanjay Kumar, *Bihar ki Chunaavi Raaajniiti: Jaati Varg ka Samikaran (1990-2015)*, Sage Bhasha , New Delhi, 2019, pp. 68-69.

⁵⁸ Urmilesh, *Bihar Ka Sach: Krishi Sankat evam Khetihar Sangharsh*, Prakashan Sansthan, New Delhi, 1991, pp. 66-67.

of Bhojpur. Ekwari village of Sahar block became the centre of the Naxalite uprising in Bihar. Thus a violent struggle started between two power groups in Bhojpur; on one side were the Naxalite leaders such as Jagdish Mahato who were leading the lower castes, while on the other were upper caste politicians, zamindars, bureaucrats, and contractors. For example, in the 'undeclared war' of 1975 in Bahuara village of Sahar block, there was continuous firing for ninety-six hours between the Naxalites and the police, a proof of the intensity of the violence between these two groups. By 1975, even the Indian government accepted that Maoists wave has swept across many districts of Bihar.⁵⁹ However, during the National Emergency, there was an all-round consensus to eliminate Naxalites from Bhojpur. But they could not be completely eliminated, although the activities of their 'armed squads' were suppressed.

Elections after National Emergency and rise of Caste violence

Till 1977 the upper castes consisting of Brahmins, Kayasthas, Bhumihars and Rajputs were politically more significant which was disproportionate to their numerical strength. Following the elections after the National Emergency Karpoori Thakur (from a backward caste) formed his government. For the first time, the backward castes acquired a pre-eminent position in the power structure of Bihar. The Karpoori Thakur Cabinet announced 26 per cent reservation through the Mungeri Lal Commission for the backward castes in government jobs. It also saw the beginning of bloody caste struggle the same year, 1977. In Belchi village of Patna, 14 lower caste people were massacred by the Bhumi sena of the Kurmi caste. In a spectacular display of solidarity Indira Gandhi, who was in the political wilderness—the Congress had been wiped out in Bihar just a few months ago—set out for Belchi. There were no roads to speak of, everything had been wiped out by the rains. Even as the opposition and the ruling party were making plans to travel to the hapless village—she arrived on an elephant!⁶⁰ The Belchi massacre was in fact the first such caste related violent incident in Bihar, leading to an endless series of caste massacres. After the Belchi massacre, Dalits were naturally furious with the Kurmis. The Congress took advantage of this opportunity and managed to regain the support of the Dalits. The Congress once again came back to power in Bihar from 1980-90s. The Congress managed to rule the state for almost ten years which was largely due to the absence of a strong opposition, split in Bihar Lok Dal and rise in violent activities by private

⁵⁹ From Naxalbari to Ekwari: DIG BN Sinha, *The Search Light*, 11 June 1975.

⁶⁰ *The Indian Express*, June 2012.

caste armies. However, though the party was in power the pressure of backward and lower castes, caste violence and growing Naxalite activities compelled the Congress high command to change as many as six chief ministers during these ten years.

This was around the same time when the CPI (ML)-Liberation launched Indian People's Front (united group of Naxalites) to further broaden its already existing base. The IPF or Naxalite groups reoriented their philosophy by declaring that 'class struggle will continue with caste orientation'.⁶¹ The radical Maoists made special appeal to the Kurmis and Yadavs in Bihar to join their organization.⁶² The Naxal outfit, the Maoist Communist Centre (MCC) on its part launched a drive to enlist the support of the Yadavs-Kurmis in central Bihar. The Baghaura-Dalelchak and Bara massacre together account for the deaths of almost 100 upper castes peasants by the MCC, in which the Yadavs' participation was significant.⁶³ Therefore, a period of violence and counter violence, in the name of self-defense, wages, dignity, land and other issues of social justice, continued in Naxal-affected areas of Bihar. Brutal attacks became more frequent and continued even after the 1990s, when the Janata Party came to power.

The Congress rule in Bihar with the support of Muslims, lower backward castes and Dalit groups had come to an end in the 1990s. Perhaps, the increasing caste violence, influence of private caste armies, mobilisation of other backward castes, the 1989 Hindu-Muslim Bhagalpur communal riots, and the inclination of lower backward castes and Dalits towards the Naxalites were the main reason behind Congress defeat in Bihar.⁶⁴ Following the 1990 Bihar Assembly elections, Lalu Prasad Yadav of the Janata Dal became the Chief Minister. The number of backward caste exceeded the number of upper caste MLAs.

In this context, Christophe Jaffrelot said that the backward castes in Bihar had gained political power in 1990s onward, but perhaps it will be correct to say that from 1990s, Yadavs enjoyed more political privileges in Bihar. To achieve this, Lalu Yadav polarized the backward castes through Mandal Commission's recommendations and Naxalites by following *swar ki rajniti* (politics of voice) against the upper castes. The Mandal Commission which came into force in August 1990, made a provision for 27 per cent reservation for

⁶¹ Faizan Ahmed, "Harijans, Backwards May be Next Target", *The Telegraph*, Calcutta, 24 February, 1992.

⁶² *Report from the Flaming Fields of Bihar*, CPI (ML) Document, Calcutta, 1986, pp. 21-26.

⁶³ Sumitra Banerjee, "Class War to Caste War", *The Telegraph*, Calcutta, 8 March 1992, p. 1.

⁶⁴ Sanjay Kumar, *Bihar ki Chunaavi Raajniti: Jaati Varg ka Samikaran (1990-2015)*, Sage Bhasha, New Delhi, 2019, p. 136.

backward castes in central government jobs that proved to be a boon for Lalu Yadav. It established him permanently in the politics of Bihar. He changed the politics of Bihar by saying:

अब रानी के पेट से राजा नहीं जनमता। अब राज मिलता है आपके वोट से। यह राज आपके वोट से ही बना है, इसलिए अब आपका राज चलेगा रॉब से, ढिलाई से नहीं⁶⁵। (Now the king is not born of a queen. The kingdom is created by your votes and therefore, you rule through your votes-with pride and dignity.)

In conclusion, it would be correct to say that the dominant backward castes maintained a love-hate relationship with the lower castes and Naxalites to fight against upper castes and gain political power in Bihar. Due to this relationship the political dominance of upper castes was weakened and dominant backward castes moved in to fill the vacuum. Again, the Naxalites sought to use other lower backward castes by uniting them against upper castes while the dominant backward castes were fighting the upper castes to acquire their place in society by forcing them to recognise their newly acquired prosperity and aspirations. And perhaps this was the main reason why, in the long run, Naxalites were not able to build a united front even with the help of the backward castes and Dalits.

⁶⁵ Shrikant, Bihar me Chunarv: Jaati, Hinsa aur Booth Loot, Vaani Prakashan, New Delhi 2005, p. 48.

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