

Zamindari Abolition and Agrarian Tensions North Bihar 1950s – 1960s

Dr Rajesh Kumar, Associate Professor
Aryabhatta College, University of Delhi
(rajeshkumar63@hotmail.com)

Abstract:

The agrarian protests in north Bihar were a manifestation of intense struggle between the rural oligarchy and the direct producers, the latter comprising agricultural labourers and cultivators who used mainly family labour in their cultivation. The rural oligarchy and the direct procedures, the latter comprising agricultural labourers and cultivators who used mainly family labour in their cultivation. The rural oligarchy enmeshed in the feral tradition of extra economics coercion was not only engaged in feudal mode of appropriate of surplus but also in ruthless exploitation. The roots of the problem go very deep into the past when permanent settlement was introduced by Cornwallis. For over 150 years the Zamindars neglected any kind of improvement in the agrarian condition and reduced the peasants to servitude without any rights over the land they had tilled for generations to understand the nature of this struggle and concomitant violence, one has to probe into its historical genesis. Throughout the nineteenth century and during the first into decades of the twentieth century there was no all Bihar peasant organization to fight for their rights. With the passage of time in the twentieth century there were a lot of changes in the ground – like increase in population, absence of nonagricultural means of livelihood, rising price of land etc. This was the time when heavy parvenu purchased Zamindaris. They were much move rapacious and exploitative. Most of the Zamindars belonged to the upper caste and the tenants from the lower caste , caste tensions also led to caste conflict. The control of zamindars moneylenders, traders, rich cultivators and lawyers on the rural life seemed to be unbreakable . Their socio-economic dominance was recognized by the government and they had become economically and socially very powerful. A sort of semi-feudal condition prevailed.

By the time independence came the sentiments of the movement compelled the national government to reform the agrarian structure with a hope that these reform measures may instigate the fury of peasants. Legislation was enacted, Schemes were formulated and projects were undertaken. Though Bihar was the first state to imitate agrarian reforms through the enactment of legislation to abolish the Zamindari System, It was the least successful of all in implementing that and other agrarian reforms. Nowhere in the contemporary India is the gulf between articulated ideals with respect to agrarian reforms and solid accomplishments more conspicuous than in north Bihar . For a variety of reasons, the agrarian reforms failed to transform the pre-reformed agrarian structure of north Bihar and the situation remained tense.

Keywords:

Agrarian Protests, Agrarian reforms, North Bihar, Tensions, Zamindari System.

The agrarian protests in north Bihar were a manifestation of intense struggle between the rural oligarchy and the direct producers. The latter comprised agricultural labourers and cultivators who used mainly family labour in their cultivation. The rural oligarchy enmeshed in the feudal tradition of extra-economic coercion was the feudal appropriation of surplus and ruthless exploitation. The direct producers who had been suffering on account of this for too long now decided to resist it. This antagonism manifested itself in protests, sometimes involving violence. To understand the nature of this struggle and concomitant violence, one has to probe into its historical genesis.

The roots of the problem go very deep into the past when Cornwallis introduced permanent settlement. Its logic brought in over some time such people in place of Zamindars. They had no connection with land and agriculture. They were interested only in extracting as much surplus from agriculture as possible for their consumption expenditure. For over 150 years, the Zamindars neglected any improvement in the agrarian condition. They reduced the peasants to servitude without any real rights over the land they had tilled for generations. Even the rent receipt was not given by the Zamindars so that the tenant could prove that he was occupying the land for twelve straight years.

There was no all-Bihar organisation of peasants to fight for their economic rights throughout the nineteenth century and during the first two decades of the twentieth century. With time, circumstances changed, and economic pressure on peasants increased. There were several factors responsible for changes. There was a rapid growth of the population. In the absence of non-agricultural means of livelihood, the demand for land increased. At the same time, the rising price of land, the increasing income from Zamindari and a great measure of mobility in them, the diminished rigour of sale laws and the rise in the mortgageable value of Zamindaris made them very attractive to all those who had money to invest¹. Thus, many a parvenu purchased Zamindaris. These parvenus were more rapacious and exploitative. Naturally, tensions in the rural areas increased.

Since most of the Zamindars belonged to the upper castes and tenants came from other castes, caste tensions led to caste conflicts in many cases. Most of the parvenu were absentee

landlords and managed through servants who extorted money from peasants on various counts to enrich themselves. Many of the Zamindars gave their Khas and Bakasht lands to sharecroppers to cultivate. The latter had no security of tenancy and fixity of rent. The upper caste urban area-based professionals like doctors and lawyers and salaried people like teachers, officers, clerks, etc., and traders and money lenders also purchased land and rented it out to sharecroppers. In almost all cases of sharecropping, the payment of rent was in terms of products, including hay and chaff. During natural calamities and hardships, there was an alienation of land by small occupancy raiyats to big landholders and moneylenders. The process of land alienation continued in the early decades of the twentieth century, and there is little doubt that the peasants who lost their land became labourers or were resettled on the land as bataidars².

Significantly, during the first half of the twentieth century, there was a decline in the per capita income in the rural areas of north Bihar. Notwithstanding a rise in population, “rice yields showed an exceptional drop that was counterbalanced by neither an increase in the cultivated area nor the development of other crops.³” Most rural credit came from the Zamindars, traders, moneylenders, rich cultivators and lawyers. Of them, the first four were more dominant. They charged a 25 to 50 per cent rate of interest every year. When the debtors were unable to pay, they got hold of their landholdings and, debtors were asked to carry on cultivation as bataidars. Thus the occupancy raiyats were reduced to the status of sharecroppers and deprived of any firm tenancy rights recognised by law.

The control of Zamindars, moneylenders, traders, rich cultivators and lawyers on the rural life seemed to be unbreakable. They were powerful, both economically and socially. The government recognised their socio-economic dominance was recognised by the government; for eg. the Begari system was not recognised by any law but in almost all the districts, Zamindars, tenure-holders, moneylenders, etc. freely and unhesitatingly resorted to it. The government seemed to accord it its sanction by not taking any cognisance.

On any significant scale, the growing population pressure on land due to the decline of handicrafts and the non-opening of modern industries in north Bihar increased the demand for land and rents were pushed up. It needs to be noted here that Zamindars in north Bihar were by

and large either adventurers and upstarts or pure rentiers. One can easily document this assertion by looking into the histories of most Zamindars, from Bettiah to Kursella. These people were devoid of any sympathy for peasants, which even the old autocrat families of native rulers had in some measure or the other. Anyway, when the Zamindari was finally abolished, the Zamindars retained vast amounts of land in the name of the homestead and personal cultivation. Lands were transferred to Benami, and records were falsified. The Bujharat operation failed to unravel the extent of falsification of records.

While this sort of semi-feudalism became the characterising aspect of north Bihar's social agrarian structure, the slow but inevitable process of commercialisation broke open the politically isolated village whose peasantry had for long periods stoically borne up the exploitation and oppression. The state's economic changes broke the socio-political placidity that the economic stagnation had caused. North Bihar became witness to an era of agrarian tensions, unrests movements and conflicts that, though endemic, were limited in their scope and arrested in their development like the economy itself.

By the time Independence came, the organised peasant movement in north Bihar had split into many factions. It had lost much of its vigour. The sentiments the movement had generated and the ideas it had aroused ultimately compelled the national government to reform the agrarian structure hoping that these reform measures may mitigate the peasants' fury. The legislation was enacted, projects were undertaken, schemes were formulated, and even mild persuasion of the landlords to give away some of their lands through Bhoodan was made under the leadership of Vinoba Bhave.

The national government tried to tackle the agrarian situation in north Bihar through developmental changes. But the change and development achieved invariably bypassed the poor in rural areas. While experimenting with these programmes, the government of India itself came up with the evaluation that "the programmes so far implemented are still more favourable to the larger owner farmer than to the smaller tenant farmer. As for the sharecropper and the landless labourer, they have been left out in the cold more often than not. In consequence, the disparities have widened, accentuating social tensions.⁴"

The Zamindars' systematic attempt to demoralise the peasantry by physically assaulting Kisans and their leaders. Zamindar Youth League was organised "to find ways and means to save themselves and devise their means of existence and sustenance.⁵" In addition to physical assaults, the Zamindars also tried to prevent the abolition of landlordism through lobbying with the Congress leaders⁶. On his visit to Patna, Leaders like Patel expressed misgivings about the equitable nature of the compensation. The provisions of "Khas Possession" and "homestead" were interpreted in a way to go in favour of landlords. "Khas Possession" referred not only to land cultivated personally by the intermediary but also to lands cultivated by servants, hired labour or stock. This broad definition of possession allowed the ex-intermediary to claim land that he did not cultivate himself even though that land was in the personal cultivating himself even though that land was in personal cultivating possession of a raiyat. Zamindari interests were quick to exploit Khas Possession provision of the Act. They not only used this provision to evict legally but also attempted to enlarge on a definition of Khas Possession to add new lands to the estates they planned to maintain following Zamindari abolition.

In effect, the Khas Possession provision in the Bihar Land Reforms Act 1950, as amended, enabled even absentee Zamindars to abuse the interests of the cultivating peasantry grossly. Thus, even after the abolition, the existing social order in north Bihar was such that the peasant cultivators were generally subservient to the ex-intermediaries. Thus the actual cultivators not only lost possession of the land they had tilled but also, ironically, sometimes continued to till the same land under new leases.

In this way, the effects of the Zamindari abolition were uneven and, as Amit Bhaduri pointed out, depending on the structure of the landholdings that existed under the Zamindars. The biggest beneficiaries of Zamindari abolition were the smaller village level landlords. They had themselves been tenants of Zamindars and were from the upper castes. The extent to which the cultivators got title to the land was directly related to their position in the caste structure. Lower down the caste structure; fewer cultivators got title to the land. There were differences in the backward castes too. Kurmis, Yadavs and Koeris were much better off than the depressed backward castes of ex-artisans and service workers.

The Zamindari abolition gave no direct economic benefits to the Dalits, who were mainly agricultural labourers. There is no doubt that abolition was not even designed to do with the agricultural labourers. The abolition did not even mean the end of landlordism. Instead, it established the power of the smaller village level landlords. They continued their exploitation through forms of tenancy, bonded labour, money lending and so on. Thus the Zamindari abolition did very much weaken the feudal structure but did not intend to end landlordism.

Moreover, in the early 1950s, the structure of power in north Bihar seemed to be immutable. The traditional society of the village had only begun to be disrupted, and the pattern of life had been so regularised that the north Bihar peasant seemed prepared to accept his position in the social and economic hierarchy as datum. His view of the world was limited. His capacity to conceive of his change in relationships with superiors or inferiors was minimal. His expectation of a higher standard of life was almost non-existent. A landless peasant could not conceive of himself as a holder of land. An agricultural labourer could not conceive of himself as having employment at wages above subsistence. A raiyat or under-raiyat tilling land without the security of tenure and subject to eviction any time could not conceive of himself as having an occupancy right in land assured by law and circumstances. A sense of frustration among peasants concerning the nature and quality of their existence was incipient. Their condition was apparent apathy. During the Survey and Settlement Operations, the Zamindars and other tenure holders held 14 per cent of the total cultivable area in the state in their Khas possession⁷.

Land reforms in Bihar were a sequel to the qualitative change in the issues causing agrarian tensions between the landlords and tenants in the post-independence period. While in the pre-independence period, the tenants used to fight the landlords on the issues concerning the encroachment of rights, in the post-independence period the tenants were fighting for the recognition itself, without which there could not be any right⁸. In the wake of the Zamindari abolition and during the intervening years of land reforms, large scale eviction of occupancy tenants had occurred, and Khas possession was extended. As a consequence of land reforms, the practice of oral tenancy increased considerably and gave rise to tensions.

Though Bihar was the first state to initiate agrarian reforms by enacting legislation to abolish the Zamindari system, it was the least successful of all in implementing that and other agrarian reforms. Nowhere in contemporary India is the gulf between articulated ideas concerning agrarian reforms and solid accomplishments more conspicuous than in North Bihar. The obstacles to the enactment and implementation of such reforms were formidable indeed.

For various reasons, the agrarian reforms failed to transform the pre-reformed agrarian structure of North Bihar, and the situation remained tense. Generally, the rights of traditional landholders had been preserved or enhanced at the expense of the peasantry. The reforms had neither led to a redistribution of land resources favouring the cultivating peasantry nor provided more secure rights in land to the actual cultivators in the rural North Bihar. They neither reduced the number of landless agricultural labourers nor enhanced the prospects of an agricultural production revolution in contemporary North Bihar. The reforms had not contributed even to a lessening of tensions between the landholding elites and the peasants. The power of landed classes to undercut the land reforms was demonstrated by the ease with which they delayed the passage of the lands ceiling's bill from 1955 until 1962 and ensured that the Bihar Land Reforms Act was studded with possible loopholes to scuttle effective implementation⁹.

Growing distress among the minor landowners became apparent from the late nineteenfifties as the number increased annual land sales by cultivators of less than one hectare to meet debt obligations¹⁰. Thus, overall, the proportion of cultivators to workers declined from 53.8% in 1961 to 43.4% in 1971. During the same period, the percentage of agricultural labourers climbed from 22.9% to over 35%¹¹. It is unclear how zamindari abolition and other abortive land reforms affected the strong association between caste and landholding.

End Notes

1. B.B. Chaudhuri, "The Land Market in Eastern India, 1793-1940, Part I: The Movement of Land Prices," The Indian Economic and Social History Review, Vol. XII, No. I and II. The other factors which made the investments in Zamindaris more attractive included the

prevalence of a system of Bhowlee (produce) rent, relatively lower level of revenue demand, provision of irrigation facilities as a result of the construction of the Sone and Tribeni canals, growth of commercial agriculture (jute, sugarcane, tobacco, etc.,) construction of the railways and roads, and lower level of awareness on the part of the Bihar peasantry of its rights.

2. Sunil Sen, Agrarian Relations in India: 1793-1947, New Delhi, 1979, p.31.
3. Jacques Pouchepadass, "Indebtedness in Colonial Bihar," in Charles Malamould (ed.) Debts and Debtors, New Delhi, 1983, p.136.
4. India, Home Ministry, Research and Policy Division, ' Causes and Nature of Current Agrarian Tensions,' published in A.R.Desai (ed.), Peasant Struggles in India, OUP, Bombay 1979.
5. The Searchlight, 19 January 1947.
6. The Indian Nation, 26 March 1947.
7. The numerous and complex relationships of people to land in rural Bihar are best enumerated in the Tenancy Act, which applies to the state.
8. F.TomassonJannuzi, Agrarian Crisis in India, The case of Bihar, p.101.
9. Nirmal Sengupta, "Bataidari Movement" in A.R.Desai (ed.), Agrarian Struggles in India After Independence, OUP, Delhi, 1986, p.326.
10. Saroj Ranjan Bose, Economy of Bihar, Firma KLP, Calcutta, 1971, p.136.
11. Ibid.