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CHRONIC POVERTY AND SOCIAL CONFLICT IN BIHAR

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Introduction

Chronic poverty trends cannot be examined without considering the impact of various forms of social conflicts afflicting the region. It is true that all forms of poverty cannot be explained by conflicts as much as all conflicts cannot be attributed to poverty. There is conflict without poverty and poverty without conflict. But, in many economically backward states, poverty and conflict have largely a two-way relationship; poverty is both a cause and consequence of conflict.

Definitions

(a) Chronic Poverty

There is a broad consensus on the definition of chronic poverty as severe deprivation of basic human needs over an extended period of time. But there is no unanimity as to what constitutes the basic needs. At some point of time, it was as basic as getting two square meals a day. But over a period of time, the 'basic needs' has expanded to encompass not only food, water, shelter and clothing, but access to other assets such as education, health, participation in political process, security and dignity. Those who are chronically poor are poor in several ways, not only in terms of income. Chronically poor households are those that suffer multi-dimensionality of their poverty -- they are perpetually haunted by food scarcity; they have no resources to send their children to school or provide health care for the sick. (Hulme, Moore, Shepherd)

(b) Social Conflict

Social conflict is generally defined as an interaction between interdependent sections of society each of which perceives incompatible goals and expects interference from the other section if it pursues its cherished goal. If the social groups turn to open combat to achieve their goals, then it is deemed as armed conflict. Such conflicts may take place between government machinery and social groups within a country or between social groups inter se.

Poverty-Conflict Interface: A Review of Literature

On the face of it, poverty and conflict are different phenomena that plague different societies, but in reality, there is a close relationship between the two. Those who dismiss the link between poverty and conflict generally argue that

poverty may lead to conflict when other factors are present; it is not a sufficient condition. According to Joan M Nelson (1998), "The precise links between economic grievances and ethnic conflicts are elusive, variable and strongly conditioned by a wide-range of non-economic factors. Nelson cites the works of specialists in conflicts and relevant headings of some of their works which are dismissive of poverty-conflict linkages; Walker Connor (1994) writes about "The Seductive Lure of Economic Explanation", while John McGarry and Brendan O Leary (1998) in their work on Northern Ireland label their discussion "Mammon and Utility: Liberal Economic Reasoning".

Milton Esman's view (1994) is quite emphatic: "To argue that the Israeli-Palestinian struggle is basically about economic values, or that the Quiet Revolution is mainly about employment opportunities for educated Quebecois or that Malays are concerned primarily with closing the economic gap (with the Chinese in Malay) utterly trivializes and distorts the meaning and the stakes of these conflicts"

Esman argues that strong economic expansion in Canada in the 1960s aroused high expectation from the people of Quebec thereby exacerbating conflict, yet recession in the late 1970s raised doubts about Quebec's ability to survive as a nation thereby dampening the quest for separation. Similarly, two decades of accelerated growth in Malaysia did not reduce ethnic tension in that country. Esman notes: "The conditions under which economic distress exacerbates conflict and economic growth mitigates conflict are less apparent."

Other studies have questioned the process of linking poverty to conflict. They reject the empirical measurement of income inequality, which is commonly measured by the Gini coefficient (it is a number between zero and one that measures the degree of inequality in the distribution of income in a given society); social inequality determined by a measure of ethnic or religious fragmentation. Cramer (2001) and Justino (2001) argue that the effort to establish a link between poverty and conflict has been undermined by the inappropriate country comparisons based on cross-sectional analyses.

Cramer's key argument is that in trying to understand the role of inequality in the creation of social conflict, one of the most significant obstacles is the poor quality and weak comparability of the data. On this basis, Cramer questions the confidence in any alleged general pattern linking inequality with social strife.

However, there are a number of theoretical and empirical studies that have established the link between poverty and conflict. Proponents of Frustration-Aggression theory suggest that individuals become aggressive when there are obstacles (perceived and real) to their success in life (Van de Goor, *et al.*, 1996). They argue that the existence of frustration always leads to some form of aggression. Frustration is defined as preventing the fulfillment of a goal.

Closely associated with the Frustration-Aggression theory is the Relative Deprivation theory. This theory stresses that sometimes people perceive themselves to be deprived in relation to others and this perception creates the inter-group hostility. This often happens when conditions improve more slowly for one group than for another.

These theories are relevant in discussing the relationship between poverty and conflict in backward states. With poor governance structures and unequal access and distribution of economic resources, some segments of the population tend to have better opportunities than others. This inevitably leads to persistence of poverty amongst certain groups with very serious consequences for social stability. When people perceive poverty as being inflicted on them, the Frustration-Aggression thesis becomes relevant in understanding why people rebel.

Some other studies suggest that most social conflicts in the developing world are fuelled by greed rather than grievance. They reject the grievance argument and note that in most instances of conflict, protest movements do not have any coherent strategy to provide justice to the poor. They are only interested in looting the resources of the state and enriching themselves and their disciples. Paul Collier argues that “the real cause of most rebellions is not the loud discourse of grievance, but the silent voice of greed”.

Internationally, the ‘greed’ argument has been flayed for its irrational approach. As Michael Pugh argues, to dismiss grievances is to assume that governments are “responsible and democratic”. Dwelling on such arguments “de-legitimises protest against ethnic discrimination, abuse of rights, denial of education and so on, and it ignores the structures and activities of governments that bring about collapse by suppressing protest”.

These theories negate the direct link between poverty and conflict since their emphasis is on the greed of disgruntled elites within a society who mobilise young men and women to rebel against the state. However, when we analyse as to how it is possible for these elites to easily mobilise large numbers of young people to mount a rebellion, we get to see the role of poverty in most conflicts. As Collier rightly notes, “If young men face only the option of poverty, they might be more inclined to join a rebellion than if they have better opportunities”.

A close look at the developments worldwide would reveal that there is a very high correlation between poverty and conflict. Many analysts believe that the participants in many of Africa’s violent demonstrations in recent years have been moved by the poor economic conditions under which they live. Copson, for instance, argues that when guerillas join a rebel group, they may obtain food and clothing as well as opportunities for recognition and advancement that are normally unavailable to them in an urban slum or a farming community. This

seems to be what is playing out in West Africa, where numerous rebel movements have become sources of opportunity for unemployed young men.

Many analysts have clearly demonstrated how conflict is linked to poverty in a variety of ways. Stewart and Fitzgerald (2001) and Stewart *et al.* (1997) have laid down both direct and indirect effects of conflict on poverty.

Marxist theory, too, presents a perspective of poverty related to social marginalisation and exclusion. In the Marxian framework, the poor and the marginalized sections of society provide the fertile ground for social revolution. It reveals a linkage of poverty to conflict. (Castells, 1996)

According to a report by the African Development Bank, with the end of the Cold War, the relationship between poverty and conflict became more evident. As per the report, of 63 low-income countries in 2002, 38 were located in sub-Saharan Africa and these were the very countries ravaged by conflict. The Bank's Progress Report on Poverty Reduction in 1998-2000 is a further testimony of the links between poverty and conflict. The statistics clearly suggest that there is a tendency for poor countries to experience conflict.

While the poverty-conflict linkage is by now an accepted fact, a lot of debate is still going on among Marxist as well as non-Marxist analysts about the specific relationship between poverty and conflict. One school of thought is of the view that poverty causes conflict, while the other argues that only the reverse is true. There are many others who contend that it is a two-way process -- poverty leads to conflict and vice versa.

Poverty-Conflict Linkages: Analytical Framework

While the need to address poverty and social conflict within a unified analytical framework is firmly established, the conceptual refinements have not taken place yet. There could be many reasons. The Centre for Poverty Analysis, Sri Lanka provides one explanation: "In the past, international development co-operation tended to maintain a hands-off attitude towards social conflict. This was partly in view of the sensitive nature of social conflict. It also stemmed from conceptual distinction and institutional separation between humanitarian aid/relief and development assistance. This hands-off attitude towards social conflict and firmly rooted dichotomy between relief and development assistance have increasingly been challenged both in social theory and development practice.

While a consensus appears to be developing among various actors involved in development programmes regarding the need to address poverty and conflict within a unified analytical/intervention framework, such a unified network is yet to be developed. Tools such as Peace and Conflict Impact Assessment are still in an early stage of development".

Scope of the Present Study:

This study of poverty-conflict interface in Bihar will largely draw upon the overall field experience and a few specific case studies. At the outset, an analysis of the causes of the caste-class churning of the day will be presented in a larger historical perspective. Then the current state of the poverty-conflict interface in Bihar will be discussed. Finally, there will be certain suggestions to address the issues and concerns emerging out of this discussion.

Poverty in Bihar: A Statistical View

If we define poverty as deprivation of basic human needs – food, safe drinking water, sanitation, health services, shelter and education – then more than two-third of Bihar's population would be subsumed under the category. Official statistics tell part of the story. Bihar has the lowest literacy rate in the country. Next to Orissa, Bihar has the highest percentage of people living below the poverty line. It has the lowest per capita income among the major states of India. Bihar's per capita income, which was about 60 per cent of Indian average during 1960s, declined to about 40 per cent in 1993-94 and further to 34 per cent in 1997-98. The GDP growth rate of the state has been abysmally low; it was just 2.69 per cent per annum from 1991-92 to 1997-98 as against about 6 per cent for all the major states of the country.

The only sector in which Bihar has stolen a march over others is in its growth of population. While the population growth rate in India declined from 23.9 per cent during the 1980s to 21.3 per cent during the 1990s, Bihar's growth rate shot up from 23.4 per cent to 28.4 per cent during the same period. Consequently, the population density of Bihar stands at an absurdly high level of 880 as against 234 for the country as a whole. It is easy to predict the overall impact of demographic explosion on the one hand and horrendously slow growth of the economy on the other. It is but natural that more and more people are slipping into the poverty net.

This is very much reflected in the official data. In absolute terms, the number of those below the poverty line in Bihar is still among the highest; Bihar alone accounts for about one-fifths of the country's rural poor. The available data suggests that the number of poor people in Bihar was more in 1999-2000 than in 1987-88.

Poverty in Bihar: Historical Context

It is an oft-quoted cliché that Bihar is a land of riches inhabited by mostly poor people. The large Gangetic plane with its fertile soil, the huge water resources available from a multitude of rivers that flow through the region and the hard-working human resource of the state ought to have ensured the status of the

truncated Bihar (minus Jharkhand which was the industrial powerhouse of the undivided state)) as the agricultural bowl of India.

Unfortunately, Bihar is today a land of misery and poverty where agriculture has turned out to be a loss-making proposition. The result is a mass exodus of hundreds of thousands of people who earned their livelihood from agricultural land.

Why have things come to such a pass? We can find some answers in the history of last two centuries.

Colonial period:

Bihar's tragedy can be traced to the British period when it was the periphery of the Bengal presidency. Bihar was one of the regions (along with some other areas of Bengal and some parts of Uttar Pradesh and Madras) where the Permanent Settlement was introduced in 1793 wherein the Zamindars were made the intermediaries for collection of rent from peasants and, in turn, they paid a fixed amount of land revenue to the state. Under the Permanent Settlement, the revenue demand was fixed at nine-tenths of the rent that the Zamindars were supposed to collect from their tenants. Zamindars, however, started extracting exorbitant rent from the tenants, though the land revenue payable by them had been fixed permanently. Often, the Zamindars farmed out the right of rent collection to subordinate agents who imposed their own arbitrary assessment on the 'raiyaats'. After meeting the land revenue demand, the tiller was left with bare subsistence. That explains why the peasants of Bihar were abysmally poor.

In 1883, a Member raised the issue of dire poverty of peasants of Bihar in the House of Commons of England. The question was somewhat like this: Has the Minister in charge of India seen the 'Notes on District of Gaya' prepared by a Bengal Civil Service Officer, Mr Grierson? The report says that if a man and his wife worked round the year, they would earn barely forty one rupees and twelve annas. If they are a family of four, it works out to 10 rupees and 7 annas per person per year. This is almost 30 per cent less than Rupees 15 that Mr Grierson thinks is the least one needs to fulfill the barest minimum needs of life. Does the Minister know that most of the landless labourers of Gaya go without proper clothes and two square meals a day? Has the Minister cared to probe the condition of poor peasants in other districts?

The Minister furnished a reply submitted by Mr. C J Moore (ICS), Settlement Officer of Gaya: 'Situation of Bihar is different from Bengal. People here can make do with very little. So an income of Rupees 15 a year is deemed to be much more than what a Bihari raiyat needs, whereas this amount would be much less than what a Bengali raiyat requires for his basic subsistence'.

It is quite evident that Bihar received a step-motherly treatment from the colonial masters. Whereas most of the capital investments were made in Bengal, Bihar was systematically denuded of its resources. There were many Biharis who did not directly eke a living out of the agricultural land but were engaged in different subsidiary activities such as rural handicrafts. British rulers systematically destroyed the occupation of rural artisans of Bihar by flooding the market with cheaper machine-made products manufactured in the metropolitan centres. That explains why, even in the early twentieth century, many jobless artisans of Bihar headed towards Calcutta in search of employment. Their trials and tribulations have been vividly depicted in many novels and short stories of the period.

The statistics of the migration from Bihar is alarming, to say the least. According to 1921 census, whereas 4, 22, 000 people came to Bihar, 19, 17,000 went out of Bihar. Most of them went to Calcutta (and some to Assam tea gardens) where monthly income varied between Rupees 15 and Rupees 20. Because of these migrants, the foundation of money order economy in Bihar was laid way back in nineteenth century. In 1887 itself, Rupees 7,22,070 came to Gaya by money order. In 1896-97, the remittances to the Muzaffarpur district alone accounted for Rupees 15 lakh which increased to Rupees 34 lakh in 1910. In 1911, Saran district received Rupees 51 lakh through money order. For the whole of Bihar, money order remittances were as high as Rupees 4.21 crore in 1915 which increased to Rupees 6.66 crore in 1920.

The migration was not limited to Calcutta or Assam alone. Many went as far away as Fiji and Mauritius. During 1910-11, the colonial government recruited 11,676 people for indentured labour in these islands; out of them more than half were from Bihar and 3473 were from the erstwhile Shahbad district alone.

Many of those who did not migrate were left with no other option but to take loan for subsistence from the land-owning class and which they were never able to return even in the long run, due to their being heavily in debt and deficit. This led to a system of informal bondage that tied down the cultivator to the landowner for whole life.

Post-colonial Bihar: Congress Era (1947-89)

Even after independence, undivided Bihar could not benefit from its rich mineral resources (in the Jharkhand region) because of the freight equalization policy of the government of India which fixed the rate of raw materials for industrial establishments across the country, without any special benefits for the state where the mineral deposits existed. So the state of Bihar could not leverage its locational advantage.

Politically, Bihar has been bereft of leaders who had the vision to set the state on the path of development. Successive chief ministers of the state, with rare exceptions, indulged in brazen caste politics, without any regard to the concerns

for the whole state. This may have something to do with the fact that Bihar, unlike Bengal and Orissa, did not undergo any social reform movement (Renaissance) and therefore, caste remained the *raison d'etre* of political and social life in the state.

If the caste leaders would have tried to improve the lot of their own caste groups, then the condition of a large section of Biharis would have been much better as politicians from different castes – high, middle and low – have occupied the hot seats of power in the state at different times. But the reality is that these caste leaders only spawned a coterie of caste followers who became rich and powerful, while letting the large swathe of their caste brethren to languish in poverty. That is why what we see today is a creamy layer in every caste group which is enjoying political and economic power, while the vast multitudes of the same caste groups continue to wallow in misery.

Poverty-Social Conflict Interface in Bihar

If the historical and political factors largely accounted for Bihar's slide into poverty, the social and economic factors were no less responsible for the same. Caste conflicts in Bihar have been an endemic factor, more so because historically, there has been caste-class congruence in the state. Upper castes have been traditionally the land-owning castes and the lower castes the marginal farmers. The Scheduled Castes, the ex-untouchables, are invariably the landless agricultural labourers.

Colonial Phase:

Bihar has a history of agrarian tension dating back to the British period. The colonial government had introduced different systems of cess collection from agricultural produce. As we discussed earlier, in Bihar, the *Zamindari* system proved to be the most oppressive. The erstwhile *Zamindars* not only drove the small and marginal farmers into abysmal poverty but also indulged in flagrant sexual exploitation. The social outcastes were hardly in a position to organise themselves to take on the oppressors, but the poor in upper and middle castes did sometimes rise in revolt, though with sporadic success.

In fact, the foundation of the organised raiyat resistance movement against oppressive Zamindari system was laid by the then respected leader of Bhumihar Brahmins, Swami Sahajanand Saraswati. Incidentally, he represented the aspirations of largely raiyats belonging to Bhumihar castes and the resistance movement was directed mostly at Bhumihar landlords. The Bihar Pradesh Kisan Sabha, founded by Saraswati, did not raise radical demands; all that it asked for was to abolish the tax on purchase or sale of lands and reduce the revenue demands on the big raiyats and similar issues that reflected the concerns of relatively better-off sections in the peasantry.

Clearly, Saraswati was catering to the needs of his limited constituency. But the fact that for the first time he set in motion the process of a protest against the entrenched *Zamindar* class, howsoever muted, was to act as a harbinger for a series of agrarian unrests to follow.

Just as the upper caste raiyats rose in revolt to extenuate the oppressive revenue demands of *Zamindars*, the middle caste peasant groups also began to organise themselves to raise voice against their social and sexual oppression. Over a period of time, the social movement unleashed by these middle caste groups transformed into a peasant movement.

But the fact remains that all these movements did not address the issues and concerns of the most exploited sections of the villages – the landless and marginalised peasants who continued to remain voiceless and on the fringes of the society.

Post-colonial phase: Era of Congress hegemony (1947-89)

In independent India, with the abolition of the *Zamindari* system (Bihar was the first state in the country to do away with the *Zamindari* system), and implementation of Land Ceiling Act, the economic repression officially came to an end, but not the economic plight of the poor. Bihar was a classic example of tardy implementation of Land Ceiling and Tenancy Acts. Though a fairly large number of tenants having occupancy rights in land got title to the land in the wake of *Zamindari* abolition and subsequent implementation of Land Ceiling Acts, in the process hundreds of thousands of sharecroppers were evicted from the land in their possession; they were driven to the brink of penury.

Their case was taken up by the Communist Party of India which waged a few agrarian struggles, the most notable among them being the Sathi Farms Struggle in Champaran. There were also attempts to launch a separate agricultural labourers' movement for higher wage demands as well as for protecting the sharecroppers' rights. The sharecroppers of Purnea district, many of them belonging to the tribal community, waged struggles against their eviction by the landlords from the tenanted lands which they had reclaimed. Though the impact of these struggles was localised and limited in so far as the economic rewards were concerned, it brought about a new consciousness among the peasantry in Bihar.

Eminent writer Jannuzi, who visited some of the villages in 1950s and 60s, captured the changing scenario vividly: "The people in these villages have been transformed, gradually over 14 years. Where once the physical, social and economic structure in these villages had been accepted as datum by the people, there was by 1968 a new capacity for even the lowest in the traditional hierarchy, the landless labourers, to articulate the need for change and to become agents for change... The inarticulates were becoming articulates, many villagers,

landless and landholders alike, who earlier had referred to the immutability of their condition, were prepared in 1968 to cry out in protest against the circumstances that denied them the ability to provide the barest necessities for their children. In 1968 their expressions of anger were diffused. Their ability either to assess blame or to scapegoat any individual faction or group was limited. Yet, they were in the process of repudiating their traditional life styles and it seemed only a matter of time before a leadership would emerge to give focus to the newly articulated feeling of anger among them”.

Jannuzi's words proved prophetic. Some Naxal groups professing faith in Maoist ideology found fertile ground to start working in some parts of the state. With the mounting frustration of poor peasants, it was hardly surprising that more and more areas came under the hold of the Naxalbari type movement. This movement is the strongest in the present south Bihar, which coincidentally, also happens to be the region where the Kisan Sabha movement of the pre-independence days was at its peak.

This has certainly exacerbated social conflict in the countryside. But how have they affected the poverty syndrome in the state? I travelled to several parts of Bihar for a first person account.

Poverty & Conflict in Post-Mandal Bihar: An Overview

A first hand impression of the state of affairs in Bihar suggests that the state has failed to provide the basic services to the poorest of the poor, even after a supposedly pro-poor government, championing the cause of the backward castes and classes ruled Bihar with a firm hand for a decade and a half (1990-2005). The most depressing sight all over the state is that an overwhelmingly large number of men, women and children have to attend to call of nature in the open as the state has failed to provide public toilets. Barely 100 kilometres from Patna, the state capital, one comes across villages which have not received electricity for over two decades. Hardly 30 kilometres from Gaya, second biggest town of Bihar, one is witness to a huge high school complex turned into a cowshed. Primary Health Centres everywhere have remained locked for years; ailing villagers are left to the mercy of the quacks.

Hundreds of thousands of ex-untouchables (Mushahars, Bhuians, Doms etc) inhabiting the outskirts of villages have no authorised shelter of their own. They live in make-shift mud houses which are often razed to the ground on some pretext or the other. One can very well see that the Scheduled Caste families living in sub-human conditions.

In Madhubani, in northern Bihar, one comes across village after village where mostly women, children, old and infirm are left behind; a majority of able-bodied persons having migrated to distant cities in search of work. Migrants are not from the lower castes alone. Many belonging to the upper castes who have fallen in bad times have also moved out to seek avenues for survival outside the state.

There are many villages in Purne where the exodus of upper caste youths has reached alarming proportions.

It is not simply the case of villages alone; in the few urban centres that exist in Bihar (it is the least urbanised state with an urban population of just about 10 per cent), the life of the multitudes is equally depressing – thousands of them live in unliveable slums amidst filth, muck and disease. Social conflicts may have pushed the villagers – cutting across the caste-class continuum – to urban centres, but that is like moving from the frying pan into the fire. Because of the unplanned and unchecked urbanisation, life for the poor in the urban centres is much more degrading and dehumanizing than what it is in the villages.

Poverty & Conflict in Post-Mandal Bihar: Case Studies

Bara & Senari: Upper castes as victims of Naxal menace

My first ports of call were Bara village, near Tekari block in Gaya district and Senari, in Arwal (the then Jehanabad) district. Bara was the village where one of the first Naxal-inspired massacre of about 40 landowners belonging to Bhumihar community had taken place way back in 1992. Senari was also a village where upper caste Bhumihars were killed by the Naxalites seven years later. How have the villages coped since then?

In both these villages, the massacre was carried out by the Naxal groups. Though the Scheduled Castes had nothing to do with the killers, they were at the receiving end of the wrath of the upper castes. The logic was that the Naxalites represented the aspirations of the Scheduled Castes. The huts, in which these poorest sections of the society lived for years, were demolished and they were forced to leave the villages. Their forcible eviction must have led to the loss of livelihood and unending sufferings as the neighbouring villages were not prepared to accommodate these displaced persons.

The condition of many of the Bhumihar households which directly suffered because of the massacre has also gone from bad to worse. It is true that the surviving members of the families got the compensation package (cash and one job for each family) announced by the government (in fact, the bereaved families in Bara also got financial help from many international agencies as it was the first massacre by Naxalites in Bihar on such a large scale and therefore received worldwide attention. By the time the Senari massacre took place, it had lost the news value for the media, both international and national). But these families faced a typical problem.

Since all the male members of the families had died, the jobs were offered to the women. By tradition, the women of the upper caste Bhumihar family never set foot outside home to do work. Many of these women just could not digest the idea of doing menial work (as they were not educated, they could be offered only

class IV jobs) in sundry offices. Some who mustered the courage to take up jobs to earn a livelihood found, to their dismay, that they had to travel far away from their villages everyday or they had to take up accommodation near the workplace. It was a Hobson's choice for most of these home-bound women who had also the responsibility to look after their minor children. The net result was that many of them had to forego the job offer.

Some of these families also faced problem of another kind. Since most of the Bhumihar adult males present at the time of the massacre had been killed (Naxalites, as a policy, do not kill minors or women), there was no one to look after their land. Many unscrupulous elements – some relatives who lived in towns and in some cases the newly emergent landlords belonging to the middle castes -- have taken control of the property of these hapless women, without providing any financial support. Since most of these households solely depend on land for their survival, they are in dire straits.

Laxmanpur-Bathe: Scheduled Castes as victims of upper caste militia

Laxmanpur-Bathe in the then Jehanabad district (present Arwal district) had hogged the international limelight in 1996 for an upper caste-sponsored massacre of 59 men, women and children belonging to Scheduled Caste families. In many cases, the entire families were wiped out (Ranveer Sena, a largely Bhumihar outfit, which was responsible for the tragedy did not believe in discrimination on the ground of age or gender). So there was no one left to suffer the consequences. But in some other families, a few members had survived. Unfortunately many of them did not get jobs as promised by the government (though they had got the financial compensation).

This appeared very strange, as Bihar had a government which claimed to represent the ideology of social justice and aspirations of the backward castes and classes. In fact, the ruling dispensation was at loggerheads with upper castes, especially Bhumihars who had taken an uncompromisingly hostile stance against the party in power. How was it that the victim Bhumihar families managed to procure jobs from this government but not the victim Scheduled Caste families? "Bhumihars managed the jobs because they had influential voices in the corridors of power, but the Scheduled Castes couldn't because they had no one to pursue their case", said Arvind Kumar, a practising lawyer and human rights activist.

The District Magistrate was not in a position to provide a copy of the Action Taken Report on Bathe massacre as the `case was old and was handled by my predecessors'. The Home Secretary who himself was new to the job also did not have any information about the number of jobs provided to the victims.

Kurumuri: Naxal interface between upper castes & Scheduled Castes

This is a village which has not been witness to a large-scale massacre, but one where the social tension is palpable. Located at a distance of 10 kms from Piro block in Bhojpur district, it is a Bhumihar-dominated village, with a sizeable Scheduled Caste population. There are only a few middle caste families living here. The CPI-ML (Liberation) has a very strong influence over the Scheduled Castes, mostly agricultural labourers. Sporadic killings of rival groups, Bhumihar and Naxalite activists, have been an ongoing feature of the area.

CPI-ML activists have tried to take possession of the land owned by relatively big upper caste landowners (there are no big landlords anymore, as in most cases, property has been divided and sub-divided among members of the family who live separately in towns), but without much success because of the stiff resistance put up by the Bhumihar community. The frustrated Naxal activists then mobilised the Scheduled Caste labourers, to refuse to work in the upper caste landholdings in order to bring the landowners down on their knees.

This resulted in no cultivation for two consecutive years. As a result, both the landowners and labourers suffered. The labourers had to go out in search of work; landowners had to fall back upon other income for their survival. The landowners then tried to bring in agricultural labourers from the neighbouring villages which was resisted by the Naxalites. Consequently, Bhumihar landowners also mobilized armed groups to provide protection to the hired labourers.

Sensing that the stalemate had turned out to be financially crippling, both sides agreed to a compromise. As part of the deal, the CPI-ML undertook not to attempt to grab the land of upper caste landlords and the landowners promised to give substantially higher wages than before. The deal turned out to be beneficial to both.

Though the tension persists even now, there is a realization on both sides that each is dependent on the other and it is to no one's interest to subvert the working relationship. This realization has given the poor landless labourers a sense of self-dignity as well as substantial increase in the wage level. It is not as if they have come out of the grip of poverty, as we defined it, but it has only ensured that they don't have to go to sleep without food.

Kamta: Hegemony of intermediate castes

This is a village where the traditionally oppressed class is today pitted against the intermediate castes. This village is adjacent to Laxmanpur-Bathe. Bhumihars have been traditionally the biggest landowning castes here, but in the aftermath of Bathe killings, in which several Bhumihar landowners of the village were

named accused, many Bhumihaar families chose to leave the village. Not surprisingly, intermediate castes have emerged as the dominant caste groups because of their financial muscle, numerical strength and political clout.

The landless poor in the village had been traditionally at the receiving end of the upper caste landowners, but since the upper caste groups are increasingly becoming absentee landlords (because of migration to urban areas) and their number is dwindling (as many of them are disposing of their land; and the middle caste groups are main buyers), the newly emergent landlords like Yadavs, Kurmis and Koeris have replaced the upper castes as the new exploiters of the oppressed groups. The CPI(ML)-Liberation, which is very active in the area, has had to engage in a war of attrition with the intermediate caste landlords to protect the interests of the landed poor.

Badgaon: Yadavs Vs Other Backward Castes

This is a village, located about 40 kilometres from Tekari block in Gaya, where the penetration or presence of Naxalites is not there at all. Bhumihaars had been the traditional dominant castes here, but they have lost their pre-eminent position to the intermediate caste groups. What is striking about this village is the turf war between the two major intermediate castes – Yadavs and Koeris – for positions of supremacy. This village is completely insulated from the influence of Naxalites of any hue –CPI-ML, MCC or People’s War. That is why, the landless poor have to suffer injustices silently.

Here is a tale of woe narrated by a Scheduled Caste man of the village: The buffalo of a Yadav landlord happened to graze in the poor farmer’s land in the night (it is a standard practice in the village for the strong to push their cattle into the poor man’s land), ate some chemical-laced stuff (used for killing insects) left in the field and died. The landlord accused the poor farmer of leaving the deadly stuff in his field just to harm his cattle and asked the latter to pay Rs 15,000 as compensation for his loss. As the poor man failed to pay the money, he was prevented from tilling his land. “Tell me, where is my fault? He should have been penalized in the first place for letting his cattle graze in my field. Instead, he is penalizing me. He has deprived me of my livelihood. He is a powerful man. Who do I turn to?”, he said with tears in his eyes.

It is clearly evident that the newly emergent intermediate caste landlords are fast emulating the feat of their upper caste counterparts.

Line Bazar (Mirganj) : Muslims Vs Yadavs

This village in Gopalganj district is dominated by Muslims, with a substantially large population of Yadavs as well. Traditionally, Muslims and Yadavs had a hostile relationship. During the communal riots, Yadavs were in the forefront in taking on the Muslims. With the dawn of Muslim-Yadav synergy in Laloo Prasad

dispensation in Bihar, the violent conflict has ceased, but the economic war continues.

During the Congress regime, Muslims had an upper hand in this village. In fact, they had taken over huge tracts of government land and used the premises for various business purposes. With the OBC power on display in the last 15 years, Yadavs took over all the government land illegally occupied by the Muslims earlier. "All our economic activities have come to a halt and we are virtually on the streets", says an aggrieved Muslim. They cannot move the police or the court (for whatever it is worth) because they are not legal owners of the land. Travelling through the village, one hears the anguish of the Muslim families against the depredations of Yadavs. But Yadavs are unfazed. "They had enjoyed the benefits of political power for long and we were mute witnesses. Now, it is our turn to enjoy the spoils of power," one of them says.

If Muslims have such strong grievances, why do they join hands with Yadavs when it comes to voting in the elections? "We have no option. If we do not vote with them, we will not be safe. We have suffered a lot in communal riots during the Congress regime. We are secure so long as Yadavs don't turn against us," goes the answer.

It is a paradoxical situation for poor Muslims in Bihar. They realize that their right to life is secure in the 'social justice' dispensation but not their right to livelihood.

Bhoodan Land: Scheduled Castes as victims of upper & middle castes

The Bhoodan movement, spearheaded by Acharya Binoba Bhave, collected huge tracts of land from big landowners. Thousands of acres of surplus land were distributed among the landless peasants. In fact, many Scheduled Caste families became proud owners of landed property, thanks to the Bhoodan campaign.

How have they been affected by the social churning going on in the countryside?

In Dangra village in Mohanpur block in Gaya district, many members of the Bhuyan (Scheduled Caste) community have in their possession the Bhoodan land, but they live in constant fear that the land could be snatched away on some pretext or the other, as they do not possess the title-deeds for the same. They cite several instances to justify their threat perception. A member of their community had got the Bhoodan land, but after his sudden death, the land was taken away by the very landlord who had donated it. The poor man's son was told that Bhoodan land could not be inherited by the descendants.

Another man in nearby Kohwari village had got the official papers that legitimized his occupation of the Bhoodan land but he was prevented from tilling the land by the landlord who had donated it on the pretext that his full and correct name had

not been written on the document. He was asked to get the mistake rectified by the appropriate authorities before he was handed back his land.

In another case, in Rajauli in Nawada district, the man had possessed and tilled the Bhoodan land for 10 years and had got accustomed to the idea of being a landowner. But one fine morning, the original landowner told him that his father had donated the land when he had a lot of landed property. Now that they had very little land left, he has decided to take back the donated land. "He told me that you should be happy that you have already enjoyed the benefits of the land for 10 years without investing a rupee," says the aggrieved farmer.

In Barachatti (Gaya), several recipients of Bhoodan land were in tears that their land had been snatched away by a newly emergent landlord who had muscle power as well as political clout.

Poverty & Conflict in Bihar: An Analysis

As we discussed earlier, both poverty and conflict have been integral part of Bihar's history. The question is: how has the situation changed over the years? Has there been a change in the intensity of poverty? Has the nature of social conflict undergone any change over the years?

Finding an answer that explains the situation for the whole of Bihar is not easy. Because the social and economic context of the villages differ, say, in every 50 kilometres of the state, thanks to the caste composition, the extent of Naxal influence in the area and the degree of infrastructural support (irrigation etc) in the region. Nevertheless, certain broad generalizations are possible

Status of upper castes: Small landowners among them are badly hit

Because of the persistent onslaught of the Naxalite groups, many upper caste landowners have snapped their ties with ancestral land and village and have moved to urban centres. As a matter of fact, since urban centres in Bihar provide very little employment, many of these upper caste men have migrated to other metropolitan centres in search of work. As they lose their personal identity in the big cities, they find it easier to break free from the bondage of social taboos and engage in menial jobs, (by tradition, they are not supposed to engage in any physical labour, even in their own land) to earn their bread. It is obvious that in the aftermath of the violent social conflict in Bihar, the poor in the upper castes have been its worst victims.

Status of intermediate castes; New landlords

The traditional conflict between the upper castes on the one hand and intermediate and lower castes on the other has diminished, as the upper caste groups have lost the clout to be in the offensive mode vis-à-vis other social

groups. The intermediate castes (mostly Yadavs and only in a few places, Kurmis and Koeris) today hold the key in the village society and are engaged in an adversarial relationship with both the upper castes and lower castes.

That explains the sea-change in the attitude of the Naxalite groups in the villages. In the 1980s and early 90s, the various Naxalite formations carried a major campaign against the upper caste landowners and managed to drive a majority of them away from the villages. But as the activists of these Naxalite groups, especially the underground outfits, are mostly drawn from the intermediate castes, they have hardly taken action against the depredations of the middle caste landlords.

Within the intermediate castes, a creamy layer has emerged which has become rich and powerful, which wields enormous clout in the village society as well as corridors of power. Their number has increased significantly in the last decade because of the government patronage. But a large section of these caste groups continue to wallow in poverty.

Status of the lowest castes: Rise in wages, but poverty unabated

As far as the lowest castes (extreme backward castes and Scheduled Castes) – who are also the lowest class – are concerned, in a certain sense, their lot has improved over a period of time (their wages have increased sharply and physical and sexual abuses have come down drastically).

Two factors have brought about this situation. Naxalite movement has undoubtedly had an impact in bringing about the upward wage revision. As the landless poor were unorganized, despite their numerical superiority, they were, on their own, not in a position to bargain with the landowners for a better deal. Naxalites provided the organizational backing, though the nature of the intervention differed depending on which Naxalite faction enjoyed supremacy in an area. CPI-ML(Liberation), which is one of the major overground Naxal outfits, believes in popular mobilization and organized resistance to confront the entrenched powerful groups. But the banned outfits like MCC and PW believe in striking terror. Their modus operandi has been to shock and awe by resorting to brutal methods. Both the strategies have delivered. The landless poor have got a better deal.

But equally and perhaps more important reason for better wages for landless poor is the fact that a large number of men from these caste groups have migrated to other states; the reason being that whether they worked in the agricultural field or industrial units in far away places, they managed to get much more money -- that too on a round-the-year basis -- than what they could earn in their native places. Because of the increasing exodus from their ranks, there is a short supply of the agricultural labourers. In keeping with the demand-supply

rules, daily wages have gone up sharply. This has certainly made the condition of those who have been left behind relatively better.

At the same time, the lot of these landless labourers has not improved perceptively, as the number of working days in land has been drastically reduced following the introduction of modern agricultural implements such as tractors, threshers and harvesters.

This has led to underemployment, which in turn has pushed the landless labour back into the poverty trap, increased wages notwithstanding. Until this problem of underemployment is addressed, chronic poverty will remain a stark reality. In that event, social conflict will continue to haunt the lives in the countryside.

There is therefore a compelling need to evolve institutional responses to address this core concern. **The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act**, recently enacted by Parliament, is a welcome step in this direction. The Act ensures legal entitlement for 100 days of employment to one member of a family in villages. That in itself is inadequate; it will not provide enough wherewithal for a family of four or five members to fulfill all their basic needs. But, at least, it is a good beginning.

Poverty-Conflict in Bihar: Prescriptions

Poverty-conflict interface in Bihar has had different dimensions in different periods of time. The caste-class convergence that characterized the social relationship in 19th and large parts of 20th century has become a thing of the past, though the social churning is more confined to higher and middle castes rather than the lower castes. The traditional upper caste landed gentry has fallen in bad times as agriculture has become uneconomical in many parts of the state.

The main impediment in the way of productive agriculture is the lack of irrigation facilities in different parts of the state. It is a tragic story that Bihar government has invested next to nothing for optimizing the huge irrigation potential in the state. "Where is the money? We can barely manage to pay salary to our staff", says a senior official of the department. In fact, engineers of Water Resources Department posted in different districts are staying on in Patna and going to their place of posting once a month to collect their salary. "No one can blame us as we can do nothing by remaining at our place of posting without financial resources", justifies an absentee officer.

The only irrigation network that exists today is the decrepit Sone Canal System which had been created by the colonial masters. It was certainly a grand project and had proved a boon for hundreds of thousands of farmers, but because of the lack of proper maintenance, there has been huge silting in the canals, adversely affecting the irrigation process. The Gandak canal, which came into existence

after India's independence, also faces the same problem. There are areas where canals are silted and channels linking the canal to the fields are choked.

The disuse of the canals has become the biggest curse for the farming community. In the absence of canal irrigation, they have to depend on ground water which is, as a bounty of nature, plentifully available in the state. But one needs electricity for lift irrigation. In a state where district towns barely get 6 hours of electricity, that too in the night, the question of villages getting electricity is a pipedream. Many of the villages have not received electricity in the last 20 years. Some of the old people remember having enjoyed the benefits of electricity till 70s. Now, even the electric wires are missing.

So generator sets have to be used to lift water from the underground. Even if a farmer manages to invest in a genset or gets it on hire, (in either case, it is an expensive proposition), that is not the end of the problem. He needs diesel to run it. With the spiralling diesel prices, this exercise turns out to be so expensive (it is estimated to cost 5 times more than what they would have paid for electricity) that small and middle farmers find it extremely uneconomical to cultivate food crops, especially when agricultural labour has also become expensive. That is why only those who till their own land are barely able to make both ends meet. For those who depend on hired-labour, it is largely a loss-making proposition.

That explains why upper caste landowners – small or big – who consider it a social taboo to wield the plough (now ploughs are passé and tractors are in) are resorting to distress sale of their land. Those who have managed to switch over to some other form of economic activity have survived the crisis. Those who have not, are in dire straits. They are the main recruits of the Ranveer Sena, which is the upper caste armed outfit to take on the Naxalites.

If poverty of the lower castes provided a fertile ground for the growth and expansion of Naxal groups, increasing pauperisation of the upper castes has created the breeding ground for Senas of different hues. It is a classic example of poverty causing social conflicts and social conflicts engendering poverty.

What is the way out?

Better Water Management:

In order to directly address the issues of poverty and social conflict, the state has to take up the task of providing proper irrigation facilities. In a number of villages both rich and poor speak in a single voice and echo a single demand -- just give us the canal water and we don't care if you loot the whole treasury. Irrigation clearly holds the key to economic prosperity of the village.

In some parts of present south Bihar, where agriculture is a profitable venture, thanks to the Sone Canal irrigation, one can see prosperity and absence of social

tension. The landowners get a reasonably good return and the landless get opportunity to work on decent wages round the year. In the absence of an exploitative relationship, there are not many recruits for rebellion.

Bihar is a classic state where the scarcity of water is a major problem in some areas, but excess water is a bigger problem in several other areas. Large parts of northern Bihar are ravaged by floods every year, year after year. What is more distressing is the fact that many of these areas remain waterlogged for more than six months a year, disallowing the cultivation of any crops. That explains the large exodus of people from the area to other places in search of livelihood.

The successive state governments have only engaged in relief measures in the aftermath of the floods causing havoc, but no preventive measures have been put in place for the optimal utilization of the flood water to benefit the state and its people.

If both the problems of excess and scarce water are tackled on a priority basis, that will, for sure, pave the way for the prosperity in Bihar's countryside and its peace spin-off.

I suggest two more measures to launch a frontal attack on the poverty-conflict cycle in rural Bihar: a) strengthening Panchayati Raj institutions, b) promoting agro-based industries.

Strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions:

The Panchayati Raj institutions were supposed to provide the platform for the villagers to be active participants in the process of decision-making and implementation of the welfare schemes, but the Bihar government did not allow the conduct of elections (even though there was a constitutional mandate to hold it within a year of the enactment of the 84th Amendment to the Constitution and most other states stuck to the time-frame) on some pretext or the other, until the Patna High Court came down heavily on it. At the behest of the high Court, the elections were held. But the sad part was that many of the newly-elected Mukhiyas were local criminals who managed to win the battle of ballot through money and muscle power. Many of those who had got genuine democratic mandate were killed by the criminal gangs. It is noteworthy that more than a thousand elected Mukhiyas have been killed since the 2002 panchayat polls.

The tragedy today is that, in the absence of any authority to ensure financial accountability, (a Mukhiya gets to spend about Rs 15 lakh a year) PR representatives are busy siphoning off the money. In several villages, the constant refrain of the Scheduled Caste and extreme backward caste groups was that the Mukhiya had not even visited their *to/a*, let alone undertake any development measures. In no village, proper Gram Sabha has ever been held.

PR institutions have enormous potential to bring about social equity, provided proper communication is maintained. Only if villagers get to know as to how much money has come to the panchayat kitty and for what purposes, they can hold the Mukhiya accountable. Then the poverty alleviation programmes can play a role in the uplift of the poor. And if that happens, then armed gangs on both sides of the divide, biggest cause of social strife in villages, would be rendered redundant.

Promoting Agro-Based Industries:

Another imperative for creating prosperity in the countryside is to re-establish agro-based industries which had flourished in the state at some point of time, but have since ceased to exist. After independence, a host of government-owned sugar factories had opened which provided impetus for sugarcane cultivation. The advantage with sugarcane is that unlike paddy it needs less water and that is extremely beneficial where water is a scarce commodity. Being a cash crop, the returns on sugarcane production is very healthy. Now that the government-owned sugar factories are closed, due to reasons of mismanagement, farmers are being deprived of this great avenue to enrich themselves legitimately.

A big farmer in Dumria village just on the border of Champaran and Gopalganj districts says that he is lucky that there is a private sugar mill just in the vicinity. That is why, he has deployed most of his land for sugarcane cultivation. And he is earning close to Rs 10 lakh a year. "I can tell you that had there not been this sugar mill, I would not have been able to earn even one lakh rupees out of my land." It is not only the landowners who are getting the benefit of the cash crop. Hundreds of landless labourers in the village are also benefiting from getting work round the year. That is the difference that the state can make in the life of farmers if it encourages the setting up of agro-based industries in the state.

Summing up:

From Poverty & conflict to Peace & prosperity?

Those who benefit from social stability have a vested interest in maintaining peace and keeping conflicts in abeyance. At some point of Bihar's history, social stability was defined by an exploitative relationship. Today, in large parts of Bihar, the impact of democratic politics and militant action has deepened to such an extent that the richest and the most powerful cannot resort to physical torture or sexual exploitation of the poorest of the poor, without facing a backlash.

It is not as if there is a positive turnaround in the situation – that social conflict has given way to social peace. The reality is that there is a balance of terror. Rich, upper and middle caste landowners know that there would be retaliation from pro-poor organizations if there is perceived injustice on any count. They are fully armed and have stocked weapons to meet any eventuality. Ranveer Sena activists say that "one reason why there has been no massacre of Bhumihars in

last few years was because of our preparedness to take on the enemy'. Many Naxal groups, on their part, assert that "the upper castes have not dared to ill-treat the landless poor because they know that there would be massive resistance."

It is a two-way process. Because of the balance of terror (or if you like, balance of power), there is the appearance of social amity on the surface, but a cauldron is shimmering within.

This cauldron is shimmering because of the vested interest of the rival armed groups for whom conflict has become the main source of the livelihood. In Bihar, these armed groups are thriving because of the collapse of the governing institutions of the state. In order to counter them, we need policy interventions to ensure that groups with vested interests in peace are identified and empowered. That is possible only by creating an environment of all-round economic well-being.

But then nobody knows when will the time come for the vicious cycle of conflict and poverty in Bihar to give way for a virtuous cycle of peace and prosperity.