

I say Bihar, you say corrupt is the headline of a chronicle by a Bihar historian at Princeton University ([Gyan Prakash](#)) in Sunday Times of India, Kolkata, 18 December 2005). He argues for a more nuanced picture.

Like most outside observers I also have my 'stereotypes' of this one of the poorest and most backwards of states in India: Feudal landlords who defend their land with private gunmen and a Maoist guerrilla fighting for the poor and for land; a very corrupt and inefficient administration; etc.

A few weeks ago the Maoists had managed to raid a jail in Jenabad and free some of their imprisoned comrades. As a "premium" they also released a number of gunmen, whom they later killed in cold blood. The Maoists seem to have a stronger hold here than I expected. They have declared the forests on the Indo-Nepal border as a "red zone", where they recruit young boys and girls for the movement. It was also there that they held a press conference the day before yesterday and declared a major offensive in the North. 'Thumbing nose at the state police and intelligence agencies ... they announced a hit list which also includes corporate houses like Tata, Posco, Essar and Jindals.' (Times of India, 16 December 2005, p. 6)

Is it from here the Nepalese Maoists have developed its own struggle against that Hindu Kingdom?

Hetukar Jha seemed the right person to tell me more.

'I know that [Lalu Prasad Yadav](#) has just been voted out of office as Chief Minister after 15 years of his rule,' I said trying to open a conversation which I hope would bring me new knowledge. 'Was that a populist regime like the one run by Ms. [Jayalithaa](#) in Tamil Nadu?'

'No, in no way,' Hetukar replied. 'In Tamil Nadu there is a regime that brings law and order, good roads and some welfare to the people. This is not the case here. Lalu and his wife, [Rabri Devi](#) (who was CM when Lalu was in prison on corruption charges, my remark), robbed in the name of the people. There is no order here and people are afraid of robbery and hold-ups anywhere in the state. We don't go out after dark.'

'But will this not change with Mr. [Nitish Kumar](#) as CM (Janata Party in alliance with BJP)? I asked.

'No, no, he can't do much. It is a culture here which is hard to change,' was Hetukar's quick answer.

As I opened the Times of India (Patna National) the main news article on the front page was about the release of an agenda for good governance in the State by the NDA government. 'The rot is 25 years old and cannot be cleaned in a day or two,' said CM Nitish Kumar at the release.

His ambition is to 'make the bureaucracy people friendly, sensitive and accountable' (Times of India, 17 December 2005, p. 1).

The paper was also full of news of a thorough reshuffle of district magistrates (District heads) and police officers in order to set the administration 'on alert'. (I read in a national daily the day after that now also the Indian Administrative Services is about to be reformed with career evaluations, early retirement, etc. What a revolution to otherwise so secure employment and steady income!)

From village community to loose fragments

Here is a short version of Hetukar Jha's views on Bihar history, society and underdevelopment.

Bihar is still a peasant social formation, where peasants produce for subsistence rather than market. It is untouched by the green revolution. One big problem is the fragmentation of landownership.

'We had a land reform, which abolished the zamindaris and gave the land to the tillers. But for every generational shift sons end up with smaller and smaller holdings. There never was an effort to increase production on part of the state government. People are starving on these small plots.

Add to this that floods often play havoc, especially in northern Bihar (streams from the Himalayas), destroying crops and leaving large patches of march lands unfit for cultivation.

People would need more industries here and more trade. But after an early build up of state industries here there was a gradual decline from the mid-sixties. The trade union came under political control and became very strong. There was violence and strikes and loss of many man-days. As a result, industries were shut down. The politicians simply robbed the wealth of industry and trade in various ways, so the big traders also chose "exit" from Bihar.'

A basic problem is the break down of the traditional village community as a functioning whole. It started already during British times. Before the 1830s there were, for example, schools run by the village community, but these completely disappeared. After Independence village common property like land, tanks and ponds were taken over by the state government. The Block level officials now give them on lease for three years to contractors, who use them for fish cultivation, etc. These do not allow the peasants to draw water for irrigation of crops. This also means that there is no secular space for meetings in the villages and no unity – community any more. It is a fragmented village society.' Bihar with its now 100 million and odd inhabitants would be one of the biggest nations in the world had it been a sovereign state. But within Bihar itself, there is a sharp regional variation and difference. These regions were only united as a Subha under Mogul rule in the 15th – 16th centuries. In those days it also included the Jharkand region, which only recently became an independent states (taking away what was left of industry from Bihar).

The three distinct regions are:

- The Northeast area with its own language, [Maithili](#), and written script, which is now recognised by the Union government. This is the area bordering the Himalayas and Nepal. The Dutch mined saltpetre here in the 17th century. Later it became known for the production of indigo (Champaran area, where Gandhi mobilised against British landlords!), opium and tobacco.
- The Western area, with its own Hindi dialect called [Bhojpuri](#). This is really the central zone, which the British considered to be a granary of India with well developed irrigation systems.
- The Southern area, Maghad, dryer uplands with its own Hindi dialect called [Magadhi](#). It is now famous for its potato cultivation.

There is a very detailed historical material called Village notes, which the British collected between 1895 and 1917. It has information on lands, castes, institutions, etc. there are such notes for all the 40 000 villages in Bihar, stored in the various District headquarters. Hetukar Jha has himself copied 7 000 of this from all districts in the state and wants to start a project compiling these data as well as visiting some of them to see the changes over a period of hundred years (he would like to do this with a foreign historian or sociologist).

Hetukar Jha, himself hailing from a Brahmin landowning family in North Bihar, worked all his life in Patna University

Sociology Department. He and his brother still keeps the land in the village, which is now looked after by one of his sons. He has no high opinion of his fellow sociologists in Bihar. 'They use out of fashion foreign theories and they have no grounding in local and regional empirical reality. The challenge is, of course, to combine good contemporary theory with thorough empirical studies of this region.

'What do you think about the Maoists and their struggle,' I ask finally.

'They are no different from other criminal gangs here. The only difference is that they flag. They ask for protection money and they stage hold-ups,' is the sharp answer and he continues. 'We need industry here, growing markets and connections to dynamic regions.'

'What about connections to West Bengal?'

'Oh, that is under one party rule. There is no open disclosure of what is going on. I think people are worse off in west Bengal villages compared to here.'

In another country?

Staying only 30 hours in Bihar is hardly enough to dig up something new of a place and a setting. But I certainly got some new perspectives from people rather critical of the Maoist standpoint and activities. As for Bihar, "idiosyncrasy" is the world I think rather than qualitative difference. It is as if all the vices one could think of in an Indian context had accumulated here, landlordism, merchant-usurious exploitation, caste hierarchy and violence, ethnic and tribal conflicts, lack of democratic mobilisation from below (perhaps impossible given the circumstances?), etc. Only Hindu-Muslim conflicts are wanting in that worst of scenario list.

Will the Nitish Kumar regime bring a new sense of direction to this disillusioned State? Could it straighten the administration, make the police do its job of hunting down kidnappers (when payoffs are so lucrative), bring in the green revolution (which in itself is scale neutral and can be used by even the smallest of farmers). Can it instil a sense of Bihari nationalism, proud of, for example, all that Bihari workers and professionals do in many parts of the world today. Only time can tell.

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