

# **Idea of Bihar**

## **A Lecture**

SHAIBAL GUPTA



**Asian Development Research Institute**

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# **Papiya Ghosh Memorial Lecture**

**OCTOBER 8, 2013**

**Nehru Memorial Museum and Library**

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## IDEA OF BIHAR

I must congratulate Nehru Memorial Museum and Library and Papiya Ghosh Memorial Trust for instituting this lecture in memory of Papiya Ghosh. I am extremely grateful to Professor Mahesh Rangrajan, its Director and a very good friend of mine, for inviting me to deliver the PAPIA GHOSH MEMORIAL LECTURE. Any form of tribute in memory of Papiya is an honour to me, that too a lecture at this august Institution. I have always considered this Institution as an ultimate destination for scholars who value the pluralistic heritage of our country and are proud of the democratic nation-state that Nehru had helped to build since India's 'tryst with destiny' in 1947. Our tribute to Papiya is indeed more stirring and historic, since it is being organised in an institution named after Jawaharlal Nehru.

Papiya would have been sixty-year old today. Even though she was a little junior to me, I had the privilege of knowing her since the college days. Even at that time, we were mesmerised by her scholarship and erudition. She was one of those rare scholars who, through her academic rigour and penetrating intellect, had bridged the mofussil and metropolitan divide, commuting effortlessly between the two worlds with clarity and authenticity. One of her enduring academic interests was Bihar itself, not merely because she was located in the state, but it had provided her a challenging research agenda. Even though an insider, she studied the state from the intellectual vantage point of the renaissance matrix that created a new benchmark of scholarship. I am really surprised and somewhat perplexed that Mahesh opted for me — a man of very limited academic attainment — to deliver this memorial lecture in her honour.

### **Formation of a modern state: transcending many histories**

I want to use this opportunity to calibrate my own idea about the 'Idea of Bihar'. Being a resident of the state, a detached view on Bihar is not easy for me. The inputs about my 'Idea of Bihar' are, thus, generally contributed by the outsiders. Unfortunately, those ideas about the state are not necessarily flattering. In contrast, my idea about some other states is quite positive, formed over the years, through numerous visits. For example, two events have shaped my idea of two cities — Ahmedabad and Mumbai. In early eighties, once I and my wife had to go to Ahmedabad under emergency condition, when my brother-in-law had met with an





process, integration with the local society was not only complete, we became authentic Biharis over the years.

### **Roots of Bihari sub-nationalism**

It might sound as Bihari fundamentalism, but once upon a time during the ancient period, the 'Idea of India' was essentially an 'Idea of Bihar'. For a considerable period of Indian history, the cultural, educational, scientific and social construct of Bihar was essentially the identity of India. Amartya Sen, in one of his recent articles opined that Bihar was an "extraordinary part of India";<sup>1</sup> it played a "stellar role as the centre of Indian civilization for over a thousand years".<sup>2</sup> For the first time in the Indian history, pan-Indian Mauryan empire was established in Pataliputra. The basic concept of state and governance evolved first here. This was possibly one of the few places in the world where social decisions were taken on the basis of public discussion, promoted by Buddhist global council. The dialogic component in society got so much internalised that it triggered a profound knowledge-based academic agenda. Not only Vikramshila (fifth century AD) and Nalanda (twelfth century AD) universities were ultimate destination of scholars, even Aryabhatta, the great mathematician and astronomer, opted for Kusumpur<sup>3</sup> (that is Patna) as his workplace. Incidentally, even now mathematics is a mass movement in rural areas of Bihar. Arthashastra, a unique treatise on statecraft, governance and economics, could not have been written in the void by Kautilya, without a vibrant knowledge-based dialogic society of Bihar. It is not a coincidence that not only two religions (Buddhism and Jainism) originated in Bihar, but Sufism and Sikhism had a powerful base here. After that there was stagnation and sloth for several centuries. However, there was brief period of revival of Bihar, during the tenure of Sher Shah – or Farid, "after lapse of about millennium that separates the rise of Afgans from the decline of Guptas".<sup>4</sup> His tenure not only was marked by the excellence in system engineering which included infrastructure based governance, budget based taxation, "but also a model land – revenue reforms based administrative system which, in course, opened a new era in the history of land revenue administration in medieval India."<sup>5</sup> The 'ideas' from Bihar once again got national pre-eminence. But, unfortunately, Bihar was relegated to stagnation and an antediluvian world-view in subsequent centuries. In the contemporary narrative of the state there is now a disconnect between the glorious past of Bihar and its present status.





led to conviction of several leaders by a recent judgment of the Ranchi Court could be traced back to the days of buccaneering accumulation of 'Permanent Settlement' as mentioned earlier. Like 'Bettiah Raj Loot', the 'fodder scam' was also a caste and political party neutral phenomenon. In this process, a culture was promoted when earning wealth without working was considered as a status symbol (as was done by landlords) and 'not working hard to earn more'. This feudal mindset acts even now as the major deterrent for any economic initiative or entrepreneurship. The functioning of the state was also guided by the same mindset. In contrast, in the developed states of India, an institutional memory of governance was created which, after the end of colonial rule, helped the newly-elected government to co-opt the best practices of the earlier regime.

firmament of the state. Their ideological progenies — the communist and the socialist movements — were the most powerful in Bihar in comparison to any other Hindi Heartland state.

There have always been two levels of nationalism in many other parts of India. One is regional nationalism (also referred as sub-nationalism) and other is all- India nationalism. These two identities are not in contradiction. In fact, during the freedom struggle, these two identities had complemented each other. One could afford to be a Tamil, Marathi, Gujarati, Bengali etc. as well as a very nationalist Indian. It is no accident that the two songs of Rabindranath Tagore, one meant for Indian nationalism (*Jana Gana Mana Adhinayaka Jayahe*) and the other for Bengali sub-nationalism (*Amar Sonar Bangla, Ami Tomay Bhalobasi*), became the national anthem of two countries, indicating the concurrent commitment to two separate (but not incompatible) identities. In most of the southern and the western states in India, the ultimate home of any social movement was sub-nationalism. For example, the anti-Brahmin movement in Tamil Nadu had got converted into an agenda for sub-national identity. The sub-national identity had emerged only after the consolidation of the social movement. This helped in building bridges with those social sections that felt marginalized (mainly the upper castes) earlier due to the plebian character of the social movement. This strategic policy leap from ‘anti-Brahminism’ to ‘sub-nationalism’ had later triggered economic and industrial development in those states. So it was no accident that in Tamil Nadu, entrepreneurs both from the social apex (like Brahmins) as well as from the margin (like Nadars, the toddy tappers) could build powerful industrial empires in the state. This phenomenon was repeated in other southern and western Indian states. The reverberation of economic consolidation of these states could be felt at the national level with the political and economic centre of gravity shifting to the south and western India.

Even in the realm of culture, elements of a Bihari identity are underplayed. In spite of our rich folk/classical culture, our local artists are not given pride of place. In other cultural regions/states, dance forms like *Bharatnatyam* and *Kuchipudi*, or songs like *Rabindra Sangeet* enjoy a preeminent position. On the contrary, in Bihar, the native songs like *chaita*, *holi or bidesia*, *ghato*, *birha*, *kajari*, *irni/birni*, *pachra*, *ropnigeet*, *sohar*, *jhumar*, *jatsari*, *aalah-rudal*, *nirgun or dance forms like jat jatin*, *bamar nach* or *jharni*, *jhijhia*, *natua nach*, *vidyapad nach*, *sohrai nach*, *gond nach* never got a

pride of place in Bihar. If our folk tradition could be properly packaged for national-international audience, then Bihar's sub-national identity could have got a different meaning. The only exception to this trend is the *Chhath* festival in Bihar that has emerged as a sub-national festival of the state. If *Chhath* could be the cultural convergence point for the broadest possible caste and class coalition, there is no reason why other social traditions cannot transcend their origin and be a base for sub-national identity.

### **Elite formation and power politics in modern Bihar**

Apart from the internal constraints as mentioned before, the discriminatory attitude of the central government was an equally strong external constraint for the development of the state. The most important element of this discriminatory attitude was the 'freight equalisation policy' which covered steel, coal, and cement, and not oil or cotton; this policy had subverted the state's (and the Eastern Region's) natural advantage as a premier mineral region. In the process, Bihar's economy was ruined in an untold manner. While economic stagnation put Bihar onto the lowest pedestal of the national economy, in contrast, the social churning and subterranean ferment was witnessed all over the state. It had started as early as thirties, but had gained considerable momentum since the seventies. Consequently, there was a change in the social profile of the political elite, implying democratization of its politics by the nineties. In most of the states, after independence, the power structure had oscillated between the traditional and the vernacular elite, both essentially from the ranks of agricultural entrepreneurs, small industrialists and traders. In Bihar, however, there is a third group, who have been christened as 'cockney elite', essentially an underclass. This social conglomeration is outside the market structure or in its fringe. They produce essentially for self-consumption and not necessarily for the market. Their engagement with the state structure is minimal. Development as understood by rest of society is for them a mere rhetoric. The traditional elite in Bihar lost their hold over state power because they were oblivious of new stirring of change in the state. While other states took up the development agenda, albeit with varying seriousness, the elites in Bihar failed in the task. Secondly, the social agenda that autonomously surfaced in Bihar had also been ignored by the traditional elite. In the process, elites in Bihar were on a double disadvantage. At the one end, they failed to chart out an independent incentive structure for economic growth and, on the other, they failed to ensure the political stability in the state by not sharing power with the subaltern. The







each other to extend hospitality to him. The stock of a person in society from his caste was determined by their proximity to him.

The Kulak brashness and the counter culture were essentially emulated from the upper caste elite. Their brashness also gets reflected through their attire. A typical brash feudal or kulak will reveal his higher social standing by wearing Bracelet-brand dhoti, yellowish silk kurta, with a red towel (gamchha) slung around his neck. The person of higher stock will wear a gold chain, which will glisten from his neck. This is almost a talisman for them. In the rank of the subaltern, Ram Lakhan Singh Yadav for the first time symbolized brashness. He was born five years before the massacre of Yadavs in the Lakhoachak in 1925 and died just two months after the formal eclipse of the so called Yadav- rule in Bihar in 2005. Even though he was not connected to either of these two events, yet he played one of the most decisive roles in the subaltern assertion in Bihar in the intervening period. He was possibly the first public figure from the subaltern ranks to be referred as ‘Sher-e-Bihar’, when such honorific titles were the exclusive preserve of the upper caste elites. Not only this honorific was used in his public meetings, he was also possibly the first group of Yadavs who defied the then social authority to affix ‘Singh’ in his surname. He was also possibly the first leader from the lower social stock, apart from Jagjivan Ram, who was referred with reverence as ‘Babu’. The high pedestal which Jagjivan Ram enjoyed was because of his total cooption by the then ruling traditional elites, but Ram Lakhan Babu created his own brand to elicit respect. This macho assertion of the subaltern, symbolized through Ram Lakhan Singh Yadav, was rooted not only to the ‘Janeu Pahno’ (sacred thread) movement of Lakhoachak but also to graduation of Patna and its hinterland, during the last century, as a ‘cereal-milk-vegetable bowl’ of the state. Patna had emerged as the state capital in 1912 of the newly-formed state of Bihar (separated from Bengal Presidency), followed by the establishment of military cantonment in its periphery, and then installation of the railway line connecting it to Kolkata and eastern Uttar Pradesh. All these created huge market for cereal, milk and vegetable capitalism. This opportunity was fully utilised by the local agro-entrepreneurs from the backward social stocks of Yadav, Koeri or Kurmi. Ram Lakhan Singh Yadav was essentially the organic leader of this upwardly mobile Yadavs of the Patna hinterland. His preeminence within their ranks remained unquestioned in spite of parallel powerful socialist and communist movement in Bihar. If he was authentically coopted in the power structure of the Congress Party, its script in the state would have

probably been different. On the contrary, many inconsequential Yadav leaders were promoted to keep him politically out of reckoning.

In the absence of a renaissance movement in the state, the display of hegemony of the elite was just not social and economic exploitation, but their brashness as well. Top grade politicians, civil servants, entrepreneurs or even academics will 'summon' their support staff routinely with brashness, laced with intemperate language. In contrast, elite or subaltern in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh, has to reckon with cultural and institutional memory of Wazid Ali Shah and the Princely Estate of Awadh. The cultural construction and etiquette of Lucknow was not one-town wonder. Even in the Quasbas of Uttar Pradesh, there was cultural efflorescence. Thus the soft cultural construction was internalized within elite and subaltern section. Unlike in Uttar Pradesh, politicians in Bihar did not feel the necessity of involving cine stars for bolstering their cultural construction. Thus, over the years, Bihar developed a grotesque brand. Two things were sniggered about Bihar — (a) that state has withered away in Bihar even without a proletarian revolution, and (b) when Indian Prime Minister agreed to part with Kashmir and give it to Pakistan provided it also takes Bihar, the Pakistani counterpart immediately refused the offer with disdain.

### **Taking cognizance of a promising politics**

In the last couple of years, Bihar seems to have reinvented itself. Never since its establishment as a separate state from the Bengal Presidency, almost a century ago in 1912, has the image of the state been so high in the cognitive world of Indians. This image is not just limited to the shores of India, but has transcended beyond. This is reflected by the numerous visits to Bihar of international diplomats and high profile journalists from foreign newspapers and magazines. Several prestigious foreign journals like *The Economist*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times* etc. have published laudatory articles in their columns on Bihar. Even the diplomats, who are normally known for their reticence, were unable to conceal their appreciation for the advancement of the state in recent years. Against this backdrop, it is a matter of serious intellectual enquiry whether Bihar is indeed on the path of resurrection. Can a state like Bihar with a mammoth population and with endemic problems of famines and floods create a positive idea about itself, without some substantive structural changes in its economy? The critic of the present regime, quite expectedly, attributes



this hype totally to the exaggerated media reports; the ground reality, they maintain, is totally different. Even though Bihar was not economically developed, the process of societal and electoral democratization had continued in the state for long, possibly only one of its kind in India. The installation of the present regime was initially characterized as a 'counter revolution' to banish all the gains of democratization that the state had achieved. Even though the social configuration of the ruling regime was a 'coalition of extremes', it was thought that it is the elite component in the coalition that has captured the political space and, thereby, reversing the gain of democratization in recent decades. In the name of development, a tyrannical regime has taken control over the state.<sup>6</sup> With the spilt in the NDA in Bihar, the 'coalition of extremes' is no more a reality, but the fundamental question — whether the state has experienced a resurrection — is still being debated. I, sincerely, think an extreme position on this issue is not tenable. In my honest opinion, Bihar is yet to transcend from the image of being a 'lost' state to a wholly 'resurrected' one. We, sincerely, hope that once again 'idea' from Bihar will get new national and global benchmark, and we could proudly say once again that the 'idea of India' is essentially the 'idea of Bihar'.

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- ✎ to offer research results in a more innovative, demystified and useworthy form; and finally
- ✎ to restore man to his central position in social research in totality and with full dignity.