

Mapping the Socio-Cultural Profile of Patna in the 19th Century

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ABSTRACT

The victory of the English East India Company at Plassey in 1757 created a new politico-administrative and economic environment in Bihar, Bengal and Orissa which affected the future development of Patna, the second largest city of Eastern India after Calcutta. The emergence of the Britishers as masters in place of the Nawabs of Bengal, altered the pattern of politics. A new administrative system, dominated in the upper echelons by Englishmen, endowed with an unfamiliar political philosophy, sprang up. This developing politico-administrative context required functionaries trained in the English-educational system. The people, at large, were faced with an unfamiliar life-style, that of their rulers. The nineteenth century was thus marked with the confrontation of the traditional with that of the English; and by the end of the nineteenth century, the local response had crystallized.

Keywords: English, administrative, Bengal, politico.

Bankipur, established as British colonial hub in the 19th century emerged as a viable entity in terms of size, population density, services, conveniences and institutions, needed for modern living. The far-flung villages and habitations had been integrated through the rise of new *Mohallas* and the constructions of roads, running from east to west and from north to south, crossed by lanes and by-lanes. The population had a fair sprinkling of Professionals trained modern system of education, law, medicine, etc.

The emerging professionals, mostly immigrants from the neighbouring province of Bengal acted as an important catalyst in the formulation of response of the local population to the new challenges. This was important because in a colonial set up, 'the effective propagation' of the policies of rulers is possible only when an indigenous group consciously accepts them and tries to convey them to their compatriots. The Bengali professionals, resident in Patna, performed this role, especially in the field of modern education.

The new education system introduced by the Britishers had received acceptance as a result of conscious governmental and voluntary efforts. The government had set the ball rolling by opening the Patna Collegiate School in 1835, Patna College in 1863 and Temple Medical School in 1874. The public had responded by setting up T.K. Ghosh's Academy in 1982, B.N. Collegiate School in 1883, P.N. Anglo Sanskrit School in 1875, Raja Ram Mohun Roy Seminary in 1897, Bankipore Girls School and B.N. College. Except B.N. Collegiate School and B.N. College, all the voluntary schools were set up by Bengalis. Besides, even government-run institutions relied heavily on Bengali teachers, both at the school and collegiate levels. As a result of these efforts, by the beginning of the twentieth century, a group of Biharis, well versed in English language and trained in modern professions emerged. Though small in numbers, they became the pace- setter of new trends, that developed in the society.

By the end of the nineteenth century Patna was fortunate to have been provided with a complete infrastructure of modern educational system. But it is ironical that Engineering and Medicine, for long, did not attract the attention of the local Hindus. The most popular professional course was Law. The attraction for law can be explained largely in terms of local factors.

First, among Hindus, the dogmas of caste enjoined a strong code of purity and pollution and therefore, any technical education was taboo, because it involved manual work. Study of allopathic system of medicine necessitated dissection of corpses and coming into physical contact with people belonging to different religions and castes and hence, militated against the caste-based notion of purity and pollution. Consequently, scientific and technical education in its early phases did not become popular amongst Bihari Hindus. The lack of enthusiasm for scientific and technical education persisted till the first two decades of the century; only the establishment of the first steel- mill of the country in

Jamshedpur in South Bihar in 1907 and the out-break of the first world war forced upon them the realisation of the importance of technical education. The neglect of scientific and technical education, on the one hand, perpetuated traditional norms, and, on the other hand, inflated the importance of law as a profession.

No manual labour was involved in the profession of law and therefore, according to prevalent norms, not *infra dig*. Secondly, physical contacts with clients were not required and hence there was no fear of pollution for the caste-conscious Hindus. Besides, certain other factors enhanced the attraction for the profession of law.

Bihar being predominantly agrarian economy despite the development of mining industries in the Chotanagpur region during the second half of the nineteenth century. The agrarian structure was highly complex; it gave rise to conflicting claims which had to be resolved in law courts. The Zamindari system established by the Permanent Settlement of 1793 had become encumbered with overlapping rights because of the growth of *Patni*, *Dar Patni* and *Se Patni* systems etc. This gave rise to lots of legal complications and matters had to be taken to law courts. The British efforts to simplify laws relating to land rights and the land revenue laws through the tenancy legislations of 1859 and 1885 met with only partial success." Recourse to law-courts was the only remedy for securing rights in land and undoing the wrongs done under various revenue laws. The demand for the service of lawyers was increasing and they received fabulous fees. Tayler, a British practising lawyer earned as much as 20,000/-in a single case. R.K. Bhattacharya, who started his career as a lawyer in Patna in 1870 earned so much that he became one of the largest urban property-holders of the town. The same was true of lawyers such as Gobind Mitra, B.M. Das and later the Imam brothers etc. Financially, a lawyer's profession was the most lucrative and attractive for the newly English-educated Biharis.

A lawyer leaned heavily on his caste and kinship affiliations to secure legal cases and thus the popularity of law as a profession reinforced and hardened the traditional attachment to caste. The spread of new education instead of diminishing the role of caste in social life, in fact, enhanced it. By the time, scientific and technical education became popular after the first world war, caste-attitudes had hardened and they became a part of the value-system of the English educated group. Gradually, this value-system manifested itself in diverse spheres not directly related to caste ordained norms of inter-personal relationship.

With the English education, people slowly began to accept the technical devices relating to everyday life introduced by their colonial masters. Its consequence was an altered life- style. People began to use railways for their travels and printing press technology became more and more wide-spread.

The introduction of printing press at Patna stimulated the growth of journalism; Patna became the principal centre for the publication of journals and newspapers in Hindi, Urdu, Bengali and English in the province of Bihar since mid-nineteenth century. No doubt, some of these journals and newspapers died young but never- the less, some like, the *Bihar Herald*(1872) in English and *Bihar Bandhu*(1874) survived. The English educated class initially took to journalism as a part time vocation. But by the beginning of the present century, at least some of them drifted towards it as full-time workers such as Mahesh Narain, the editor of *The Bihar Times*, established in 1894 and later on called *The Beharee*. A new profession for educated people had emerged.

The emergence of full-time journalists vitally changed the character of journalism. From being informative and descriptive it turned analytical and critical. Journalists became educators of people in socio-politico-economic affairs and also their conscience-keepers. Journalism became a powerful instrument for arousing public consciousness and contributed to the dissemination of political ideas taking shape in different parts of the country. Infact it became a propagator of nationalism. The Patna press emerged as the trendsetter of public opinion all over the province.

The significance of education and printing-press was visible in the day to day functioning of the society in Patna. Public meetings dedicated to a variety of causes were regularly held. Several political, social and religious organizations, local, provincial and national in character and catering to the needs of various sections of the populations emerged. Among local level organisations mention may be made of Bihar Young Men's Institute, which got a building of its own almost in midst of various educational institutions. Leaders of national socio-religious organizations such as Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, Theosophical Society, etc., frequently visited the city to address members of their organisations and to win new adherents for their faith. But they were hardly able to win dedicated followers in large numbers. Only a handful of Biharis joined these movements with the result that the society could hardly get a radical orientation. The shell of conservatism and casteism were scratched only on surface by these socio-religious reform movements. The society remained inward-looking.

The Bengali immigrants, who constituted the largest English-education elite in the town, failed to inculcate a sense of urgency for change. On the other hand, the English-educated Biharis adopted a course of confrontation with the Bengalis and they received support from the colonial masters, who had their own political and administrative axe to grind. A combination of English-educated Bengalis and Biharis would be a political liability especially in view of heightened anti-British sentiments then prevailing in Bengal. The two should be delinked lest Bihar should catch the

nationalistic infection from Bengal. Hence when educated Biharis, primarily Muslims and Kayasthas, raised their voice against the educated, professional and employed resident-Bangalis in Bihar, they were encouraged by the Britishers. The Bihari demand for separation of Bihar from Bengal became more insistent. Till 1912, when Bihar was separated from Bengal, Bengali-Bihari contradictions dominated the public life in the city. The movement helped to crystallize Bihar sub-nationalism.

One aspect of Patna society needs special attention. The Hindus and Muslims lived in harmony and the nineteenth century tradition of communal amity was carried forward. This was in spite of communal venom engulfing the surrounding countryside and the rise of avowedly communal parties such as the Muslim League and the Hindu Mahasabha. It is difficult to explain this phenomenon except as a deviant case or a reflection of high degree of interdependence and mutual trust that had developed as a result of living together for centuries..

The substantial growth in the number of English-educated Biharis and their awareness that wider opportunities for employment and enhancing socio-economic status existed, contributed to the rapid growth of political consciousness. It is true that Biharis had begun participating in the annual sessions of the Indian National Congress since its very inception in 1885, yet the association was, by and large, on individual basis. But now the need was felt for giving it a wider and collective base. Hence, participation in the political life of the country became a growing concern with the educated classes, especially the lawyers, whose profession brought them enough money and left them with plenty of leisure. Thus participation of Biharis in politics on all-India level increased and it was reflected in growing politicisation of the society in Patna. Patna lawyers such as Hasan Imam, Ali Imam, Mazharul Haque, Sachchidanand Sinha, Rajendra Prasad became increasingly involved in national politics. Patna became the nerve-centre of political life in the state and also carved a niche for itself in the national politics. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that the Indian National Congress was invited to hold its 27th annual session in 1912 in Patna.

The Patna School of Painting which had existed for about a century and a half withered away. After the death of its last patron Rai Sultan Bahadur in 1891, there was no one to extend patronage to the artists, who now dispersed and took up various jobs to earn a living. The development of photography at this stage dealt the final blow.

To conclude, the nineteenth century brought a significant changes to society in Patna without undermining the traditional mode of life. However, the two were now in confrontation and this determined the socio- cultural profile of Patna in the years to come.

REFERENCES

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- [10] Among Brahmo visistors P.C. Mazoomdar and Sivanath Sastri were most important. For the visits of P.C. Mazoomdar see Suresh Chunder Bose, *The Life of Protop Chunder Mazoomdar* (Nobabedhan Trust, Calcutta, 1929), Vol. II, pp. 325, 332, 344.
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