

Understanding Condition of Agriculture in Bihar during the Early British Rule,1765-1833

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Modern Bihar, before the creation of Jharkhand, was mainly composed of three major regions – The North Bihar plains, the South Bihar plains and the Chotanagpur Plateau which is largely a hilly area. This study mainly aims at looking into the ruin and revival of agriculture in Bihar during the Early British Rule and mainly confined to the period from 1765 when the English assumed the Diwani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and the year 1833 when the commercial activities of the British East India Company came to an end and made it a purely administrative body.

The big loss of population in the famine of 1770 had devastating effects on the agriculture of Bihar.As years passed there began a gradual revival of agriculture and cultivation in the province.The peculiar conditions, namely, the disastrous effects of the famine coupled with the recurring problem of incursions by the hill tribes compelled the Company administration to create an extraordinary institution called the Invalid Estate.The recovery of agriculture and extension of cultivation has been ascribed to the Permanent Settlement by many. It is, however, highly doubtful if the settlement by itself contributed to the recovery.

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Modern Bihar, before the creation of Jharkhand, was mainly composed of three major regions – The North Bihar plains, the South Bihar plains and the Chotanagpur Plateau which is largely a hilly area. This study mainly aims at looking into the ruin and revival of agriculture in Bihar during the Early British Rule and mainly confined to the period from 1765 when the English assumed the Diwani of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and the year 1833 when the commercial activities of the British East India Company came to an end and made it a purely administrative body.

The big loss of population in the famine of 1770 had devastating effects on the agriculture of Bihar. Depopulation of the province was caused not only by the deaths from starvation and pestilence, but also on account of desertions by Ryots on a large scale. Desertions were of two types, i.e. from the areas more affected by famine to the less affected ones, and from the famine-affected areas to the areas and regions immune from the famine. Thus, many people of Shahabad district migrated to Banaras where famine conditions did not prevail and there was better encouragement from the land- controllers, the farmers.ⁱ

In the year 1771 more than one-third of the cultivated land was recorded as deserted and by 1776 the entries in the relevant column excluded one-half of the whole tillage.ⁱⁱ In 1773, the areas of waste land and paucity of people was so great that the Company began to devise measures for inducing the subjects of native princes to migrate to Bihar, particularly from the neighbouring districts of the Nawab Wazir. Even twenty years after the famine Cornwallis declared one-third of the Company's possessions in Bengal to be a 'jungle inhabited by wild beasts'.ⁱⁱⁱ The surviving cultivators also found agricultural operations difficult on account of their bullocks having been sold during the famine days in order to provide them their subsistence. In 1771, the Company administration felt that the remnants of the population would not be sufficient to till the land and the revenue farmers had no possibility of recovering the rents in arrears.^{iv}

According to the Judge of Tirhut in the vicinity of major parts of the road from Darbhanga there was in 1781 very little cultivation. Grass jungles had appeared over extensive plains which were previously rich in cultivation. Tirhut faced yet another calamity, that of heavy rains, inundations, and cattle disease in 1788. The Collector reported that 'along the solitary banks of rivers of rivers scarcely a hamlet is to be seen, and for miles and miles not a human footstep to be traced'.^v Even the high roads were in some parts choked with weeds and grass. Inundation and mortality caused so much havoc that in pargana Bisara out of fifty thousand bighas of land sown with winter crops, ten thousand were damaged by excessive rains. Cultivation of the remainder was seriously hampered on account of cattle dying of disease. Even in 1789, in the district of Tirhut, out of four thousand inhabited villages more than one thousand became desolate and waste.^{vi} In Champaran almost half of the inhabitation was supposed to have absconded, leaving the country almost a desert. This happened on account of the ignorant and rapacious farmers of revenue. The

extremely decayed condition of cultivation in the district could be seen from the fact that during 1770 the collection in the Sarkar was only 38% of the collections made in the year 1766.

In 1770, there was no harvest in Purnea as all the land of more than one thousand villages in the district were turned into waste tracts or jungles.^{vii} In four parganas land lay waste for want of inhabitants, particularly in pargana Haveli Purnea which contained more than one thousand vilages. Even in the year 1788 most parts of pargana Dharampur continues to be out of cultivation. During the famine year the total yield of the entire district of Bhagalpur was not more than formerly produced in two or three villages. Thousands of cultivators gave up cultivation of their land and offered their ploughs and bullocks to the Fouzdar of Rajmahal. People of Rajmahal suffered the additional misfortune of a constant anxiety and alarm on account of the incursions of the neighbouring mountain dwellers who caused great inconvenience and distress. People had withdrawn to places more secure for themselves and their families.^{viii} From Farrukhabad to Colgong, a stretch of sixty miles, there was dearth of grain even for the troops and travellers due to paucity of population and an insufficient area of land being under cultivation.^{ix}

As years passed there began a gradual revival of agriculture and cultivation in the province. By the year 1791, during the decennial settlement, the assessment of Sarkar Rohtas and Shahabad reached the level of 1766 at Rs. 10.30 lakh.^x This was possible on the basis of a revival of cultivation in the Sarkar. By 1801, the proportion of uncultivated to the cultivated lands was one to four, exclusive of the hills. The district was in progressive state of improvement on account of a very considerable extension of cultivation after the decennial settlement. By the time of Buchanan's survey of the district, the old Thana's of Ekwari (present Piro), Karaiya (present Bikramganj) and Baraong (present Karghar) 62.0, 53.6 and 70.8 percent of their respective total area under cultivation.^{xi} So far, the whole district was concerned, an area of 2,282 square miles, i.e. Approximately fifty-six percent of the area was restored to cultivation. Sarkar Bihar, conforming broadly to the districts of Patna, Gaya, Aurangabad and Nalanda contained an area of 77,64,480 bighas under the plough. Out of the total area of 5,358 square miles were brought under cultivation, i.e. about seventy five percent of the total area.^{xii}

Saran appears to have escaped the ravages of the famine. According to Major Rennell's observation made in 1784, it was one of the most prosperous in the British dominions and for a long period been in the highest rate of cultivation. The soil under tillage yielded abundantly all the richest productions of the earth. During the decennial settlement of the total assessment was almost the same as in 1765 and more than double of Todar Mal's, but the area assessed had increased nearly sixfold since 1582 AD.^{xiii} In fact, the whole of Saran division as it then was consisting of both the districts of Saran and Champaran had reached a high state of cultivation. According to the Collector "where 60 bighas in 100 were in cultivation formerly, 80 or more are now in that state.

In Tirhut cultivation increased greatly since the first year of the decennial settlement and continued progressively to increase. As a result of this progress much of the waste tracts were annually reclaimed and bought under cultivation or converted into pasture.^{xiv} Towards the northern portions, however, there were extensive forests. In 1802, the cultivated land was supposed to bear the proportion of three to two uncultivated, the later probably also included fallow land. The most valuable crops grown in Tirhut were tobacco. Pan. turmeric, ginger, opium, indigo and sugarcane.^{xv} According to the Collector, the cultivation and production of these had considerably increased during the late year due to the great consumption and ready sale of these articles. According to the judge of Tirhut there was great improvement with respect to population, cultivation, and commerce. The increase in cultivation was astonishing and he believed that during his tenure there it increased in the proportion of one third.^{xvi} The Zamindars were yearly bringing into cultivation large tracts of jungle and wastelands chiefly on account of the confidence generated amongst them by the assurance of government regarding the decennial settlement. According to the Collector's observation all the parganas were considerably advanced in cultivation. Since the decennial settlement, cultivation had been improved and extended, and population had increased in a wonderful manner.^{xvii} He ascribed it to the establishment of private property of individuals and the assurance that everything that could be derived from it, beyond a specific sum, should be enjoyed by them in perpetuity.

Extension of cultivation in Darbhanga district appears to have occurred only in the 19th century. In the early years of the century a large part of the district amounting probably to one half of the total area was uncultivated. Similar appears to be the situation in the northern portion of the old

Monger district (now comprising the new Begusarai and Khagaria District) where as late as the middle of the last century only 35 percent of the total area was found to have been cultivated. In the northern portion of the Bhagalpur district, nearly two thirds of the tract had been grassy or tree jungle at the time of the Permanent Settlement. It was only by 1850 that more than eighty percent of it was brought under cultivation.

Purnea recovered remarkably well despite the acute distress caused by the famine. By the turn of the 19th century the population increased, and cultivation advanced significantly. Buchanan makes specific mention of the division of Bahadurganj as a very rich and populous country with a high degree of cultivation so much so that few or no destructive animals were found there.^{xviii}

The prevalence of Gachbandi tenure in parts of the district had its origin sometime in the middle of the 18th century. It implied letting out blocks of land contained within certain boundaries for a lump-sum payment only without measuring their area or fixing any rates of rent. This appears to have resulted in considerable reclamation of jungle lands.

Agricultural recovery in Bhagalpur appears to be comparatively slow and uneven, largely on account of the fact that the district not only suffered from the impact of the famine, but also with the additional misfortune caused by the large scale and prolonged ravages of the hill tribes. The main cultivated area of the district was surrounded by hill tribes, who did not know, or practice settled agriculture. Prior to the famine, the Zamindari chowkees lying between the hills and the cultivated parts of the country kept things within reasonable bounds. The famine, however, swept away several of these chowkees and left the plain country entirely exposed to the ravages of the mountain dwellers. It was only after several years of military action coupled with patient and constant pacifying measures by the administration that some sense of security was restored among the inhabitants of the adjacent lands and apprehension of being plundered of the produce of their labour by the lawless banditti was removed. Consequently, the inhabitants extended their cultivation over large tracts of land. The country at the bottom of Raj Mahal hills which Hastings earlier saw in a 'state of nature' was found by him subsequently in a 'state of universal fertility,

In several places ryots, both resident in the district and others who came from different parts of the country applied for Pottahas to bring waste land into cultivation and for other purposes. A glaring example of how the paucity of population could restrain and thwart the extension of

cultivation is evident in the case of Tuppah Nyah Dhess, situated nearly in the centre of Bhagalpur pargana and consisting of three Tuppah i.e. NyahDhess, Mahomedanagar and Ammenabad. Comparative peace and better management did to some extent result in recovery and a regular state of improvement. But the inability of the Zamindars to pay up a Jumma beyond the yield of the lands resulted in their oppressing the ryots 'who deserted in consequence in bodies and never returned.' Absconding of ryots from Nagdi land appear to be more prominent since they were bound to pay a specified rent whether the crops were abundant, scanty or failed in toto. The failure of the crops coupled with the poverty of the defaulter led to desertion by some and the inability of others to pay the amount due.^{xix}

The peculiar conditions, namely, the disastrous effects of the famine coupled with the recurring problem of incursions by the hill tribes compelled the Company administration to create an extraordinary institution called the Invalid Estate. The scheme provided for grant of free Estate to the old, invalid, and demobilised sepoys and others of the army around the hills. It was believed that these persons of martial spirit will be able to check and repulse the incursions of hill tribes. As such they will not only bring under cultivation directly the lands granted to them, but also by acting as sentinels in between the hills and plains, make it possible for other ryots to resume cultivation without fear of plunder and destruction by the hill tribes. The quantity of land to be given to each recipient depended on his rank. In the fifteen thanas under Bhagalpur, Sultanganj and Kahalgaon more than eighty-two thousand bighas of land were given as Invalid Estate. The total number of Invalid thanas in the district in 1787 were twenty-three.

It was believed that the Invalid Jagirdars (as they were called) already settled in many parts between the range of hills from Rajmahal to Mohghyr would 'encourage and call forth the exertions of the newcomers to bring their respective talooks quickly into cultivation. Further by promoting intercourse with the natives of the neighbouring hills, these settlements would contribute to a certain degree to the perfection of the cultivation of the hillmen. On account of these establishments greater security to the travellers was provided on the great western road the inhabitants of the low country. The habitation of the Invalid sepoys inspired confidence among the ryots. By the closing years of the 18th century the administration appears to have gone slow in granting these Invalid Jagirs, largely on account of the fact that by now cultivation was

already in a state of considerable revival and improvement. It was felt that only waste lands from which government derived no rent immediately should be granted in Jagirs.^{xx}

The grants given to the Invalids were only for the lifetime of the grantees. When these grants were resumed on the death, the lands were assessed to revenue and settled permanently with their heirs.^{xxi}

Another important feature after the famine was the remarkable growth in the number of Paikasht or the non-resident ryots. After 1770, the horrors of famine compelled the land -owning cultivators also to join this non- resident class because they could find land everywhere and what was more, at a cheaper than their old ones.^{xxii} They could now get land at very cheap rent and were in a position to throw up their farms if and when ill-treated by Zamindars and renters. It was basically a question of agricultural manpower.

Depopulation of large tracts by deaths and desertions rendered vast areas of the province desolate, created an ecological imbalance and resulted in the growth of forests and wilderness. wild animals must have proved to be a serious obstacle in the resumption or extension of cultivation over large tracts of lands which were previously cultivated but had lapsed into waste and wilderness due to depopulation. It was only inevitable that wild animals, in their largely increased numbers, would impair cultivation and destroy the standing crops falling within therange of their roaming incursions. Birds such as cranes and parakeekts and peacocks were also quite numerous and proved to be the most destructive to the crops in Bhagalpur till as late as the opening years of the 19th century. In 1788 the Collector gave an account of the ravages committed by tigers in pargana Kadwa reporting that rewards were paid for killing as many as six tigers per annum.^{xxiii}

While the growth in population tended to promote and extend cultivation, the process was considerably hindered by the oppressions and exactions from the ryots by the Zamindars. Under the farming system prevailing before, the ryots' share after the customary deduction was nominally half. But the farmers also exacted abwabs as a result of which the ryot did not receive even a fourth of all the crop. The officers of the Company after the acquisition of diwani not only continued the assessments of that standard, but also compelled the amils to realise it rigorously even though 'the ruin of the country was the inevitable consequence'.

The recovery of agriculture and extension of cultivation has been ascribed to the Permanent Settlement by many. It is, however, highly doubtful if the settlement by itself contributed to the recovery. The framers of the settlements, no doubt, thought that 'the commerce and the consequently the wealth of the country must increase in proportion to the extension of agriculture. Inducement to ryot to cultivate more valuable articles of produce and to clear the extensive tracts of waste lands was also in mind. Subsequent experience, however, makes it highly doubtful that the Permanent Settlement had a directly favourable impact on growth and extension of agriculture in Bihar. Here at least the zamindars had no real confidence in the performance of rate. Of course, the Permanent Settlement created a new relationship of the Government with the Zamindars based on the sacrosanct contractual obligations of a fixed revenue demand and payment of the same.

To sum up, the crucial contradiction between the need to feed the increased population and the perpetuation and accentuation of exploitation and stagnant conditions of agriculture could not be resolved under the Company rule. Consequently, there began the vicious circle of self-perpetuating poverty as a result of growing pressure of population against limited resources, particularly, land resources in the context of stagnant agricultural techniques and dearth of other agricultural inputs.

ⁱ Choudhury, N.G; Cartier, Governor of Bengal, Calcutta ,1970, P.68.

ⁱⁱ Sinha, J, C; Economic Annals of Bengal, London,1927, p.103

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Hunter, W.W; The Annals of Rural Bengal , Calcutta,1965 ,p.25;.

^v Sinha, Chandra Prakash N.; From Decline to Destruction, Agriculture in Bihar during the Early British Rule,1765-1813. Manak Publications PVT. Ltd.1997, p.40.

^{vi} LETTER Dated 28 October 1789 from Darbhanga to J.Shore, President and Member of Board of Revenue,MOR,p.90m

^{vii} Sinha,Ram Narayan,; Bihar Peasantry, Bombay, PPH,1968,p.8

^{viii} Minutes of Consultations of Rajmahal Circuit,1773. Letter from W. Hardwood, collection of Rajmahal dated 5 August 1772 to W. Hastings.

^{ix} Letter of Collector, Bhagalpur dated 21 October ,1783 to W. Hastings, BCER Vol.III.

^x O'Malley, L.S.S; Bengal District Gazetteers: Shahabad, Patna,1924, p.125

^{xi} Huback, J.A; Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the Districts of Shahabad,1907-1916, Patna,1928, p.101

^{xii} Sinha, Chandra Prakash N.; Ibid.p.43

^{xiii} O'Malley, L.S.S; Bihar and Orissa District Gazetteers; Saran, Patna,1930,p.105

^{xiv} Hamilton Walter, Geographical, Statistical and Historical Description of Hindustan and Adjacent Countries in Vols XI to XV, 1877, p.269

^{xv} Stevenson-Moore, C.J; Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the Muzaffarpur District, 1892-1899, Calcutta, 1901, p.72

^{xvi} Fifth Report, Vol.III. P.530

^{xvii} Stevenson-Moore, C.J; Final Report on the Survey and Settlement Operations in the Muzaffarpur District, 1892-1899, Calcutta, 1901, p.239

^{xviii} Buchanan Francis; An Account of the District of Purnea in 1809-10, Patna, 1928, p.79

^{xix} Letter from the Collector, Bhagalpur, dated 25 July 1787, BCER (Bhagalpur Collectorate English Records preserved in the Bihar State Archives, Patna), Vol. XII.1794.

^{xx} Letter from the Collector, Bhagalpur, dated 17 August 1799, BCER, Vol.XVIII, 1799.

^{xxi} The jagir system was put to a stop by Regulation II of 1821. The reason amongst others, being the difficulty of obtaining suitable land.

^{xxii} Hunter, W.W: The Annals of Rural Bengal, Calcutta (1965) P.39

^{xxiii} Buchanan Francis; An Account of the District of Purnea in 1809-10, Patna, 1928, p.13