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EMERGING AGRARIAN SYSTEM AND ITS IMPACT ON CASTE RELATIONS AND LOCAL POLITICS: A STUDY IN THE STATE OF BIHAR¹

Prashant Kumar Choudhary²

Abstract

This paper focuses on caste relations in the villages of Bihar. Various facets of caste discrimination and aspects of inter-caste relationship among different groups are covered, which include the kind of discrimination faced. The paper considers some forms of caste discrimination practiced in the temples where some of the untouchable castes are not allowed to enter. Emphasis is placed on the practice of untouchability towards lower castes and various forms of discrimination exercised in these villages. The phenomenon of caste politics is observed in villages where a member of a particular caste votes for the party headed by the person of his/her caste. At local level panchayat election, people belonging to a specific caste vote for their own caste candidate (which is also observed in assembly and parliament elections). Along with it, the paper also deals with the impact of agrarian change on caste politics. i.e., the impact of change in landholding pattern in villages on politics.

Keywords: Agrarian Change, Caste, Politics, Discrimination

Introduction

Caste system rules Bihar. Its hegemonic presence is prevalent in the state. A majority of its population lives in the rural part (88%, according to Census, 2011) where the caste system is relatively stronger than in the urban milieu. A large number of scheduled castes (population of SCs in Bihar is 16%) people in rural Bihar are landless and work as agricultural labour for a living. The age-old caste system deprived a large number of Shudras and Dalits of basic human dignity and forced them to work for upper castes for their subsistence living, subjecting them to humiliation and exploitation. After Independence, under a democratic set-up, upper castes of Bihar ruled the state as the society was virtually run by them. The continuation of the dominance of upper castes in the social, political and agrarian spheres became much more prominent after India became independent. The upper castes, who occupied almost all the social and economic avenues, were those who benefited the most from the transition.

The forward castes maintained their dominant presence in state politics until 1990. However, the rise of lower castes started before the imposition of Emergency in 1975 when leaders from lower castes got Congress tickets and got elected in the assembly elections. Over the years, there was a gradual incorporation of lower caste leaders in Congress party and a kind of 'passive revolution' (Kaviraj, 1988) continued from Independence to the 90s. Though the post-Emergency period witnessed the breakdown of Congress party rule in the state, the first non-Congress government was short-lived. Backward castes finally established political dominance in 1990 when the then Janata Dal formed the government in the state. Since then, all chief ministers of Bihar have been non-upper castes. Bihar in the last 25 years has witnessed the complete ascendancy of a combination of lower caste and backward

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caste (more of OBC) politics, which was possible after 'uniting a scriptive groups which are victims of discrimination' (Jaffrelot, 2005).

The awakening of lower castes was not confined to politics alone; rather, it has larger implications in social and economic arenas. Overall, the OBC-led assault on forward castes' dominance had spillover effects on the improvement of these castes in other domains too. Since a majority of the people in the state live in the rural milieu, this change in the politics influenced the societal set-up. At the same time, there is no denying the fact that the impact of this change remained insubstantial and it could not bring forth any structural/radical change in the social and economic order. Jeffrey *et al* (2001) observe that the same 'electoral success in itself does not necessarily reflect the interests of the disadvantaged'. This might be the case, but the caste system in the state has gone through some changes over the years, largely after the 1990s. These changes might not be an overhauling of the caste system but it did take place to be termed as a loosening of the caste system, which led to greater flexibility in terms of selecting an occupation and to some extent availability of education for lower castes. Still, caste politics determines the rules and norms in many aspects of life like birth, occupation, marriage, education, and politics. In a way, it still has a significant impact on the way people live in society. When mobilisation takes place on identity grounds, caste identities get strengthened rather than weakened. Secondly, the strengthening of OBC politics is actually the strengthening of the caste system. Only the Dalits would favour the abolition of the caste system in toto. The OBCs, since they enjoy some privileges in the hierarchy, would never want the abolition of the caste system. Therefore, the electoral success of OBCs actually strengthens caste rigidities, though superficially it may appear as if caste ties are loosened.

This paper tries to focus on this aspect of caste in relation to a change in the agrarian system of village society in the state of Bihar. It examines the village level inter-caste relations between different castes, the differences in their land-holding and its impact on politics.

Caste and Caste Relations in *Navadih*

In this section, many forms of untouchability based on caste which are prevalent in the village of Navadih are discussed.

Table 1: Caste and Untouchability in Navadih

Caste	Yes	No	Total
<i>Dusadh</i>	6	0	6
<i>Lohar</i>	0	1	1
<i>Mushar</i>	42	5	47
<i>Pasi</i>	1	0	1
<i>Ravidas</i>	6	0	6
<i>Sonar</i>	0	1	1
<i>Nai</i>	0	7	7
<i>Kumhar</i>	0	6	6
<i>Yadav</i>	0	43	43
Total	55	63	118

Source: Author's tabulation based on Field data.

Table 1 shows the castes of Navadih and their perception about whether they are considered untouchable. It is observable that *Dusadh*, *Mushar*, *Pasi* and *Ravidas* (all scheduled castes) are regarded as untouchables. These castes are called '*chhotijati*' (lower caste) a demeaning term for scheduled castes in the village. The terminology is not just to address these castes, but brings a whole set of discriminating behaviour towards them such as not drinking water at their houses, by their hands, not having food in their houses, etc. The practice of untouchability continues in an indirect form of discrimination such as banning of 'inter-caste marriage'.

Table 2 lists some of the discriminatory practices noticed towards the castes cited. It is observable that all the four scheduled castes are discriminated against in one form or the other. The untouchability practiced at present in the village is in the absence of upper castes; but certainly, these norms are established by erstwhile upper caste landlords, which are followed by OBCs. One of the *Yadavs* recounts:

'Bhuiya (Mushar) aur Dusadh ke yaha hum tabhi khate hai jab wo log kisi Yadav ke yaha khana banata hai. Hum uske yaha ja ke khana aur paani nahi peete hai par wo log hamare yaha aa ke khana khayega aur paani peeyega'

(We take the food of Mushar and Dusadh houses only when it is prepared at a Yadav's house and Mushar and Dusadh provide raw items such as rice, wheat flour, vegetables, etc. We don't eat their food directly or drink water at their houses, but they do at ours).

i.e., cooked food from *Mushar* and *Dusadh* is considered impure and is not taken by *Yadavs*, which is a clear occurrence of untouchability towards these castes. On the contrary, precaution is considered to not give stale foods to *Brahmins* (priests or other *Brahmins*). This very act is a confirmation of either deep respect for priestly caste *Brahmins* or acceptance of the fact that *Brahmins* are superior to 'us'.

Table 2: Practice of Untouchability in Navadih

Castes	Type of Untouchability Practiced Towards
<i>Dusadh, Mushar, Pasi, and Ravidas</i>	I. <i>Yadavs, and Nais</i> don't take food and drink water at their houses; II. They don't take food in the same queue with them; III. Brahmin priests from other villages (called for marriage ceremony) don't take food; rather, food is prepared at <i>Yadav's</i> or <i>Nai's</i> house for the priest; IV. Inter-caste marriage is not practiced; V. Caste-based derogatory slander based on these castes is pervasive in the village; VI. <i>Mushars</i> are discriminated against also due to their food habit (in this case eating of pork); VII. Sweetshops owners don't take milk (cow's or buffalo's) from <i>Mushars</i> . VIII. <i>Mushars</i> feel discriminated against in gram sabha meetings

Source: Author's tabulation based on field data.

Some of the *Mushars* do not accept that they are considered untouchables about *Yadavs* not having their food or drink water at their house; rather they deny claims of the *Yadavs* that 'they don't.' However, inquiry about this complexity of untouchability practiced (by *Yadavs*) and denial of their being regarded as untouchable (*Mushars*) with a third caste (*Thakurs*) corroborated the accounts of *Yadavs* including their participation, i.e., the practice of untouchability towards *Mushars*. Why *Mushars* did not want to disclose to 'others' that they are treated as untouchables is a moot point to reflect upon. What sort of emotion was at work - shyness or shame? It seems more of shame than the former. They realise that being treated as untouchables is not a thing to be made known to anonymous others as it might bring a bad name to them and their community. However, *Yadavs*' declaration of practicing untouchability is an affirmation of discrimination based on caste towards Dalits. Paradoxically, people of discriminated castes (*Mushars*, *Dusadh*, *Ravidas*, etc.) who work as *Raj Mistri* (main construction worker) don't eat food at Muslims' houses due to religious beliefs.

There is no reporting of inter-caste conflict in the village, but discontentment is still present with both erstwhile upper caste landlords and current medium peasants. They argue that in the past, caste oppression was intense, where there was hardly any objection in visible form from the oppressed. That has changed completely now. As mentioned above, though caste-based discrimination is persistent, conflict is avoided. Discriminatory and untouchable practices are left to die a natural death without much resistance from discriminated ones. At present, even if there is a minor feud between castes of different hierarchy, it does not lead to conflict.

Caste in Politics

All the households interviewed agreed with the view that they cast votes on their own without fear or under pressure from anyone in all the elections from panchayat to general. i.e., days of landlords forcing their tenants to vote for the candidate/party of his/her choice are gone now. But still, there is the presence of money power to lure voters, at least in the local election. Money is used as an indirect form of muscle power to get votes in the panchayat election.

Caste is one of the most important markers of Bihar. Caste rigidity in Bihar is because of a long phase of stagnation in society. "Structurally, the population of Bihar comprises thousands of individual castes. Caste is the most durable mode of social identity and has become the basis of socio-political organisations" (Kumar *et al*, 2008). As a social identity, caste has a certain innate capacity to mobilise communities, leading up to the casting of votes for a voter's own caste candidate or the party headed by a person of the same caste. For this reason, the study tries to analyse the caste phenomenon in politics in both the villages. Two direct questions were asked to assess caste-based voting to the respondents: First, "Is it beneficial to consider caste in deciding to vote?" and second, "Do you vote for your own caste candidate?" followed by supplementary questions such as, "Why do you think it is beneficial to consider caste before voting?" and "Why do you vote for your caste candidate?"

Table 3: Caste Factor in Election, Navadih

	Importance of Caste in Election	Voted for Own Caste Candidate
Yes	37	66
No	46	47
Not Applicable	1	5
Don't Know	34	0
Total	118	118

Source: Author's Calculation based on field data.

Table 3 presents the caste drive in election and politics in general. A total of 37 households out of 118 believe that caste is important in election, whereas 66 households accepted they vote for their caste candidate or the party led by their caste person. It is deemed to emphasise that a lower number of households recognised the importance of caste in the election than the number of households voting based on caste. It shows that though they do not accept that they give importance to caste in election, still they vote on a caste basis. *Mushars* and *Yadavs* are the two most populous castes in the village, and they are the ones who vote on caste lines in elections. A total of 36 out of 47 households of *Mushars* vote for their caste candidate and 28 out of 42 *Yadavs* go for caste-based voting. For example, *Mushars* accepted that they voted for Jitan Ram Manjhi in the last assembly election primarily because Manjhi belongs to the *Mushar* caste. The feeling of '*apni jati ka leader*' (leader of own caste) is prominent among *Mushars* for Manjhi. The fact is that a negative response to the question 'Did Manjhi do any welfare work for you (*Mushars*)' did not deter *Mushars* from voting for him. This reflects the strong caste feeling *Mushars* have for their own caste politician Manjhi. When asked 'Will you vote for him again?', most of the *Mushars* responded positively: '*Ek baar aur mauka denge unko*' (we will give him one more chance) which shows caste-based voting in *Navadih*. In a similar vein, *Yadavs* also feel about Lalu Prasad Yadav and his party Rashtriya Janta Dal where they accept that they vote for him or his party in assembly and general elections. Here too, the motivating factor for *Yadavs* for caste-based voting is the emotive connection of a candidate belonging to "*apnijati*" (own caste).

The availability of a candidate from specific caste (e.g. *Mushar* and *Yadav*) in the election is not the only sufficient leeway to actuate someone for caste-based voting. Instead, it extends to a candidate of a different caste (or his party) who is in coalition with the ethnic party. For example, a Congress candidate contesting elections in alliance with RJD does get votes from *Yadavs* of *Navadih*. It reflects the addition of caste votes when two or more political parties go for an electoral coalition. Voting by a *Yadav* for a non-*Yadav* party or a non-*Yadav* candidate (for example a non-*Yadav* Congress candidate) is suggestive of ethnic voting.

Caste and Caste relations in *Rajua Bakhri*

The following sections discuss the caste dynamics of *Rajua Bakhri* which include the practice of untouchability towards some scheduled castes, caste-based voting for a candidate belonging to the voter's caste, ban on temple entry for some dalits and inter-caste marriage.

At first, castes which are treated and perceived as untouchables are discussed here. In response to the question 'Is your caste or *jati* considered untouchable?' There are five castes which have answered in

the affirmative as presented in table 4. They are *Ravidas*, *Tatwa*, *Kahar*, *Lohar*, and *Mali*. The common untouchable caste in both villages is *Ravidas*. Among *Malis*, a majority are not considered untouchables as per their account. Some of them have a different opinion about whether they are treated as untouchables. On the contrary, there is unanimity among *Ravidas*, *Tatwa*, and *Kahar* when it comes to their being regarded as untouchables.

Table 4: Caste and Untouchability in *Rajua Bakhri*

Caste	Yes	No	Total
<i>Kumhar</i>	0	11	11
<i>Ravidas</i>	5	0	5
<i>Tatwa</i>	10	0	10
<i>Baniya</i>	0	11	11
<i>Yadav/Bherihar</i>	0	1	1
<i>Kahar</i>	4	0	4
<i>Koiri</i>	0	4	4
<i>Kurmi</i>	0	6	6
<i>Lohar</i>	2	2	4
<i>Mali</i>	2	9	11
<i>Teli</i>	0	30	30
Total	23	74	97

Source: Author's Calculation based on field data.

Table 5 presents some forms of untouchability carried out towards these castes. There are many commonalities between *Navadh* and *Rajua Bakhri* in terms of these castes facing the same set of untouchability acts. The table cites those common acts in addition to some new ones.

Table 5: Practice of Untouchability in *Rajua Bakhri*

Castes	Type of Untouchability Practiced Towards
<i>Kahar, Lohar, Mali, Tatwa, and Ravidas</i>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> I. People of other castes don't eat food and drink water at <i>Ravidas</i>, <i>Kahar</i> and <i>Tatwa's</i> houses; II. They don't take food in the same queue with them; III. Entry is restricted for them in temples of other castes (e.g. <i>Brahmins'</i> hamlet) area; IV. Brahmin priests from other village (called for marriage ceremony) don't take food at these castes' houses; rather, food is prepared at a <i>Teli's</i> or <i>Baniya's</i> house for the priest. V. Inter-caste marriage is not practiced; VI. Caste-based derogatory slanders on <i>Ravidas</i> and <i>Dusadha</i> prevalent; VII. <i>Tatwas</i> and <i>Ravidas</i> caste members are not allowed inside the houses of <i>Brahmins</i> and <i>Bhumihars</i>.

Source: Author's tabulation based on field data.

The presence of *Brahmins* and *Bhumihars* deeply determines the caste relations in the village in the form of banning temple entry or practicing untouchability towards these castes. When a *Bhumihar* was inquired about the existence and practice of untouchability, he remarked

'ab jaat-paat sab khatm ho gaya. Ab pehle wala baat nahi raha. Ab hum log bhi uske (lower caste) yaha shadi-biah mai jaate hai; haan par khate nahi hai, kewal chumaan ka paisa de ke aa jaate hai'

(Now, there is no such a thing called caste. Things are not the same as earlier. Now, we also go to a lower caste marriage; but we don't eat there, but only give some money (as per ritual it is considered blessings and wishes for a newlywed couple) and come back).

The account speaks for itself in the sense of how caste and caste relations have changed in villages of Bihar. To claim that *'there is no such thing called caste'* based on an upper caste going to a *dalit* house while practicing other forms of untouchability is more of a self-proclaimed diminution of caste which is the farthest from its reality. The journey the caste system has travelled from total separation from upper castes to upper castes going to the houses of lower castes although not having food or water there is an epitome of the existence of it. But, the cardinal issue of interest is why someone would call this incident the end of the caste system when he himself is being an agent of discriminatory practices. Is it so simply based on his understanding of caste where segregation between lower and upper castes mattered the most i.e., segregation is the defining feature of the caste system? This anecdote can be comprehended as the upper caste's effort of creating or propagating a false narrative about the demise of the caste system while maintaining the status quo of discriminatory practices. The duality of the upper caste exercising discriminatory power and denial of the reality of the caste system from which power was extracted simultaneously co-exists. Many others (upper castes and OBCs) too share the same view on the caste system and its eventual death in the village while they continue discriminating against the lower castes.

A more direct form of discrimination which led to physical abuse was noticed (from the narration of a *Tatwa*) when an erstwhile landlord (upper caste *Bhumihar*) slapped a *Tatwa* (lower caste, considered untouchable) because he entered the former's house wearing slippers on his feet in a marriage event. As mentioned earlier, *Tatwas* in *Rajua Bakhri* don't own their homestead land, and it belongs to these landlords. As they were landless attached labourers to them, they were allowed to stay on these lands. Since generations, they worked for them on *beggari* (without any in-kind wage but food; this system is non-functional though at present) but at present there is hardly any *Tatwa* family which does not have members who have migrated and are working outside the village. The changed dynamics might have loosened the clutch of caste-driven discrimination, but its hold is still secure and durable for years to come. It is so even after the abolition of landlordism and the migration of upper castes from villages, moving away from the agrarian structure (giving their land on sharecropping to others). In a sense, both upper and lower castes migrated outside the village (upper castes with entire family whereas among lower castes it was mostly males leaving their family back in the village; the nature, destination and kind of work they get at their destination are different too) but when they

return to the village, past relations seems to prevail (for upper castes it is the legacy of landlordism and for lower castes it is attached or wage labour) under which upper castes still deem themselves to be at the centre of the power equation. It is this perceived or real authority of upper castes which encourages them to discriminate against lower castes or more specifically in this incident slap one of them for entering an upper caste person's house with slippers on.

A completely different incident of inter-caste marriage does reflect upon the prevailing firm clasp of the caste system in the village. A dalit man fled with an OBC girl and stayed at the house of his relative- a *Tatwa* of *Rajua Bakhri*. The *Rajua Bakhri* man landed in jail after the girl's parents filed a case against him and the boy. To get bail, he took money from a *Bhumihar* which he is repaying with interest; additionally, his wife also works as a maid in the *Bhumihar's* house. He recounts the event:

'jab wo yaha ladki le ke aaya tha humko kuch pata nahi tha. Kuch din yaha fir chala gaya. Uske baad ladki ka baap case kar diya ki hum ladki bhagane mai saath diye. Police jail le gaya humko. Bail ke liye bhi paisa nahi tha, Case kaha se larte? Malik log se paisa le ke case lar rahe hai. Aaj tak sood samet paisa de rahe hai. Gaon pe kaam nahi tha so Muzaffarpur mai motiai ka kaam karte hai. Jab gaon aate hai to uske (Bhumihar) yaha bhi agar kaam hai to karna parta hai. Uska mann kiya to paisa diya nahi to nahi. Hum maangte nahi hai. Kabhi deta hai din bhar kaam ka Rs 10 Kabhi Rs 150 kabhi Rs 200. Abhi bahut baaki hai paisa chukana aur case bhi chal hi raha hai'

(When he (the boy) came to my house with the girl, I did not know anything about it. They stayed here some days, then left. The girl's father filed a case against me that I helped them to flee. Police put me in jail. I did not have money to get bail; how could I fight the legal battle? I took money on interest from a *Bhumihar* (whom he calls *Maalik* (Boss)) for this purpose (to get bail). Till now, the debt is not repaid. I went to *Muzaffarpur* as there was no job in the village where I work as handcart puller. When I come to the village, if there is work at the *Bhumihar's* I have to do. If he wishes, he pays for the work done and sometimes he doesn't. I don't ask for the wage. Sometimes he gives Rs 10, sometimes Rs 100, Rs 150 or Rs 200 for the work. Still, the case is subjudice and I have to repay a good amount of money to him).

The recount shows that a dalit entangled in rigid caste system is exploited at social, economic and judicial levels; social in the form of proscription against inter-caste marriage and thereby if seen violating the norm, brings wrath from upper castes/OBCs; economic in monetary terms and judicial which is closely related to economic ones with reference to discrimination faced while accessing justice (police generally listen to those who have money and status in the village which dalits are deprived of). Multi-pronged discrimination and economic deprivation kept the lower castes at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Another recount sheds light on the prevalence of caste-driven discrimination in *Rajua Bakhri*. While offering food, a *Baniya* (OBC) remarked: '*Hum log chhota jati nahi hai, hamare yaha aap kha sakte hai* (We are not lower caste, you can have food here)'. Two salient points can be discerned from this statement; first is his assumption that people generally don't take cooked food at the house of a

lower caste person if the caste is known to them; the second is directly linked to the first where the genesis of this belief might be the reflection of untouchability practiced (including by his own caste) towards lower castes in the village.

Caste in Politics

'Caste in Bihar politics' is the title of a paper by Jha (1970) which argues the caste dynamics of Bihar politics in the 1970s. It observes that post-Independence politics in Bihar centered around upper castes and the 'real tussle in Bihar politics has been between Brahmins, supported by the Backward Castes, and different permutations and combinations of *Kayasthas*, *Bhumihars* and *Rajputs*'. The dominance of upper castes in Bihar politics continued till the 1990s with different upper castes and permutations among them heading the state and by the mid-1990s, OBC politicians dominated the state...of Bihar (Witsoe, 2012). OBCs and lower castes started voting for the party headed by their castes which also fielded candidates of the same caste and assisted them to mobilise politically. "Caste had long structured political practice – excluding many lower castes from the political process altogether – and lower-caste politics was a reaction to this reality. This is why lower-caste politics was much more than a 'politics of identity' for its own sake, but impacted the distribution of power, functioning of state institutions, and economic relations in the countryside. The explicit appeal to caste identities by the regional parties that emerged in the 1990s sought to inspire a popular political mobilization that potentially includes the vast majority of the population in an attempt to subvert a long history of upper-caste hegemony (ibid. 318)'.

This phenomenon of caste-based voting is not so strong in *Rajua Bakhri* as it is in *Navadih*. Still, many assert the importance of caste in the election. They are mostly *Koeri-Kurmi* who believe in the importance of caste in the election and eventually voting for their own caste party (JD (U) led by Nitish Kumar as he belongs to *Kurmi* caste).

Table 6: Caste Factor in Election, *Rajua Bakhri*

	Importance of Caste in Election	Voted for Own Caste Candidate
Yes	11	14
No	71	81
Not Applicable	9	1
Don't Know	6	1
Total	97	97

Source: Author's Calculation based on Field data.

There are two-fold reasons for low caste-based voting in *Rajua Bakhri*. First, there is a low population of castes which have political party representation at the state level. e.g., JD (U) considered being the party of *Kurmi*, RJD of Yadavs, LJP of *Dusadhs*, HAM of Mushars, etc. Second, the most populated castes of *Rajua Bakhri* are *Teli*, *Baniya*, and *Kumhar* which do not have state-level political party representation. i.e. for these groups, caste does not work as an electoral marker to vote for a political party. In the absence of their caste-based political party, which could bank on their votes to win an election, they find other electoral issues to vote for a political party. These electoral issues could be a

combination of local to the national matters of concern. However, this is not to claim that the presence of a caste-based political party is the only condition for caste-based voting. As cited earlier, the caste of a candidate contesting an election does matter equally if not more depending upon the population of that caste in the constituency (assembly or general election). For example, RJD may not be considered a party of *Kurmis*, but may field a *Kurmi* candidate from a constituency if the population of *Kurmis* is sizeable enough to win the election.

Relationship between Agrarian Change and Its Impact on Caste Politics

In this section, the impact of agrarian change on caste relations and caste politics is discussed in detail. It focuses on both villages' change and land holding structure and its relationship with caste and caste politics. Table 7 presents the change in landholding and effect on caste relations thereof. It shows that most households respond positively to the question 'Have any changes taken place in the landholding pattern in the village?' They accept that there are changes in land occupancy after the abolition of *Zamindari* and the eventual departure of the landlord (mostly upper caste *Rajputs*) in the later part of 2000s from the village.

Table 7: Landholding and Caste Relations in Navadih

	Change in Landholding	Benefit to Non-Upper Castes	Impact on Caste System	Assertion of Non-Upper Castes
Yes	102	102	102	95
No	14	0	0	1
Don't Know	2	2	3	5
Not Applicable	0	14	13	17
Total	118	118	118	118

Source: Author's Calculation based on Field data.

When *Rajput* landlords were present in the village, they had held a large chunk of land. Other than a few *Yadavs* and *Thakurs*, most of the villagers had some or no land. A majority of dalits were landless agricultural labourers of *Rajputs* (landlessness among dalits still persists, but not all of them are agricultural labourers of landowning castes. Instead, there is diversification in the jobs they do in or outside the village. The continuation of landlessness among dalits is the manifestation of the failure of land reform in the state). One *Yadav* recollects the landlord days of *Rajputs*:

'Uss time wahi (Rajputs) log ke pas san zamin tha. Zamindari chalta tha un logo ka. Humlog ke pas bahut kam zamin tha. Humlog bhi uska zamin zotte the batai par. Jab wo log chala gaya yaha se zamin bech kar, humlog zamin kharide. Dheere dheere sab zamin wo log bech diya. Ab uska ek bhi kaththa zamin yaha nahi hai'

(At that time, only they had land. They were the zamindars. We had less land. We used to till their land on sharecropping. When they left the village selling their land,

we bought from them. Slowly, they sold all of their lands. At present they don't have even one *kaththa* (0.084 acre) of land in the village).

It is also noticeable that the same number of households agree on the fact that non-upper castes were the largest beneficiaries of the change in the landholding pattern in the village. The primary reason for non-upper castes acquiring most of the land from zamindars was the absence of any upper castes in the village which facilitated non-upper castes (mainly backward castes such as *Yadavs*, and *Thakurs*). Since in the land occupancy hierarchy, the backward castes stood second (though it was disproportionately in favour of zamindars) as they had some lands or were sharecroppers of zamindars and got some money/assets (e.g., jewellery, loans from relatives, cows, oxen, etc.) to buy lands of zamindars which were on sale. One *Thakur* narrates the days of buying land:

'uss samay jab wo log zamin bech raha tha, humlogo ke pas bhi zyada kuch nahi tha. Stithi etna achcha nahi tha. Kahi se kuch le de ke zamin liya. Jo kuch bhi tha ghar mai sona, chandi , gaay sab bechna para. Rishtedar se bhi kuch paisa liye. Etna paisa nahi tha ki bahut zamin kharid paate, par kuch kharide'

(We did not have much (money) when they were selling lands. Our (economic) condition was not good. We bought lands by borrowing from here and there. Whatever we had- gold jewellery, silver ornaments, cows, etc. - sold to buy lands. We borrowed lands from relatives too. We did not have enough money to buy much land, but we bought some).

It is evident that the final exit of zamindars from the village immensely helped backward castes in terms of land occupancy.

In contrast to backward castes' land purchase from zamindars, a majority of dalits of the village (*Mushar*, *Dusadh*, and *Ravidas*) remained landless as they were. During zamindari, a majority of people from these castes were agricultural labourers (wage labourer, attached labourer, etc.) to zamindars which has changed now. At present, the sole dependency on agriculture has decreased substantially, and they move out of the village in search of jobs. However, for those who are still involved in agriculture and work as agricultural labourers change took place in the ownership of land. i.e., from upper castes to backward castes while their position in the agrarian structure remained intact. However, one visible change that occurred in the agrarian system for dalits in the village is their engagement as sharecroppers, which was not at all there throughout the zamindari regime. Many of dalits in the village are sharecroppers of backward castes with freedom to say 'No' to the terms and conditions of sharecropping if they were not agreeable to them. It was not possible during zamindari as restrictions on the specific tasks dalits were forced to do was too strict to imagine doing something else apart from the job assigned. One *Mushar* aged 70 years who is a sharecropper of a *Thakur* (backward caste) compares the days of zamindari with the present day in terms of agrarian change:

'Oi samay stithi bahut kharab rahlo. Je babu bollo kare hoto. Sara din khet mai kaam karle, khana dito jowar roti aar sabji. Oi baad jadi aar kaaj rahlo, to uu bhi harma ke hi karte hoto. Babu log khoob gali ditto, marto bhi. Ghar ke sab log okra ke yaha kaaj karto. E zamin (homestead land) or hi rahlo, dile hato. Base khatir zamin dilo. Oar hi

bandhua majoor the. Lekin aaj uu baat nei ho. Bahut kuch badal gelo. Aaj malik log sab chal gelo. Kuch zamin batai pe liye ho, ussi se pait chalat ho. Thakur ke zamin ho. Aadha baant kedet ho, aadha kharcha uu det ho. Nahi poshaya to batai nahi bhi karat ho, uu kachu bolto na'

(During zamindari, our condition was really horrible. Whatever they (zamindars) ordered, we had to do. When we worked the whole day, we used to get jowar's chapati and sabji. After that, if some work was to be done, we used to complete that also. Zamindars used to abuse and beat us too. Other members of the household worked there too. Homestead land was given to us. We were their attached labourers. Today it is not the same, things have changed a lot. Zamindars have left the village. We took some lands on sharecropping which is sufficient to survive. These lands are of Nai and half of the produce is shared with him as half of the expenditure is shared by landowner. If we cannot bear the expense of agriculture, we can refuse to cultivate the land and can tell the landowner 'No').

It is apparent then that the disappearance of the zamindari system helped the backward castes economically more in relative terms and dalits socially in the form of the loosening of the draconian norms of the caste system. This is not to deny that dalits' economic condition did improve over the years as cited above, but development concerning social change is more significant than the improvement in their economic status. This is corroborated by a higher number of households (which is equal to the positive responses to the question 'Did any changes take place in the landholding pattern in the village?') accepting that change in the landholding pattern had an impact on the caste system in general. The follow-up question asked to the respondents was 'Is there any impact on caste system?' (assuming the response for the question mentioned above was 'Yes'). The higher positive response also indicates that impacts are believed to be palpable on the ground where the caste system got hit from the demise of zamindari, which ultimately resulted in changes in the landholding pattern. This impact on the caste system is affirmed across all castes (SCs, OBCs, EBCs, etc.). i.e., all the castes in the village believe that this change in landholding has impacted the caste system positively. However, their interpretation of this impact differs with respect to their caste. It is also noticed that when a backward caste (e.g., a *Yadav* or a *Thakur*) elaborated on the kind of impact on the caste system which s/he witnessed due to change in landholding pattern, it is mostly in terms of obtainment of land from erstwhile zamindars. It reflects that even during zamindari, they were not the groups which were oppressed more compared to the SCs. This is verified when they point out that discrimination towards them was less and they were not considered untouchables during the zamindari regime. There was occupational mobility for them; they could even opt to go outside the village in search of a job.

Their (*Yadavs* and *Thakurs*) responses are, 'Zamindari got abolished; upper caste left the village,' '*Yadavs* got land,' '*Thakurs* got land.' Some *Yadavs* say that they are treated well now. 'Treated well is more of a 'respected' well as there is no caste above them in the hierarchy of the caste system in the village. To elaborate further, it implies that in the presence of zamindars, *Yadavs* and *Thakurs* were deprived of the respect and prestige which they enjoy at present. It is this lack of respect which they

talk about when they say 'not treated well'. However, there is no denial of the fact that during zamindari, there were instances of feud between *Yadavs* and *Rajputs*. One *Yadav* recollects an incident:

'Kono khet ke lekar jhagra hua tha. Gaay chala gaya tha khet mai. To fir bahsa-bahsi hua tha. Raja log tha jo mann kiya bol deta tha.'

(We had a feud with a zamindar over agricultural land. A cow grazed his field. We had an altercation over this. As they were kings, they used to say whatever they wanted').

Coming back to scheduled castes' views on change in landholding pattern and its subsequent impact on the caste system, for them, this impact was not only positive but was favourable in the social, political, and economic domains. Under the social dimension, some of the commonly quoted responses are '*Bhed-bhav kam hai*' (discrimination is less and the majority of the responses came from *Mushar* caste)', 'got more freedom' (both *Dusadhs* and *Mushars* believe so), 'now we can speak' (*Mushars* account). These viewpoints are reminiscent of the discriminatory caste system because of which their human agency has been targeted by upper caste landlords in the village. The impressions are reflective of SCs' past where freedom to speak and more specifically liberty to say 'No' to a landlord's order was like a daydream for them. The witnessed changes which they mention are not complete. Discrimination towards them does exist and still they are considered untouchable, though the intensity of discrimination (instances of discrimination, places of discrimination, e.g. house, market, the agricultural field, temple, etc., freedom to speak) has reduced. At the economic level, many of the dalits point out that *Yadavs* and *Thakurs* turned out to be the biggest beneficiaries of the change in landholding pattern. Dalits did not have any means to buy these lands when the sale was on. Dalits' biggest achievement, however, came from freedom to change their caste-based hereditary occupation. They can even opt to go out in search, which many prefer at present. With it, they also acquired freedom to till land on sharecropping if they wish to which was not the case before as they had to work as agricultural labourers. A related incident might help us to comprehend it better. A *Mushar* (a sharecropper) came to tell the *Thakur*(landowner) that from next year onwards he would not be able to till his land as in the ongoing season there was a mismatch in agricultural expenditure calculation from the landowner's side. According to the sharecropper, the landowner did not give the correct amount of money he owed the former. This is a telling story of how things have changed for a dalit in the village, who has gone from being an attached labourer to a sharecropper with freedom to refuse to till the land. S/he now can reject the landowner's terms and conditions of *battai* (sharecropping) which became possible due to the availability of an additional source of job opportunity/income (migrating outside the village) than agriculture. It can be observed that dalits did not get land from zamindars, but social freedom was achieved.

A question related to change in landholding pattern was 'Do non-upper castes assert themselves better now due to this change?' An overwhelming number of residents of *Navadih* responded positively to the question, which implies that they believe that change in landholding pattern led non-upper castes to assert themselves now. The assertion again is made at social, economic and political levels. The first two have already been discussed above in detail. The political part of it is analysed here from the point of view of both OBCs and SCs. In general, politics in the village is free

from coercion. i.e., voters have the freedom to vote for a candidate of their choice and they don't face any pressure from the candidate or his/her political party to vote for him/her. Residents of *Navadih* reject outright any charges of forced voting. One of the *Mushars* compares the past (during zamindari) and present days of voting:

'oi samay ja ke bolat rahlo babu bhot debe ke, o ke hi dete hoto. O maalik rahlo. Mukhiya hato. Kono paisa-rupiya dito na, khali bolto ki kekra ke bhot debe ke. Hamni kuchu bolto na. Par ab oi baat na hai. Abhi jekra ke maan, bhot det hai. Kono dabab na hai. Haa oi (pratyashi) aato zarror, kintu khali bolto ki bhot dou'

(During those (zamindari) days, we used to vote for the candidate for whom we were asked to as per the zamindar's instruction. They were the *maliks*. They were the village heads. We did not get any money for voting, we were just asked to vote for whomsoever they wished to win. We did not utter a word. Those things are gone now. At present, we vote for the candidate as per our wish. There is no pressure from anyone. Some candidates do come to our door but they request us to vote for them).

The narration applied to three-tier political systems (panchayat, assembly, and parliament). At panchayat level politics, zamindars used to dominate the village by winning it through force or the land-driven dominance they had possessed over the ages. The democratic process was not at all egalitarian, at least constitutionally. Local politics was controlled by zamindars and they acted as a restraint to the democratisation of the village society. During assembly or parliament elections, zamindars canvassed for the candidate of their caste or the political party they were aligned with. The association with a political party was based on caste identity or money. Local zamindars, in turn, functioned as vote-dealers between rural voters and a political party or candidate of the party. Politics (caste politics) remained the forte of upper castes.

The second half of the above recount is the portrayal of change which has taken place and shows how the voting process and politics, in general, has reformed in the village. With the expiration of the old regime of zamindari, upper caste dominated politics in the village is dismantled. Dalits are free to vote for a politician of their choice or their caste candidate. Politics of caste has shifted from the upper castes to the lower castes. The population on their side aided with constitutional provisions (73rd Amendment Act which facilitates panchayat election at village level with a reservation for SCs) and lower caste politics reversed the political spectrum in the village. For example, *Tandwa* panchayat's *mukhiya* post is reserved for scheduled caste woman. In the last panchayat election held in 2016, a total of twenty scheduled caste women contested for the post of mukhiya under *Tandwa* panchayat. Three were from *Navadih* and all of them were *Mushars*. A *pasi* (scheduled caste from a neighbouring village named *Jondhi*) woman secured victory and a *Mushar* woman from *Navadih* was runner up. The winning margin was less than hundred which was way more than the combined vote share of the other two contestants of *Navadih*. In this regard, many *Mushars* of *Navadih* have accepted that they voted for their caste candidate (for the runner-up candidate). Vote consolidation for the own caste (*Mushar*) candidate is reflective of caste politics in the village. Indeed, the process of democratization of village

politics paved the way for lower castes to claim the political space which hitherto has been occupied by upper castes. One *Mushar* explains the caste politics in panchayat election:

'Do teen baar se pasi ke hi patni chunat jitlo. Ei baar hamra ke ho chunab lare ke rahlo. Apni he jati ke khada rahlo ek mahila. Sab mil ke o ke bollo chunab lare khatir. Pasi dabab dilo ki chunab na laro. O dhamki dilo Humni ke, bujhlo je hamar jati o ke bhot na debe. Lekin, chunab holo. Sab mil ke bhot o dilo. Lekin chunab mai haar gaye humni. O ke bhot dilo pasi log. Hamar aadmi ke doosar gaon ke jati wala bhot na dilo, ei kaarn haar holo. Aar o aage se hi mukhiya rahlo, to paisa hato, khoob kharch karlo chunab mai bhot ke liye'

(From the last two-three times, Pasi's wife is winning the panchayat election in the village. Last time, we (Mushars) had decided to contest the election. We had fielded a woman from our caste. We all had requested her to contest the election. Pasi pressurised us not to contest the election. He threatened some of us that our caste people should not vote for him. But the election took place. We voted for our caste candidate. We lost the election, though. Pasis voted for their caste candidate. Voters of other castes from other/our village did not vote for our candidate; this is the reason we lost the election. In addition, since she was an incumbent mukhiya, she had money, she invested money in the election to buy votes).

Lower caste politics (when panchayat seats are exclusively reserved for SCs) in the village is a complicated domain and any consideration of its simplicity is fraught with the reality on the ground. Lower castes are not a homogeneous group and they do behave according to the intricacy of the democratic set-up of political process where number matters. Under the circumstances, different *jatis* of lower caste contest to win election, aligning with some castes while fighting against some others. It suggests that in a panchayat election on a reserved seat for SC, the broader grouping of scheduled castes does not seem to be functioning. i.e., there is no solidarity among scheduled castes when it comes to contesting a reserved seat in the panchayat election.

From the perspective of backward castes, the panchayat election in *Navadithi* is an exclusive domain of lower castes and their politics. Since it is a reserved seat, the backward castes cannot contest the election, but only be voters. Lower caste candidates approach backward castes during the election campaign to seek their votes. Voting of backward castes in a panchayat election is based on several factors. Some of the most quoted factors are, on time disbursal of PDS items. These items should be given as per the rules (some of lower castes such as *Mushar* and *Ravidas* point out that they don't get the stipulated amount of wheat, rice, kerosene and sugar and not on a monthly basis. According to them, though backward castes also don't get these items monthly, "the amount given to them per person is higher than us or equal to a specified amount, better roads and electricity connections, allocation of government schemes, e.g. old age pension, widow pension, etc. It is true that roads and electricity connections are better in backward castes' hamlets than that of lower castes". Unequal infrastructure availability between backward and lower castes' areas is more obvious when the *mukhiya* of the panchayat is from a SC. For votes in the panchayat election, favourable treatment to OBCs by

lower caste *mukhiyas* in the form of providing benefits of government schemes shows that democracy might have entered the rural society and have functioned well to a large extent, but the democratisation of the political system is still a work in progress. Backward castes accrue differential advantage from their comparatively higher economic (agrarian) and social positioning in society.

The next section discusses the impact of agrarian change on caste politics in *Rajua Bakhri*. Table 8 presents the four factors which are indicative of a change in landholding pattern and related impacts on caste relations in the village. As it shows, *Rajua Bakhri* is in complete contrast to *Navadih* in terms of change in land occupancy. A majority of households responded negatively to the question 'Do you think that any changes have taken place in the landholding pattern in the village?'. It is indicative of the status quo about landholding in the village. From the earlier accounts of respondents, it was already established that there is a large concentration of landholding among *Bhumihars*, with high landlessness among lower castes and backward castes with some lands in the village. Zamindari might have disappeared from the village, but it did not result in land distribution or sale to other castes.

Table 8: Landholding and Caste Relations in *Rajua Bakhri*

	Change in Landholding	Benefit to Non-Upper Castes	Impact on Caste System	Assertion of Non-Upper Castes
Yes	4	5	3	4
No	92	3	4	22
Don't Know	1	8	18	25
Not Applicable	0	81	72	46
Total	97	97	97	97

Source: Author's Calculation based on field data.

State failure to implement any form of land distribution is the main reason for the high land inequality between upper castes and non-upper castes. Along with *Bhumihars*, *Brahmins* (an upper caste) are the group which has the largest share of land in the village and most of the dalits and BC-1 groups such as *Ravidas*, *Tatwa*, and *Kumhar* remained landless. One *Tatwa* narrates the existing agrarian relations and some of the changes related to it, which took place in the villages"

'Sab zamin unhi logo ke pas hai shuru se hi. Humlog uske yaha hi kaam karte the bandhua. Pet bhar khana milta tha khali, Aur din bhar kaam karna parta tha. Malik log ka raaz tha yaha. Jo bura bhala kehta tha sunn lete the. Khet se lekar ghar tak ta poora kaam karte the hum log. Zis zamin pe ghar hai wo bhi usi ka hai, waho log basne diya yaha. Lekin ab stithi waisa nahi. Babu log khud gaon chhor diye, kheti-baarichhor diye. Sab zamin bataai pe laga diye. Sehar chale gaye, wahi naukari karte hai. Bachcha sab bhi naukari mai lag gaya. Kheti mai bas ek-do parivaar hi hai. Lekin zamin koi bhi nahi becha. Humlog bhi kuch bataai pe zamin liye hai. Aur baahar bhi kaam karte hai. Kono dabab nahi hai karne wala'

(From the beginning, they (Bhumihars) have all the land of the village. We used to work for them as an attached labourers. We used to get stomach-full food as wage and work the entire day. Bhumihars ruled this village. Whatever good-bad they told

us, we had to listen. We had to work in the agricultural field and at their houses. Our homestead land is theirs; they allowed us to settle here. Things have changed a lot now. Landlords left the village; they quit agriculture too. They gave their land to others on sharecropping. Settled in the city, got jobs there. Their children too got jobs there. One or two families stay here and are involved in agriculture. However, they did not sell their land. We also till some lands on sharecropping. We also work outside the village. There is no pressure from anyone now).

The narration is suggestive of the whole dynamics of change and continuity of landholding structure in the village and its relationship with caste. There are certain changes in agrarian relations, but other factors are responsible for it rather than any alteration in land occupancy of upper castes. These critical changes are mainly the migration of erstwhile landlords from the village to the cities (which also provided freedom to lower castes to change their hereditary occupation), migration of lower castes to non-agricultural works outside village, inability of agricultural sector to produce sufficient employment for the growing working class (mainly agricultural wage labourer) etc. However, upper caste landlords maintained their dominance over land in the village, which denied any structural change in landholding pattern.

The subsequent impact of the change of landholding pattern on the caste system or benefitting non-upper castes remained minimal, which is also evident from the response cited in table 9. It shows that several households which positively reacted to the question of 'Did change in landholding pattern benefit non-upper castes?' is as low as five. Similarly, for the follow-up questions such as the impact of landholding pattern on overall 'caste system' and on 'assertion of non-upper castes,' the responses are largely non-positive. It is evident that the concentration of land in the hands of upper castes resulted in control of both the economic and social domains of the village. It is this continuity of land occupancy of upper castes which is still existing and not letting the caste relations of the village to loosen up. Though, it is not undeniable that due to upper castes' migration, caste relations in social and political (more in political dimension) have remoulded for the better (for lower castes).

At the political level, upper castes have left the space for lower and backward castes in the village. It is apparent that in panchayat election for *mukhiya*, all the eight contestants (all males) belonged to either backward castes or extremely backward castes. Even on the unreserved seat for mukhiya such as *Bakhri Nazir* panchayat a *mallah* (fisherfolk, an EBC) is the head of it and none of the upper castes fought the panchayat election. As there is no *mallah* in the village (but they are in the majority in the neighbouring village under the same panchayat), not many respondents agreed to vote on caste lines. One *malik* responds to the question of voting on caste basis:

'Wo (mukhiya) hamare jati ka nahi, jaat ke naam pe vote nahi diya koi yaha. Bolta hai kaam karega, par kuch kiya nahi. Usko apne hi jati ka log sab vote de ke jita deta hai'

(He is not from our caste, We did not vote for him considering his caste. He promised us that he would work for our development but did nothing here. People of his caste voted for him and he secured victory).

It is noticeable that when a panchayat seat is reserved, a higher number of lower castes fight the election as in the case of *Navadih* where twenty scheduled castes women contested for the post of *mukhiya*. It seems that even without any change in landholding pattern, i.e. when a large part of the land is controlled by upper castes, lower and backward castes manoeuvred political space for themselves with the help of constitutionally granted rights and provisions. In local politics, the Constitution to some extent overruled the supremacy of upper castes and equipped lower/backward castes for the struggle against the inherent undemocratic nature of village society.

The democratization of village also obliterated older forms of the judicial system which was based on the caste system. The modern system of justice has the setup of electing *panchs* from each ward to deliver justice to villagers. However, the system is not efficient enough in the sense of providing justice to the complainants and they approach the police or court. This is not to deny the disappearance of a caste-ridden justice system led by landlords of the village (both in *Rajua Bakhri* and *Navadih*) which has done so much harm to lower castes.

Conclusion

The complex nature of Bihar's village society is still under the web of the caste system, which broadly defines its characteristics. Caste holds sway in social, economic and political spheres of village lifeworld. Discrimination and untouchability are exercised towards dalits. There is extreme inequality in land occupancy between upper castes and lower castes. The sheer ineptitude of the state in implementing any type of land reform allowed upper caste to retain higher share of land in the village (*Rajua Bakhri*). There are some exceptions (*Navadih*) though where the abolition of zamindari assisted backward castes to acquire the majority of the lands and lower castes remained landless even in this process. In this case, backward castes imitated the discriminatory practices towards lower castes the established by erstwhile upper castes landlords.

Irrespective of the change in landholding pattern (CLP), lower castes secured more and better space in the democratic process which is mostly due to constitutionally sanctioned rights and reservation (in panchayat, assembly and parliament elections). However, the success story is not linear for cases where CLP took place and where it did not. In the latter scenario (*Rajua Bakhri*), the withdrawal of upper castes from local politics due to migration paved the way for backward castes to run the panchayat government. While in the case of *Navadih* where the *mukhiya* seat is reserved for SC women, dalits gained much political clout comparatively. In assembly and parliament elections, caste-based identity politics does matter and people do vote considering the caste of the candidate or of the head of political parties. It reflects the complex character of caste politics in the state of Bihar where many factors are simultaneously influencing the essence of it.

Caste is present all over India, but it is deeply entrenched in Bihar. It is because of the long existing stagnation in society. There has been no revolution at all. The so-called 'passive revolution' is too passive to change anything in Bihar. Caste is so much deep rooted in Bihar because of the failure of the state in the economic realm. If the economic basis of the society were to be changed, the caste question could have been taken care of. It has to be said the state has failed in Bihar on both agrarian and non-agrarian fronts.

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