

**SECNARIO OF CASTE CONFLICT THROUGH THE ECONOMIC  
DIMENSIONS IN BIHAR TILL 2006**

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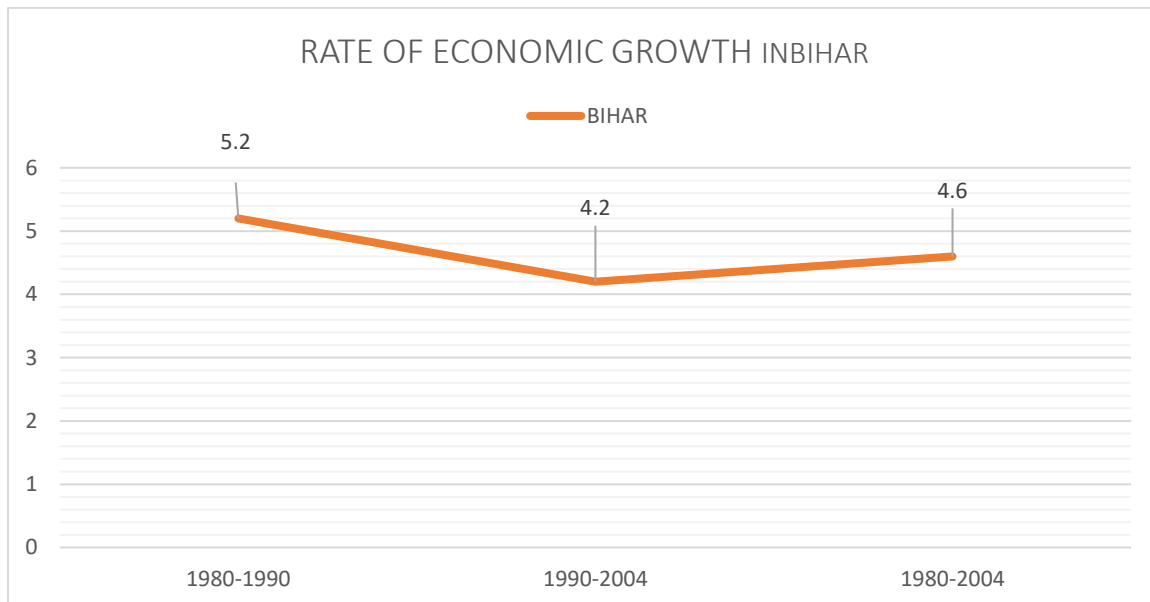
**Abstract :** *his research makes an attempt to examine the economic elements that contribute to caste strife in the region of Bihar. The struggle over the right to and use of finite resources in Bihar is caused by a lopsided land and ownership ratio. Caste can be defined as a system of segregating people within themselves based on culture, religion, lifestyle, and, most importantly, occupation. Castes are defined by the vocations that people have held over the years. Caste conflict is a form of social dimension that is closely linked to issues such as identity, brutality, and social injustice. Despite the fact that oppression is a characteristic of the ruling class, regardless of caste, there are a great number of people who are weak and so oppressed and marginalised by their own caste members and outsiders. However, division of the weak and excluded as an "oppressed class" to combat oppression and injustice regardless of caste identification has rarely been witnessed in Bihar. Economic considerations are also to blame for caste conflict. This may not precisely follow as a rule in the changing socio-political context and rising economic prospects, but it does follow as a trend.*

**Keywords:** *caste conflict, economic elements, occupation, identification.*

**Introduction**

The social components of caste conflict, which are more prevalent and pervasive, include concerns such as caste identity, reservation, caste violence, and social justice, among others. The present section attempts to examine the economic elements that trigger caste strife in the context of Bihar. In the context of social conflict, social class is a far broader term than caste. However, caste and economic status are frequently complementary in nature; in other words, the higher a caste's place in the traditional system, the more likely it is to be economically well off. Similarly, the lower a caste's place in the social order, the greater the likelihood of economic destitution. This may not precisely follow as a rule in the changing socio-political context and rising economic prospects, but it does follow as a trend. Despite the notion that oppression is a trait of the ruling class, regardless of caste, caste and class appear to be inseparable in incidents of oppression and following caste conflict in Bihar. Not only that, but even among the dominant castes, there are many people who are weak and so oppressed and marginalized by members of their own caste and outsiders. However, division of the weak and marginalized as an "oppressed class" to combat oppression and injustice regardless of caste affiliation has rarely

occurred in Bihar. During the last decade of the twentieth century when caste conflict in the rural Bihar was at its peak, its conflict with the so called 'feudal classes was in reality a mindless spate of caste violence aimed against the Upper Castes in general and a specific caste in particular. This strange 'class conflict' didn't even spare the weak and oppressed among the Upper Castes. It's in this context that an attempt has been made to analyze the economic dimension of Bihar's caste conflict.



(Source: Kohli, Atul. "Politics of Economic Growth in India, 1980-2005 Part II: The 1990s and Beyond" ON Feb. 17, 2010)

### **Poor Economic Performance as a Source of Conflict**

In Bihar, the battle over the right to and use of scarce resources may theoretically be described by Marxist dogma of 'class warfare' between the 'haves' and 'have-nots,' but its manifestation has remained mostly caste-based. In this framework, an attempt has been made to examine the economic aspects of Bihar's caste struggle.

To comprehend the economic dimensions that contribute to caste conflict in Bihar, it is necessary to examine the state's macroeconomy and economic performance throughout time. The process of economic reforms initiated in the 1990s increased the nation's GDP from a paltry 5.6% in 1990-91 to its highest ever 9.6% in 2006, allowing many states to achieve exceptional economic growth. Table 8.1 shows the comparative rate of economic growth in some of India's major states over a two-decade period, from 1980 to 2004.

While states like Gujarat, West Bengal, and Haryana experienced substantially higher rates of economic growth between 1990 and 2004, Bihar experienced only 4.2% growth during the same period. Without a doubt, the time saw the breakup of Bihar and the secession of the state's economic backbone in the form of Jharkhand. However, even during the previous decade of

1980-1990, its 5.20% economic development was not comparable to the finest in the country. The investment climate in the states has also deteriorated in Bihar. Several elements inherent in Bihar's approach to managing the political economy have contributed to the slow pace of economic development over time. The World Bank stated in its 2005 assessment that "Bihar has not been proactive in pursuing private investment or articulating a development plan and "vision." As a result, the government lacks an investment council, indicating a lack of concern for encouraging and preserving private investment" [Bihar Towards a Development Strategy, World Bank 2005: 32]. According to the World Bank (2005), approximately 40% of the state's population lives below the poverty line (BPL), and poverty eradication would necessitate a multi-pronged approach. The rural poverty rate is 41.1%, whereas the urban rate is close to 24.7%.

### **Poverty and Caste Identity**

According to research on Bihar's political discourse, issues of state poverty are also tightly linked to individuals' social standing and caste identity. The ruling Upper Castes' longstanding persecution and marginalization of the lower castes, often defined as OBCs and SCs, denied them the right to choose their profession and access to other economic opportunities. Thus, the poor are often defined as low caste (read oppressed and Backward Castes), lowly paid, and uneducated. They live in dilapidated housing with insufficient essential amenities such as safe drinking water, sanitation, and so on. It is worth noting that, despite decades of efforts and welfare policies aimed at the socioeconomic upliftment of the Scheduled Castes, they are still about three times as poor as the Upper Castes and significantly poorer than the OBCs in Bihar. In comparison to the top and lower castes, the SCs' per capita expenditure on household and landholding is quite low.

### **Landholding in Bihar**

The unbalanced link between land and landholding in Bihar has a caste component. Prior to India's independence, upper-caste landlords held the bulk of land, followed by OBCs, while scheduled castes and scheduled tribes were mainly landless. The 'Abolition of Zamindari Act' was altered numerous times before becoming the Agricultural Land (Ceiling and Management) Act, often known as the Land Ceiling Act, in 1955, and was revised again in 1971 and 1973 with no significant positive effect.

According to a Government of Bihar study, the overall geographical area of Bihar is around 93.60 lakh hectares. The net cultivated area is only 56.38 lakh hectares, but the total cultivated area is 79.46 lakh hectares (Bihar Online 2008). According to Government of Bihar data on Sectoral Distribution of GSDP (2003-04), agriculture accounts for 40% of the state economy,

compared to 20% nationally. In Bihar, industry generates 10% of GSDP, compared to 30% nationally. The service industry contributes the remaining 50%, which is the same as the national figure. As farmers or agricultural labourers, the agricultural sector employs over 75% of the state's population. According to the report of the Government of India, Ministry of Agriculture (1995-96), marginal landholdings<sup>23</sup> are significantly bigger than their corresponding national estimates. In Bihar, 80.14% of landholding is marginal, defined as less than 1.00 hectare, compared to 61.58% nationally. The average size of marginal landholding in Bihar is roughly 0.34 hectare, which is smaller than the national average of .04 hectare. The total national landholding size is projected to be 1.41 hectares, while Bihar has only 0.75 hectares. According to the 55th round of the NSSO Survey performed in 1999-2000, 76.6% of all agricultural labourers in the state are fully landless<sup>24</sup>, which is a major source of economic strife in the state. However, due to opposition from important upper caste landholders who also mattered politically at the time.

### **Economic Impoverishment and Class-Caste Conflict**

In many economically backward states, poverty and conflict have largely a two-way relationship wherein poverty is both a cause and consequence of conflict [Mohanty, 2007: 1]. Bihar is trapped into that maze. In the rural Bihar, which has experienced worst kind of caste conflicts the economic issues have always been that of land ownership, wages and economic exploitations of various sorts. In parts of central Bihar, caste conflicts have led to organized massacres of the marginalized peasants and landless laborer's by middle and Upper Caste landed 'armies'. During the Zamindari days before independence the instruments of oppression known as the lathait (lathi wielding henchmen) were sorts of mercenary who were paid by the landlords to execute their orders. In the present-day caste armies and the Marxist-Leninist organizations are completely voluntary and influenced by caste considerations and affiliations. It was observed that the economic aspect of caste conflict has a direct relation with the 'agrarian class structure' which refers to the arrangement of groups (or classes) which are determined by access or denial thereof to land- the primary means of production. The relationship of one class with another is also determined by the differential access to land and other means of production. In case of Bihar this agrarian class relation is embedded in caste, because whether a person controls land or not is conditioned by that person's caste status. Castes as group often enjoy antagonistic relationship over the means of production due to traditional hierarchy and oppression.

### **Agrarian Increments**

Bihar has a long history of occasional peasant uprisings, both violent and nonviolent, against economic exploitation and persecution. It saw the Santhal revolution of 1885-86 and the Munda uprising of 1886-1887 among the tribals. Later, there was unrest in Champaran against the colonial exploitation of native indigo planters, which Gandhiji led in 1917 as the Champaran Satyagraha. During the 1930s, Swami Sahajanand's Kisan Sabha spearheaded the struggle

against the elimination of the exploitative Zamindari system, with two of its most notable movements being the Bakshat movement in 1936-38 and the Rewra agitation in Gaya in 1933 and 1938, among others. During the 1950s and 1960s, Bihar's Communists and Socialists attempted to advance their cause in an organized political manner. At the time, the Communists, whose core ideological postulate is based on Marxian class warfare, did not engage in any physical confrontation. That strategy might not have succeeded at all at the time, because Gandhian nonviolent mass mobilization for social and political change had a profound impact on the societal psyche. However, towards the end of the 1960s, the simmering anger was exploited by the ultra-Leftist CPI (ML), which was created in 1969, and eventually, the Leftist Naxalite gave the 'class struggle' a violent dimension. "The radical assertion of peasants, sharecroppers, and landless agricultural labourers has posed a formidable challenge to the landed gentry's hegemonic position and status-quo ideology in the central plain." The ruling caste(s) issued a battle cry: 'the kisans' lives and property are in danger, and the government has failed miserably in defending them; therefore, the kisans must safeguard their own lives and property. Bihar's historic caste structure, like that of the rest of India, was founded on the Jajmani system. Under this system, the landowners, or Zamindars, who were generally of the upper caste, would be the employer, exploiter, and tormentor of their ryots or service providers who belonged to the lowest castes and economic strata. The conflicts at various times beginning from the decade of 1970s have involved the Upper Castes and the Scheduled Castes and, in some cases, the OBCs too. The dichotomy exists between the Marxists and castiest perspective of looking at the conflict. What is class struggle for one is caste struggle for the other. Conflicts between different caste groups in Bihar's Kargahar, Pathadda, Gopalpur, and Dharampura were mostly economic in character. The labourers, the majority of whom belonged to the lower and downtrodden castes, were asserting legal rights such as fair wages, occupation rights, and liberation from bondage. During the later stages of the Bihar caste struggle in the 1990s, the uprising against upper caste landlord socioeconomic oppression by the organised Naxalite CPI (ML) and Party Unity (PU) cadres killed numerous upper caste men in Jalpura, Senari, and Jehanabad.

The cause of conflict in several examples of caste conflict in Bihar has been either a desire for increased pay or landholding rights, such as in Belchi and Kargha in Patna and Jehanabad districts in 1977. The upper backward castes were responsible for the violence and crimes against the Scheduled Castes. Those slain were from the backward 'Kurmi' caste. In the 1970s, the Kurmi emerged as new landowners and were pitted against landless Dalits. The conflict was primarily economic in nature, as it concerned not just pay but also a plot of land. According to Janaki Paswan, one of the survivors of Belchi, the Kurmi intended to take a piece of Dalit land. The 1977 Belchi massacre triggered a series of violent conflicts that shook Bihar for the next two decades, resulting in severe societal unrest and deaths.

### **Caste-Class Conflict**

The economic war in Bihar is characterized by a caste-class character, with castes united by common interests acting as oppressors or rebels. The coming together initiates the establishment of a social class, either dominating or downtrodden. The class-caste division that arose following the Green Revolution in the 1960s enriched a number of landholding castes, both among the backward and upper castes, while leaving the marginalized castes, namely the Dalits, even poorer. The economic impact of the Green Revolution also significantly boosted the political clout of intermediary landholding castes like as the Kurmi, Koeri, and Yadav, while the two-pronged persecution of the Dalit and Extremely Backward Castes increased in caste conflict. Another critical part of the economic battle is the status quo mindset of the land-owning class, which, despite the fact that the land is generally extremely fertile, does not want to invest in contemporary ways to increase yield. As a result, the demand for increased wages frequently leads to caste conflict and bloodshed. Chaudhary (1988) described numerous sorts of conflict between big landlords and tenant cultivators in Bihar's caste-class structure. ii) landless poor peasants versus landlords and owner-cultivators, and iii) moneylenders who come to own land once mortgaged with them by the former [Chaudhary, 1988: 51]. Landlords and moneylenders constitute a group in the rural power structure whose dominance can be felt both economically and socio-politically. They frequently have direct power over the economic interests of landless, destitute peasants. The oppressed castes argue not only against economic exploitation, but also for a change in the present power system, which is at the foundation of exploitation. Due to a lack of alternative viable economic options in Bihar, an overwhelming percentage of the population still relies on agriculture for a living. The caste-class element, once again, specifies the extent or type of dependence people have on this source of economic survival.

Because caste membership is determined by birth rather than choice, it is all the more difficult to overcome this caste-class barrier in terms of economic opportunity. Thus, a landless caste stays landless and vulnerable to economic exploitation unless it assertively and intentionally chooses not to engage in other professions for economic subsistence. Without a doubt, increased political and social consciousness are changing ground realities in a minor but discernible way, as many castes opt out for new ways of livelihood within and primarily beyond the state.

### **Emergence of the Neo-Landlords**

The character of the war for economic dominance and hegemony is also evolving as a result of new political and economic circumstances. With the elimination of Zamindari, numerous transitional castes, or OBCs, such as the Yadav, Koeri, Kurmi, Kahar, and Kanu, among others, emerged as neo-landholders who, until recently, were the ryots of the major and upper caste landlords. Many of them have supplemented their agricultural income with service, becoming marginal to large landlords by purchasing the holdings of traditional landlords, generally upper-caste men. This was visible in Patna and its surrounding districts, where there were a number

of caste clashes. They quickly rose to political prominence and influence, and their treatment of poor landless labourers became as cruel as that of any upper-caste landlord.

### **The Changed Economic Scenario**

Bihar is a typical instance of prolonged poverty and economic distress causing conflict, which has frequently turned violent and socially destructive. The economic dispute has also resulted in large-scale migration of labour from the state, and the state's economic character has shifted to a "money order economy. The economic dispute stems from centuries of social injustice and discrimination against underprivileged castes. The disadvantaged castes were denied the opportunity to have sources of economic sustenance or income generating. The traditional feudal system, which made feudal land lordship or landholding the exclusive domain of the upper castes, also economically disadvantaged the weaker and oppressed classes. As a result, the distribution of wealth and economic standing became skewed. However, as a result of socio-political interventions in recent years, some castes among the OBCs that have become economically better off have also engaged in comparable economic oppression of the remaining disadvantaged castes. As a result, the causes of economic strife persist. The causes of economic conflict cannot be eradicated by a lack of appropriate economic planning and the resulting continuance of economic backwardness in the state. In the absence of overall economic progress, which allows people to share affluence rather than poverty in equal measure, social justice in Bihar remains elusive and unimportant.

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