

## **REPORT ON THE FIELD SURVEY CONDUCTED IN BIHAR FROM JUNE 6, 2011 TO JUNE 16, 2011**

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As part of the EU programme on conflict and governance, a field survey was conducted in Bihar on the above mentioned dates. Documents and reports were collected from various departments of the government of Bihar from June 6, 2011 to June 11, 2011. The field survey proper began from June 13. The survey covered three districts namely, Saharsa, Supaul and Madhepura. These districts fall in the Kosi belt and were severely affected by the floods in 2008. The survey revolved around the question of labour migration, floods, rehabilitation, conflict, governmental response and land relations. The gram panchayats covered under the survey were Naharwar and Mahishi in Saharsa district, Mehasimar and Kishanpur (South) in Supaul and Patori in Madhepura. It involved extensive discussions with villagers, interview with local leaders and government officials. The main caste group that was interviewed was the Mahadalit communities.

A common trend across the three districts was the skewed land relations. However, there were variations as well which will be discussed later. In Naharwar gram panchayat, in an interview by the local *mukhiya* I was told that the Rajputs have huge landholdings with some individuals owning upto 400 *bighas*. The main crops that are cultivated are *makhana*, maize, pulse (moong), wheat, paddy and *garma*. Landowners either cultivate the land themselves or on the basis of sharecropping or *bataidari* on a 50:50 share with the sharecropper in both costs and return. Most of the *bataidars* I met belonged to the Mahadalit communities. There is another form of tenancy named *Manhunda* according to which the tenant has to give a certain amount of the produce or the cash equivalent at the end of each year. Nearly every household of Mahadalits was landless and migration is most common in these communities with almost every male above 15 years migrating seasonally. The migration is mostly to Punjab and Haryana as agricultural labourer with skilled workers preferring to go to Delhi. Migration in all three districts depends on the agricultural seasons both in Punjab and locally. For example, there is a large scale migration in June which is the beginning of the sowing season in Punjab. The labour that migrates comes back in the *chhath* puja after the harvest. Not everyone who leaves now returns during the *chaath* puja. Many will return just after sowing because their skill lies in that. This same labour will then begin sowing in their villages either on *batai* or as agricultural labour and the cycle moves on. The wages for agricultural labour is paid in kind that amounts to 2-3 kg of grains and breakfast for a whole day work. When asked to compare about the work condition in Punjab and in their own village, the workers were unanimous in saying that the conditions and wages were far better in Punjab. According to them, for sowing 1 *killa* land in Punjab they get around Rs. 2500 and only three workers complete the work. The saving they do in the sowing season amounts to Rs. 20,000.

The picture, however, becomes dismal when indebtedness is taken into account. Almost every Mahadalit household has debts to clear. The interest rate varies from Rs. 5-10 per Rs. 100 every month. A respondent told that he had taken Rs. 10,000 to build a house and he has been paying it for the last six years.

There is an absolute absence of logistics for the migrant labour in the three districts. There is only one railway station at Saharsa that caters to the need of the three districts mentioned above. There are only two trains that the workers generally take. Purabiya Express which goes to Delhi and Jansewa that goes till Amritsar. The workers have to wait for their turn to board the train (the wait can extend to several days). The workers go in batches as it ensures a better bargaining power or they go through labour contractors. According to a labour contractor, workers who go without contractors have to wait for work at what is known as labour chowk. According to him, there are at least 10 labour chowks in Ludhiana where workers wait for work.

There have been several government initiatives like MGNREGS, Indira Awas Yojana and Swarnajayanti Gram Sewa Yojana but all these are mired in corruption at the lowest level. It is given that the *mukhiya* will get a cut of Rs. 5000 under the Indira Awas Yojana. In MGNREGS, the situation is equally bad. The job card and the bank passbook given to the beneficiary is kept by the *mukhiya* who then gives wages for a few days and pockets the rest. The respondents of Chowhatta village under Kishanpur (South) gram panchayat were so fed up with the government schemes and its associated corruption that they said it was better that those schemes were dropped altogether.

One of the most surprising things about these districts was the near absence of conflict in the social structure. The tentative hypothesis that I have formed during the survey is that this absence of conflict is due to the large scale labour migration in the region. The constant cyclical displacement negates the possibility of sharpening of the conflicts that prevails in the region. However, conflicts do come up on the surface in a violent manner as was evident in Madhura village under Mehasimar gram panchayat. On May 16, 2011, villagers from the Yadav community burnt down the dwellings of Mahadalit community. Mahadalits in this village were finding it hard to accommodate themselves in their homes as the families were increasing and built a few houses on the land that was public. According to the Yadavs, the land was earmarked for a girls' school which was donated by their ancestors. It is too early to say that this is a trend but the conflict of these kinds cannot be ruled out in the future. As of now, Mahadalits have been stopped from using the fields to relieve themselves and are not allowed inside the Yadav dominated part of the village.

Another significant finding of the survey revolves around the question of the land reforms and the slogan of 'land to the tiller'. There seems to be an absence of demand of land from the landless as well as marginal landowners. People of both these categories see a large scale

migration for work and their main demand is for work. Also, individuals who have accumulated some wealth as a result of migration such as labour contractors are not buying land in the villages. They put the land at their disposal either on *batai* or a member of the family tills the land. But there is no such trend of concentration of land due to sale and purchase. Government of Bihar has a scheme for Mahadalits through which the latter is provided with 2-3 decimals of land to build houses. The beneficiaries complain that the land is not enough for livelihood but their demand is again for work and not more land for agriculture.

At this moment of relatively fewer data and findings a few observations can be made. One of the approaches to study conflict in the region can be a comparative study of this region with South and Central Bihar where there has been a long history of caste violence and violence perpetrated by caste armies and ultra left wing extremism. The pattern of land relations and migration can be the indicators which can bring to the fore the correlation between land relations, migration and conflict in Bihar. At this stage it will be too premature to see the phenomenon as either the absence of sharpening of class struggle or on the other hand aggravation of caste violence in Central and South Bihar.

The observation made by some officials and political parties that MGNREGS has been successful to an extent in checking migration is completely false for these districts. If there are success stories regarding this statement, those regions need to be studied and the reasons found for the phenomenon.

The formation of mahadalits as a different official category and the politics behind it needs to be seriously examined. When asked whether this category has brought any significant change in their lives, people of these communities answered in the negative. What kind of social engineering the government hopes to achieve by making this category needs to be studied. Pattern of voting by these communities can be one of the variables that has to be studied.