

A journey through Madhubani

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Bihar is considered the quintessential landscape of the lack of development. This is so on all fronts: health, education, employment, agriculture, industry, roads, law and order and so on. On the numbers front Bihar lags behind in all areas, and 37 of its 38 districts were listed among the most backward, to be targeted for various poverty alleviation programmes such as the National Employment Guarantee Act.

While many things can be said in numbers, this is a more impressionistic account of one of its districts, Madhubani, based on a series of visits over the past year*.

Traveling through Madhubani is a visual experience of sharp contrasts. The district borders Nepal. A disconcertingly flat landscape, with not even a hillock to break the view to the horizon, is dominated by vast stretches of paddy fields. These are criss-crossed by rivers and streams that come down from the Tarai foothills of Nepal, and dotted with numerous ponds, giving the impression of a place that almost floats on water.



The rising Kamala



Spreading river waters

Villages are frequent and small, and tightly packed. Most are not connected to the outside world by all weather roads. Very frequently, when traveling in interior areas there is a distinct sense that people from here don't go 'out' very much, nor does anybody who is not from one of these villages come here.

Children are everywhere, riding on the backs of buffaloes, leading goats, carrying water, or just playing. The district added a staggering 26 percent to its population of 1991, increasing from 2.7 million to 3.4 million in 2001, in just 10 years. A highly rural district, with 96 percent living in villages, female literacy in 2001 was just 20 percent.

Bamboo and reed are used to make animal shelters, house boundaries, hay stacks, and even huts. Some are made with tremendous skill, with decorations in the weave. But for the most part, human dwellings are made of bare brick, with no plaster and no decoration, with rice thatch roofs. The lack of a local aesthetic in these more permanent structures is persistent. Every now and then, a house will appear that obviously belonged to a rich family, hinting at a

* This study was sponsored by The Asia Foundation. Data is taken from the Population Census of 1991 and 2001, the Economic Census of 1998 and 2005 and various websites of the Government of India.

zamindari past. Rounded columns for the front portico, courtyard, casement windows, a flat built roof, crenellations, and the whole usually painted blue. But more frequently than not, it is also obvious that these houses have fallen on hard times, a very long time ago. They are falling to bits, with inner walls crumbling, the paint mostly gone, goats and calves sheltering under the portico and the plaster chipped in large chunks. The people living in these houses look as poor as those in the reed huts, and sometimes there are several families housed in these large bungalows. The newer houses seem not to have aspired to the rich aesthetic of the region and are just brick walls built to give very basic shelter. There is a sense of incompleteness.



A reed hay stack with a 'well off' house in the background



Village tea and snack shop

The village tea and snack shop is the usual type seen in the entire region of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa; bamboo poles, with low rice thatch, the blue wooden cupboard with glass panes for storage, benches for the customers and the wood burning open cooking range of baked mud.

This is farming country, with more than 80 percent of the total 1.2 million workers engaged in it in 2001, either as cultivators or as labour. But over the decade of 1991-2001 marginal workers (those who get work for less than 6 months of the year) in agriculture increased by about 300 percent in this area. From 81,000 odd such people in the entire district in 1991, their numbers shot up to nearly 350,000 by 2001. Men were the hardest hit, with marginal men workers increasing from a mere 4300 in 1991 to 130,000 in 2001, by a whopping 3000 percent. Cultivators reduced by 23 percent and overall employment in agriculture stagnated, with a 10 year increase of only 4.5 percent.

Productivity of land and labour is very poor here compared to many other States. The average yield of rice, the dominant crop, is about 1.2 tons per hectare here, while Punjab averages over 4 tons, Andhra Pradesh 3.5 tons and even neighbouring West Bengal about 2.6 tons. There is no extension work of the department of agriculture.

One of the reasons for low productivity is attributed locally to the presence of embankments, built to contain the flood waters of those rivers that tend to have large flood plains. This activity began in the late 1950's and has been going on since then.

They are highly controversial and generate passionate responses from people of the district. While most agree that they sometimes serve the purpose of protecting town and villages from floods, for the most part they seem to create more problems than solve. The most damaging one is that, they are an impediment to flood water draining back into river beds, leading to

large scale water stagnation in agricultural land, making it useless for years. And of course, there are frequent breaches making the whole flood control claim debatable.



Embankment and river in the distance



Paddy fields

One opinion is that they have led to the low productivity of land, since the rich silt that is carried down is now not able to spread on the land. Instead, it gets deposited in the narrow river bed between embankments. River bed levels have risen dramatically as a result over the past 20 years, increasing flooding.

With such low productivity and large down time due to flooding, how many days of work at what wages is possible for those depending on agriculture? The tremendous rise in population has not been matched by increased productivity of land and labour, leading to large scale marginalization and effective unemployment.

Whatever the sense of a hard life with very little to spare one gets of the villages, the endless brilliant green of the paddy fields, the thick shade of the mango groves, the wallowing buffaloes and the ever present sparkle of water all around still lends to the whole an organic togetherness.

This pleasant sense that agrarian landscapes often give in India is rudely broken when one crosses a town. A town in these parts is a place where a large amount of centralized trading goes on. The outskirts are made remarkable by a series of large, stinking piles of garbage, at least some of it rotting in water. Here is squalor not seen in the villages, of humanity contained in unrealistically small spaces, living cheek by jowl with its own refuse. There is no sense of ownership here, of care.

The feeling of everything being makeshift pervades these towns, with not even the mitigating factors of the village: hay stacks and drying crops spread in front yards, the flower bushes and the occasional pumpkin vine on the roof, to signify that life, such as it is, is lived to some degree of completeness.

Madhubani town, the district headquarters, gets anywhere between 4-6 hours of electricity supply per day. While most town roads are nothing more than a patchwork of potholes, sometimes there are concrete roads with sharp deep edges that are terrifying to both man and machine, since they descend abruptly into the drains of the town, rarely concealed, with dark, bubbling, slimy depths that buzz with flies.



Typical streets in small towns

The shops look helter-skelter, packed with unrelated goods piled anyhow. The half built and unfinished brick structures become double-storey here, with clothes lines in the upper windows. The bright shop signs, many of them of obvious digital origin, are provided by companies trying to advertise to a customer base that is largely made up of a floating population; people from nearby villages coming to town to buy various goods once in a while. In such towns the ratio of wholesale and retail traders to households is about 1:7. They cater to large surrounding areas.

Towns have not come into existence because some small or large scale industry has flourished, but have sprung up for the same age old reason: trade routes. It's a convenient location for the surrounding population to access goods.



Rural retail traders

Rural retail trade takes place out of boxes here. Little 4x4x4 feet wooden boxes on bamboo poles, packed with motley goods of daily necessity; gutkha packets, edible oil, matches, biscuits, bidis, bindis, bangles, sweets, and pan making paraphernalia. Net income from such trading is about 35 rupees per day. On the average, each retail trader caters to about 35 households. With large scale marginalization of labour, it can hardly be expected to give more returns.

Even so, the district saw a huge rise in retail trade establishments in the period 1998-2005. The number of such establishments went up by about 58 percent and the number of people working in them by about 68 percent. In the non-farm enterprise sector, this was the biggest employer in absolute numbers in 2005. Again, most of these are household enterprises and their employment capacity is minimal. If government run establishments are set aside, the

entire non-farm enterprise sector in this district can, on the average, employ no more than 2 people per enterprise. There was a large rise in the tea and snack shop establishments also, of about 70%, with a majority being run as household enterprises. One is most likely to be served by a child no older than 10 in most of these shops. The net income from a typical tea shop of this kind is also about 35 rupees per day.

In fact, over the same period, industry declined. Larger units of handlooms, spinning mills and rice mills shut down across the district and this happened most in the more 'urbanised' belt. The industrial estate in Pandaul, built in the late 1980's, is a ghost town. Small manufacturing, mostly clay works (bricks and pots), metal works (village blacksmiths), wood and bamboo works, and repair shops of various kinds saw an increase of about 35 percent. But they remained household enterprises, multiplying to cater to a growing population, yet unable to grow into organized units.

Hiring capacity of the non-farm enterprise sector declined by about 22 percent in this period. While nearly 40 percent of the non-farm enterprise sector workers were hired in 1998, this figure reduced to a mere 30 percent by 2005.

Much of this household trading and manufacturing is a result of distress in the agricultural sector. With nothing to have in terms of regular employment, many people set up small shops in the hope that at least the daily food requirements will be fulfilled. But it is unlikely that this is the case.



Defunct industrial units

In economic terms, this district is stagnating on the cusp. It is neither able to make agriculture keep pace with its population, nor has the wherewithal to move into newer areas of non-farm employment. Poor roads, very little power and an absence of examples of successful entrepreneurship mean that there is also a stagnation of ideas and thought processes.

What does the government do in such a district? Not much, apparently. NREGA has not worked very well here, with very low uptake of funds and very little employment generated. The budget of the Zilla panchayat is minuscule, barely covering salaries. Some NGOs have been working in this area for a while; building awareness of institutional functioning, disaster management and flood mitigation strategies are some of their focus areas.

The Zilla Panchayat president is a woman, elected from an unreserved seat, from an area of the district that borders Nepal. Anarodevi is in her mid-30s, married to a mahant, who runs a rural matt. After a couple of years in office, she has obviously settled into the role with ease.

By no means shy, but neither aggressive, there is a sense of quiet firmness about her dealings with people. Her husband is not to be seen anywhere in her office and does not say anything on our tour of her constituency. She knows that her power is limited by the amount of money she controls. As we pass various villages on the way through her constituency, she keeps a running tab on how much she (the zilla panchayat) has spent where and on what over the past year: roads, hand pumps, houses for the poor, rikshaws for the unemployed. Each tally ends with the lament: I don't have even this much to spend this year. She knows what she is talking about.

The roads we travel over on this day are atrocious. It takes us 2 hours to cover 30 km in a well sprung Tata Safari.



Anarodevi and her husband



Carpet weavers

After a day spent talking about the lack of investment in the district, she has something she wants me to see. It's close to her concerns and she has been trying to find money for it. There are carpet weavers in a village in her area. They were trained in a government run training centre, which has since closed. They got work initially in Bhadohi in UP near Varanasi, as daily wage workers. Then the carpet factory owner decided to outsource work to them if they were willing to set up the basic weaving unit in their village. They promptly agreed. Living at home was so much better. So they have built open sheds of mud, brick and asbestos sheets, set up 6 weaving looms and now employ 25 people. However, the president pointed out that they were only getting daily wage. If only somebody would invest a little money to set up a carpet polishing unit, it would increase employment and wages. But where does one look for an investor? She wants to give some money from some small loan scheme. But knows it is not enough.

I asked the carpet weavers if the owner in Bhadohi will invest. They tell me: we are willing to train a workforce of 200 people in one year, we have the knowledge of each step in this business, but everybody is scared of coming to Bihar. They think they will lose everything.

This is a hard case.