
Woman's position in British India: Rituals, Customs & Education

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Abstract:

The article explores the socio-political conditions in Bihar during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, focusing on the absence of nationalist political activity prior to Mahatma Gandhi's influence. It highlights the dominance of traditional landlords, the limited urban development in places like Patna, and the slow penetration of socio-religious reforms from Bengal. The text underscores the challenging position of women, constrained by the purdah system, discriminatory practices like female infanticide, and the horrifying tradition of sati. The emergence of polygamy in Mithila and the exploitative practice of Bikaua are also discussed. The British administration's initial reluctance to intervene in cultural practices is noted, culminating in Lord Bentinck's regulation against sati in 1829. Overall, the article provides insights into the complex socio-cultural dynamics of Bihar during this period.

Keywords

Bihar, Mahatma Gandhi, Nationalist politics, Traditional landlords, Socio-religious reforms, Brahma Samaj, Purdah system, Female infanticide, Sati, Polygamy, Bikauasystem, Social disparities, Reformist movements, Female education

Prior to the advent of Mahatma Gandhi on the national scene there had been very little nationalist political activity in Bihar and no distinctive "Bihari" style of national politics had emerged whereas in neighboring Bengal and in Maharashtra a creative regional intelligentsia had established a strong sense of regional identity and assumed the leadership of the national movement. This was partly due to the continued social and political dominance in the region of the traditional ruling elite of large landlords. Although they no longer fulfilled their traditional role in Bihar society and had developed into what D.A. Low has called "Husk Culture"¹, they were politically unchallenged until the second decade of the twentieth century. Bihar also lacked the advantages of a city like Calcutta. Patna, the major town and the future capital, hosted in 1901 a mere 1, 34,753 inhabitants.² It had no industries worth recording and offered few opportunities at hand. Bihari youth had not only to travel to Calcutta to further their education but also tended to find jobs and take up residence in that city or Allahabad (the process is still continuing with Delhi replacing the former two).

This was the time when adjoining Bengal was experiencing the impact of first movement for socio-religious reforms initiated in India "the Brahma Samaj", under the impact of western ideas, culture and technology (the Brahma Samaj was almost 50 years old by 1876). Though the objective of the reform movement supported by the new elites, was not to attack the prevalent patriarchal system in any way or do challenge the power and position neither enjoyed by men nor even to make women more equal partners of men in the societal or economic roles outside the family. Its purpose was to improve the position of women within the patriarchal framework and to make them more capable of fulfilling their roles as wives and mothers within the

¹D.A. Low (ed.), *Congress and the 'Raj'*, London, 1977, Introduction, p.12.

² *Census of India, Delhi, 1901, VI, p.31.*

family.³The impact of the Bengal "Renaissance" percolated into Bihar in a slow manner. In the early nineteenth century in India, women were almost excluded from the formal system of education, since there were strong and deep-rooted prejudices against women's education. This was in continuance with the early times when Vedic rituals dominated, and a major part of Bihar being a stronghold of Vedic rituals remained resistant to the idea of formal education of women. The formal system of schooling based on evaluation, age wise distribution into classes and certification, often at a location spatially removed from the houses of the pupils came along with colonial rule. Prior to such institutions, children learnt basic literacy skills; familiarity with the scriptures at Pathshalas and Makhtabs. The British government was the principal agent in disseminating modern education in India. The system of formal education set up by the British colonial power, clearly reflected a bias in favour of the native males. The English were primarily interested in educating men rather than women in India; they generally refrained from assisting the educational activities for girls.⁴ This approach in part was in keeping with the overall attitude towards women, whether of the Indian or the British middle classes, namely that they should be trained not to pursue careers but to be good wives and competent mothers; it was also due to the anxiety of the British not to incur the displeasure of Indians by supporting schools which were suspected of intentions of proselytization.

Position of Women in the Province

The position of women in the mid-nineteenth century was far from enviable. *Purdah* system was highly prevalent and the women folk were debarred from stepping into public without being escorted. When they went out they were carefully screened from the public view.⁵*Purdah* was recognized even by the British courts. Ladies of high rank were examined either on commission or by the Judge himself and their evidence was heard through the double screen of the palanquin.⁶ The degree of seclusion varied from place to place and caste to caste. In the *Rajput* families of Tirhut, *purdah* was so stringently observed that it was considered improper for a young married couple to see or speak to each other in during the day. In sharp contrast, a sizeable number of women populations in Dariapur and the other surrounding areas near the Patna district did not observe the *purdah* so rigorously. The women of *Agrahari* caste openly took part in the business of their husbands'.⁷ It thus appears that *purdah* was not observed among the lower castes. The women of lower castes worked outside the home and added to the family earnings. The *Ahir* women used to sell cowdung cakes, milk, ghee, and other milk products.⁸

Although the women observed the *purdah*, they were not illiterate and ignorant. In a survey conducted by Buchanan, it was found that ten or twelve ladies in the Shahabad district of Bihar could fluently read and write letters and had a good understanding of the accounts. Buchanan also mentions that the ladies of Tilauthu had a fair understanding of the political thoughts of Tulsidas. At the same time, the women of Bihar were equally adept in the domestic affairs and performed all the household chores properly. The girls from a very tender age were initiated into the domestic duties. Along with the elder sisters the younger ones shared equal responsibilities in looking after the infants of the family. A girl after marriage became the mistress of her husband household but generally, she had to live under the strict supervision of

³ **Ibid.**

⁴T.S Rajagopal, *Indian Women in the New age or Women in Young India*, New Delhi, 1936, p.199.

⁵ R.R. Diwakar (ed.) *Bihar through the Ages*, Bombay, 1958, p. 380.

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷ L.S.S. O'Malley, *Monghyr Distt. Gazetteer*, Calcutta, 1928, p. 38.

⁸ L.S.S. O'Malley, *Saran Distt. Gazetteer*, Calcutta, 1930, p. 43.

her mother-in-law. If the latter was ill tempered, the life of the former sometimes became miserable.⁹ Men could perform various religious rites and ceremonies but the women's rights in this context were limited.¹⁰ At Manihari in Bhagalpur, the women were not allowed to pray or make offerings. They were also prevented from being present at religious sacrifices. However, they were allowed to join marriages feasts, funerals ceremonies.¹¹

Customs and Practices

Certain customs and practices associated with the institution of Hindu marriage had degenerated into glaring social evils by the nineteenth century. Some of these had religious sanctions behind them while others were socially accepted by virtue of established customs and conventions.

For practical purposes, when a custom, irrespective of being good or bad was universally adopted by the masses, it left a strong influence on their minds. Thereafter, they adhered to that practice strongly. Moreover, many of the customs and practices, which were henceforth looked down upon were at one time treated equally as symbols of distinction by the socially high and low. These included the customs of *purdah*, polygamy, *sati*, etc. However, the most invidious distinction that lay at the root of many such evils was the discrimination between the male and female children. This distinction was prevalent right from the cradle to the pyre. While the *shastras* prescribed innumerable ceremonies and rituals for the progress and welfare of the male child, few were provided for the female counterparts.

Female infanticide was yet another social evil that was prevalent in one form or the other. During the nineteenth century, female infanticide was a common practice among the war like castes of central and western India. Ironically, the mother of the infant girl was made the executioner. She would either not feed the baby or rub a little opium while feeding. The extreme privacy of the *Zenana* made the detection of such cases of infanticide almost impossible. The contemporary version is to use technology to determine the sex of the foetus, and to abort the child if it is female.

Of the evil practices, prevalent in the nineteenth century Bihar the most horrifying was that of the burning of widows alive on the funeral pyre of their husband. This practice was commonly known as the *sati pratha*. Eventually, this practice proved to be a serious problem for early British rulers to deal with. This was primarily because *sahmaranor* dying with the dead husband had assumed a somewhat semi-religious status. By this 'meritorious' act which was otherwise forced, she could earn for herself a place in heaven. This ceremony was attended by large crowds and it added to the dignity of the deceased husband and his family. However there were several cases reported wherein widows were forcibly thrown into the burning pyres by their relations. In certain cases, the British officials did intervene whenever such inhuman practice came under their notice. But they took such step in their individual capacity, as there were no rule or precedent laid down on this issue. M.H. Brooke, collector of Shahabad who had forcibly prevented a case of *sati*, in a letter dated 28 January 1789 to Lord Cornwallis wrote:

"cases sometimes occur in which a collector, having no specific orders for the guidance of his conduct is necessitated to act from his own sense of what is right. The rites and practices of the Hindu religion should be allowed with the most unqualified tolerance, but a practice at which human nature shudders I cannot permit without particular instruction".¹²

⁹ "Notes on the Ryots of Bihar", *Calcutta Review*, Vol. 69, p. 35.

¹⁰ Diwakar, *op. cit.*, p. 681.

¹¹ Oldham (ed.), *Journal of Bhagalpur*, Calcutta, 1854, pp. 100-101.

¹² K. K. Datta, *Unpublished Correspondence of Judge and Magistrate of Patna*, Patna, 1978, p. 45.

In reply, Brooke was informed that his action must be “confined to dissuasion and must not extend to coercive measures or to any exertion of official powers”¹³.

The custom of widow-burning was rare in the Mithila region of Bihar. During his survey of the district of Purnea, Buchanan did not come across any person who had ever seen such a sacrifice.¹⁴ But the practice was very much in vogue in the Bhojpur region. Buchanan found it very common in Shahabad district, especially in Belautiparagana. In almost every village he saw two or three truncated cones of clay or small temples showing that the sacrifices had been performed there.¹⁵ They were kept in good repair and women of all ranks made offerings at those places. Although the custom was mostly prevalent among the higher castes, there were instances noted by Buchanan in which persons of lower castes had also performed *sati*. He heard about a *Mushar* woman who was reported to have performed this sacrifice. Likewise, the fact that the widow of a weaver had emulated this spirit of *sati* by burying herself alive shows the high esteem in which the rite was held by the common folk as well. *Sati* was prevalent in some parts of Bhagalpur division also, especially among people from the Bhojpur region settled in Monghyr.¹⁶ In Monghyr town itself on the average one case was annually reported while the average for the rest part of the district was two. In Shahabad district it exceeded twenty.¹⁷

In other parts of the country, particularly in Bengal, the situation was all the more deplorable. William Carey, the Serampore missionary, took up the issue with the government by placing the figure of *sati*, in the area thirty miles around Calcutta, at 430 in 1803 alone.¹⁸ The government was obliged to take the advice of the leading Pandits including Ghanshyam Sharma who opined that *sati* was recognized and encouraged by the *shastras*.¹⁹ For some years therefore, efforts on the part of government were directed towards regulating the *sati* cases. Accordingly, the practice was to be allowed in those cases where it was countenanced by their religion and to prevent others where it was prohibited. *Sati* was to be performed now in the presence of a police officer. This naturally came to be interpreted as according official sanction to the practice. And the result was that the number of *sati* cases shot up. As against 378 cases officially reported from Bengal in 1815, the number rose to 839 in 1818. The gravity of the situation drew the serious attention of some European officials and public-spirited Indians, particularly Raja Ram Mohan Roy who even went to the burning ghats in order to prevent *sati* cases by persuasion. In Bihar, between 1815 and 1817, there were as many as 98 cases of *sati* in the Patna division alone.²⁰ It was to ascertain “whether the interference of the police has by legalizing the practice been a cause of the increased number of *satees* or has it acted to the same effect in any other manner.”²¹ He was also required to give his opinion on the likely effect of a law abolishing the practice of *sati*. Finally, Lord Bentinck issued Regulation XVII in December 1829 “declaring the practice of *sati* or of burning alive the widows of Hindoos illegal and punishable by the criminal courts.” As expected, there was a strong opposition to the Regulation by the orthodox section of the people in Bengal and Bihar. Deputations, for and against the governmental measures, waited on the Governor-General. An appeal was made to the Privy Council also which was, however, dismissed. But the reverential hold of the practice

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴F. Buchanan, *op.cit.* p. 262.

¹⁵F. Buchanan, *An Account of the District of Shahabad*, p. 212-213.

¹⁶F. Buchanan, *ibid.* p. 269.

¹⁷F. Buchanan, *ibid.* p. 213.

¹⁸Thompson and Garrett, *Rise and Fulfillment of British Rule in India*, Allahabad, 1958, p. 327.

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰R.R. Diwakar(ed), *Bihar through the Ages*, Bombay, 1959, p. 682.

²¹K.K Datta, *op. cit* pp. 417-18.

on the popular mind lingered and some instances of *sati* were reported occasionally from Bihar even in later years.²²

But the number of *sati*, however big, just touched the fringe of the vast multitude of widows in the province, which was constantly swelled by staggering additions due to culpable practices like polygamy and child marriage. Polygamy was confined to the Mithila region. Almost all the Khandavala rajas of the erstwhile Darbhanga Raj had more than one wife. In other parts of Bihar a man very seldom took a second wife unless his first wife had lived long without bearing any child. Polygamy in Mithila like *kulinism* in Bengal differed from the type of polygamy which was ordinarily prevalent among the richer sections of the society-the king and the nobles. Here pedigree, and not wealth, was the basis of the system. Ward's surprise was but natural when he made the following observation on the prevailing *Kulinism* in Bengal, "Vallal's creation of the order of Merit ended in a state of monstrous polygamy, which had no parallel in the history of human depravity. Among the Turks seraglios were confined to men of wealth. But in Bengal a Hindu *Brahmin*, possessing only a shred of cloth and *paita* (sacred thread) kept more than a hundred mistresses."²³ Referring to the practice prevailing in Mithila, Buchanan likewise stated in his report on Purnea district that "a man of high rank is often hired when toothless or even moribund, to marry a low child, who is afterwards left a widow, incapable of marriage, for the sake of raising her father's family."²⁴ This practice, which owed its origin to the *Panji* system of Hari Singh Deva, came to be known as *bikaua*, because under the system a section of *Brahmans* of high order contracted marriage with women from families of low status only for material gain. To maintain their wives was not their responsibility. Money and presents on every visit to their father-in-law's house were their sole concern, and they were very exacting in the realization of the same. The father of the girl had not only to support his married daughter but also to suffer all sorts of indignities at the hands of his son-in-law, just for the reflected honour of having a relation of high order. Munshi Raghunandan Lal, a *Maithili* dramatist and poet, pitied the fate of those who went in for *Bikaua* son-in-law: *Je Jan Kayal Kamai Bikaua, Tanik man Dhan Nash: Durbachanahi Adar ab Tanika, Sab Khan chita Main Tras*. Translated, it means: He who has a *bikaua* son-in-law, his prestige and wealth are bound to suffer, he is always greeted with abusive language (by him) and always remains under a constant fear).²⁵

Raja Madhav Singh (1775-1807) of Darbhanga was perhaps the earliest person to draw the attention of authorities towards this heinous practice. In a petition to the judge of Tirhut he stated that "the *Brahmans* individually marry some fifty or sixty ladies and give them up at their respective native places. On account of excess in marriage they (*Brahmans*) cannot manage for their maintenance. The ladies concerned, due to negligence and carelessness of their husbands, suffer a great deal of trouble and distress in their subsistence. Although they (ladies), in view of maintaining their prestige and honour, do not file their grievances in *Adalat* for redressal, it is proper in every respect for the court to inflict condign penalty or punishment on them."²⁶

The government responded favourably and the Judge of *Dewani Adalat*, Tirhut, John Niff, issued a Notice dated 26 August 1795, prohibiting all the *Brahmans* and

²² Two cases were reported from the Gaya District in 1901 and 1903. In 1929 occurred the sensational Barh Sati case and in 1930 a widow attempted to immolate her in Hazaribagh district, cf. K.K. Datta, *op.cit.* p. 456.

²³ J.S. Jha, (ed), *K.P. Jayaswal Memorial Volume*, Patna, 1981, p. 53.

²⁴ F. Buchanan, *op.cit.* p. 60.

²⁵ *Mithilank, Mitila Mihir* (Margshirsh, V.S. 1992) p. 60.

²⁶ J.S. Jha, *K.P. Jayaswal Memorial Volume*, Patna, 1981, p. 55.

Panjikars (Registrar of Marriages) of *Sarkar* Tirhut from marrying more than four ladies. But this did not satisfy a section of the *Brahmans* who wanted to have more than four wives. Some of them, namely Kirtinath Jha and Dharmadhar Mishra of Koilakh and Chandradeva Jha of Singion defied the order. Raja Madhav Singh filed a second petition to the court and a fresh but stricter, order was issued on 9 July 1798, to punish the delinquents.²⁷ The measure no doubt failed to meet the enormity of the situation but all credit goes to Raja Madhav Singh for his noble pioneering efforts to eradicate this evil. Raja Ram Mohan Roy acknowledged his services when he wrote: "the horror of this practice (polygamy) is so painful to the natural feelings of men that even Madhav Singh, the late Raja of Tirhoot (though a *Brahman* himself), through compassion, took upon himself (I am told) within the last half century, to limit *Brahmans* of his estate to four wives only".²⁸

Decades wore on, but the virulence of polygamy did not show any sign of abatement. In the proceedings of a meeting held at Madhubani on 15 December 1878, G.A. Grierson has recorded the following about the prevalence of polygamy among the *Maithil Brahmans*: "Among *Maithilkulin Brahmans*, those who go by the name of *bikauaa* marry 25 or 30 wives of a low family, simply as a monetary speculation. They bring the first wife home and leave the others at their own houses. Once a year or when convenient they go on tour to their fathers in laws houses and demand money from their wives or their (wives) parents, which they consider a laudable means of livelihood". The most serious aspect of the system was that by the death of one *bikauaa* a large number of women became widows. An enquiry conducted by the Madhubani Sub-Anjuman in 1876 revealed that by the death of only 54 *bikauaas* as many as 665 women, some of tender age and others in the prime of life, had become widows. Since remarriage was prohibited, they passed their lives "cursing their husbands as well as their living parents." The case of two *bikauaas* has been specially mentioned in the proceedings – one of village Koilakh, aged about 50 years, who had married 35 wives, the other of Ramnagar, aged about 40 years, who had married 14 wives.

The meeting, mentioned above had been sponsored by the Madhubani Sub-Anjuman, a branch of the Darbhanga Sadar Anjuman – i- Hind, established in the wake of the movement started by Munshi Pyarelal of Shahabad district, for the curtailment of extravagant expenses in marriage. Regarding Pyarelal and his movement, a detailed account would follow under the appropriate sub-head. Rules were framed with the assistance of Maharaj Kumar Gopeshwar Singh, the two uncles of Maharaja Lakshmishwar Singh, with a view to putting a stop to the evil of polygamy by taking solemn promises from the parties concerned. In the year 1876, Munshi Pyarelal was himself present at the famous *Saurath Sabha* of *Maithil Brahmans*, and in 1877 the S.D.P., Madhubani, and Maharaja Lakshmishwar Singh personally supervised the working of both the *sabhas* held at Saurath in *Asad* and *Aghan*. According to the return (*Siddhant Patrika*) filed by the *Panjikars* (registrar of marriages) 2289 marriages had been celebrated in accordance with the rules framed by the committee.²⁹ Besides the *Siddhant Patrikas*, marriage licenses had been issued by the Anjumans of Darbhanga and Madhubani. 107 marriages had been celebrated against the rules, out of which the cases of 76 persons who had partially infringed the rules were disposed of by inflicting upon them the social fines as agreed to previously by the *Panchayats* in accordance with the seriousness or otherwise of their fault, and 26 cases were referred to the Maharaja of Darbhanga, as chairman of the Sadar Anjuman, for disposal. Decision in the remaining cases of five persons, who still defied the rules, was left for the consideration of Sadar Anjuman. Gradually, however, the movement lost

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 56.

²⁸ Suamendranath Tagore, *Select works of Raja Ram Mohan Roy*, New Delhi, 1973, p. 171.

²⁹ J.S.Jha, *Biography of Maharaja Lakshmishwar Singh*, Patna, 1972, p. 139.

its momentum, partly because the leaders of the movement in Mithila were themselves not above board. During the period, as in other matters, people looked to the local rajas and zamindars for the necessary lead. In this case the rulers of Darbhanga Raj, who were themselves *Brahmans* of high order, had to play a vital role. But they seem to have been as much a prisoner of the social system as other sections of the society. Raja Pratap Singh (1760-1775) had left behind three widows, having married the youngest only three months before his death, while he was suffering from a protracted illness. Even Maharaja Lakshmishwar Singh, the most enlightened of the Khandavala rulers of Mithila did not rise to the expectation in the matter. He was a patron of Munshi Pyrelal's Marriage Reforms movement and delivered speeches under the auspices of the Sadar Anjuman in 1878, but only a year before he had married two wives, after the death of his first wife. The irony is that the third marriage was performed owing to the fact that his second wife was simply a child then. No wonder that in the proceedings prepared by Grierson referred to above, we read the following: "Besides the proceedings of the committee, the speech delivered by His Highness the Maharaja of Darbhanga may safely be considered as fulfilling the object of the committee, if he himself acts up to it as promised by him."

Polygamy continued even in later years, but with the spread of English education in Mithila, *bikaua* marriage became extinct as in Bengal. But it brought in its chain another evil, the dowry, which was till then nonexistent among the *Maithil Brahman*s.³⁰

Extravagant Expenses in Marriage

Besides sati and polygamy, there were a number of other evils connected with Hindu marriage in Bihar, such as extravagant expenses in marriages, child marriages, unequal marriages, that is, the practice of marrying girls of tender age to an old, infirm and useless man owing to the poverty of the bride's parents, etc. Reporting on the ruinous effect of extravagant Hindu marriages, Harbans Sahay, a pleader and distinguished social worker of Arrah, observed:

The extravagant Hindu marriage expenditure is a cursed evil of the day. It is the fertile source of vices of the worst type. It has brought about misery and ruin of many families and has caused hereditary estates, the sole means of family support, to be sold by private sale and in execution of decrees. It has not infrequently sent many persons to civil and criminal jail and branded many a respectable family with disgrace and infamy.³¹

Extravagance in marriages was then found in different forms according to the customs and manners of the people of the different parts of the province. Heavy expenditure was generally incurred on extravagance of show such as music, processions, fire work, feasting and charity. Heavy sums of money had to be paid as consideration to the guardians of the bridegroom. But in the case of the uneducated and indigent high caste people it was just the opposite. The greed of the girls' father had to be satisfied. The evil had spread to lower castes of artisans, and also in classes amongst whom it never existed before. Aly Hoseyn, the Zamindar of Koyatur (Shahabad) complained to Buchanan about the injurious influence of the Hindu customs on Mohammedans also.³² He told him that unless a man wished to appear mean in the eyes of all Hindu neighbors it could not be avoided. By the eighties of the nineteenth century the problem had become so serious that the *Al Punch* of Patna published a news item in the form of conversation between a husband and wife about the marriage of their five daughters. The husband says that unless a girl's parents had the capacity to give the Pharaoh's estate to the bridegroom as consideration money and *Karun's* treasure to their daughter in

³⁰ *Mithila Bharati*, Vol. 1, Parts 1-3, pp. 25-27.

³¹ J.S. Jha., *Report of the Regional Records Survey Committee, Bihar (1965-76)*, Patna, 1976, p. 65.

³² Buchanan, F., *Shahabad Report*, New Delhi, 1934, p. 158.

dowry, her marriage was impossible.³³ At the time of Buchanan's visit to Dumraon in course of his survey work, he saw the grand preparations being made for marriage of the Raja's daughter, which was roughly estimated to cost him Rs. 20,000, although his estate was encumbered.³⁴ Babu Kunwar Singh of Jagdishpur who was deeply involved in debt had spent a sum of Rs. 10,300 for purchase of articles for the marriage of a granddaughter.³⁵ And regarding the marriage of his grandson we have the following account: "Kunwar Singh performed the marriage ceremony of his grandson Birbhanjan Singh with great pomp and éclat. He was married in the Gidhaur Raj family (Monghyr district). The *Barat* procession, which included the Rajas of Tikari and Deo, who came up to Patna, was like a self-contained caravan having its own bazaar, where everything could be purchased. Ten *Hakims* (Yunani physicians) and twenty-five *Vaidyas* (Ayurvedic physicians) accompanied the *barat* to look after cases of illness on the way. The journey to and from Gidhaur took ten days each way and the *barat* halted for five days. Raja Jai Mangal Singh of Gidhaur, the host, entertained the *barat* on a lavish scale. On return from Gidhaur, Kunwar Singh gave one party at Arrah and another at Patna to the English officials."³⁶

Tilak and *Jahez* were always very heavy amongst the *Babhans* and *Rajputs*, as a class but they were otherwise thrifty. But for the *Kayasthas* they proved to be harder and more ruinous as the mode of their living was somewhat ostentitious. Among the other castes *tilak* and *Jahez* were ordinarily not heavy, but there was a tendency to rise, as these classes always went by the examples of the classes above them.³⁷

Moved by the prevailing ruinous marriage practices among his caste Munshi Pyarelal of village Gopalpur in the Sasaram subdivision of (now) Rohtas district started a movement to fight this social evil. He resigned his job in the government of North West Province in the sixties of the nineteenth century and threw himself heart and soul into the marriage reform movement. He received much encouragement from the Lieutenant Governor of N.W.F.P., Sir William Muir and also from some leading Indians of intelligence and enlightenment. To propagate his new ideas, he founded an organization called *Sadar Anjuman -I-Hind* with branches in most of the districts. Elaborate rules were laid down for the observance of the members, which not only restricted the amount of *Tilak* (to the maximum of Rs. 125) but also regulated every item of expenditure connected with celebration of marriage with a view to effecting economy. Encouraged by the initial success of the movement he extended his activities first to his home district and then to the entire province of Bihar, Harbans Sahay, a pleader of Arrah, was one of the first public men in Bihar to lend his full and unstinted support to the movement. The first Anjuman in Bihar was set up at Arrah in 1868. With official encouragement at all levels, and support of the leading Zamindars like Durmraon, Darbhanga and Hathwa, the entire province was covered with a network of Anjumans within a few years. The movement which had started with Kayasthas soon spread to other castes also. Munshi Pyarelal thus observed in a letter from Muzaffarpur, dated 8 May 1873, to S.C. Bayley, Commissioner of the Patna Division and also the President of Sadar Anjuman - I - Hind:

³³ *Al Punch*, 18 April, 1892, Patna, p.6.

³⁴ F. Buchanan., *Shahabad Report*, op.cit. p. 159.

³⁵ K.K. Datta., *Biography of Kunwar Singh and Amar Singh*, Patna, 1974, p. 37

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 39.

³⁷ General-Misc. 'A' December 1896, Nos. 55-56, cf. K.K. Datta, *History of the Freedom Movement in Bihar, Patna, 1967*, p.164.

It is also a matter of great satisfaction that Bhoohar Brahmans who are the same caste with the Maharaja of Benaras have a desire to join the movement and Baboo SheoPurshan Singh, a great Zamindar of the district has come forward to raise the point; so in Tirhoot each Brahmans intend to take part in this laudable society³⁸.

Grierson also refers to the rules framed for regulating the marriages of the following castes with the approval of their headmen or *Panjiar* of those classes who put their signatures on the draft (rules) by way of attestation – (1) *Brahman* (2) *Kayastha* (3) *Khatri* (4) *Bhumihar* (5) *Sakaldipi Brahman* (6) *Karna Kayastha Mithila* (7) *Kayastha Baniyan* (8) *Runiyar* (9) *Sonar of Ayodhya* (10) *Kanaujia Halwai* (11) *Madhesia Halwai* (12) *Darzi Musalman* and (23) *Chamar*. The *Chasma – I – Ilm*³⁹ (of Bankipore) published in its issue of 16 November 1873, an *Ikrarnamah*, signed by three Maharajas and fifteen other persons of note including Siristadar Munshi Awadh Chand Misra of Hathwa as Secretary and members binding themselves to curtail the ruinous expenses incurred on marriages. They called upon all members of the assembly and others to join the movement and held threat “to excommunicate and place them within the eight prohibited classes of outcastes.”

Dumraon was a great stronghold of the movement. There the Maharaja, Maheshwar Bux Singh and his son Kunwar Radha Prasad Singh were great patrons and supported the movement financially and otherwise also. They addressed a number of meetings organized for the purpose, and the estate brought out a pamphlet, *Jaga Upakarak* to educate the general public about the social movement that had been set on foot. Kunwar Rahda Prasad Singh also promised to set apart a sum of Rs. 1000/- annually to defray the marriage expenses of his poor caste men. Dewan Ram Kumar Singh of Surajpura was also a strong pillar of the movement. The result was that marriages, without any exception, began to be celebrated according to the new rules.

The movement thus showed great prospects of being crowned with success. But strangely enough at Patna the movement met its failure. Some of the leaders there while seemingly professing to be friendly (owing to official support to the movement) to Munshi Pyarelal plotted secretly to thwart his measures and to arrest the progress of the movement. Some designing among them resorted to false and malicious propaganda against the Munshi to prejudice the minds of the people. Many influential people did not take kindly to the leadership of the Munshi and viewed his proceedings with suspicion and dislike. It was too much of an affront for the *reis* of Patna to be led by a commoner like Munshi Pyarelal. They considered the rules which attempted to regulate and limit even the number of dishes at the marriage dinners “as far too meddlesome”. Meanwhile the Munshi himself, quite unwittingly, committed the folly of attending a large marriage party in the house of a Kayastha in Patna, where besides other infringement of the rules a two-day *nautch* had been arranged. This event annoyed Princep, District Judge of Patna and President of the Sadar Anjuman, so much that he severed his connections with the Marriage Committee.⁴⁰

Munshi Pyarelal's failure at Patna, the capital of the province, had a very disastrous effect upon the working of the Anjumans in other districts also. Soon reports began to pour in that people, in contravention of the rules and agreements signed by them, had begun to receive and accept privately and secretly larger amounts in *Tilak* and *Jahez* than the authorized sum, and when summoned before the *Panchayat* they falsely but boldly denied the charges against them. Moreover, imposition of social penalties for lapses on the parties concerned created

³⁸ K.K. Datta, *Ibid*.

³⁹ *Chasma-i-Ilm*'s first number appeared early in January, 1896, J.S.Jha, *Education in Bihar*, P.U., 1978, p.45.

⁴⁰ J.S. Jha, *Report R.R.S.C., Bihar, Patna*, 1976, p. 67.

schisms in many cases. Thus, the zealous reformer Munshi Pyarelal died a disillusioned man, and with his exit the movement collapsed. S.C. Bayley, the commissioner of Patna Division, reported to the Government of Bengal on the difficulties faced by government officials in propping up the movement. He aptly remarked that "they can only give assistance to such a movement, they cannot give it life."⁴¹

A fresh move for curtailment of marriage expenses was made in March 1895 by Rasik Lal Roy of Bhagalpur. Perhaps under the spell of the new spirit generated by the Age of Consent Act (1891), he made a representation to the government for some suitable legislation on the subject. The government on its part sought suggestions from different individuals and associations including the Bhagalpur National Mohammedan Association. It may be noted here that the National Mohammedan Association of Calcutta, under the leadership of Syed Amir Hussain Khan, had already started an agitation for reduction of extravagant marriage expenditure which in its opinion, was not only illegal but also a sin.⁴² There was a general unanimity of opinion as to the crippling effect of the evil on the society, but most of them doubted the efficacy, and even advisability, of government interference by way of legislation. Raja Rameshwar Singh of Darbhanga, who had also been an active supporter of the cause, also sidelined himself, which among other things, throws some additional light on the causes of the failure of the movement in Bihar. "A movement was started", wrote the Raja, "by Munshi Pyarelal some years ago under semiofficial auspices in this district as well as in others. I was Honorary-Secretary of the society in this district, and was thus able to know what was taking place. As soon as the people came to know that the agents of the society were attempting to scrutinize the expenditure, money commenced to change hands secretly, the society's agents being assured that no money had been paid – in lower Bengal and in the *Kayastha* and some other communities in Bihar, I am told that bridegrooms command large prices. Education, birth and wealth must naturally command a certain (premium?) in the marriage market, and it cannot be expected that persons who possess any or all these advantages will not wish to profit by them"⁴³. It still creates nuances in the present society.⁴⁴

Child Marriage

Another issue which generated considerable controversy during the period was child marriage. The practice of child marriage was almost universal among the Hindus all over Bihar. According to Buchanan it was an established practice for Brahman and other high caste girls to be married at the age of 8 or 10.⁴⁵ Among the lower castes their age was still lower. The practice was attributed to Manu's laws on Hindu marriage which lay down "that if a girl before her marriage has her first menses her parents and brothers are doomed to go to hell after their death". The result was that Hindu parents were anxious to marry their daughters before they reached the age of puberty. Generally, a girl in India attains the age of puberty after she passes her 12th year and before she reaches her 14th. Since there is no knowing when such an event will occur, a Hindu father was obliged to marry his daughter at or before the age of twelve. To avert bad consequences of infant marriages the society, as in Mithila, found a way out by

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Gen-Misc. 'A' December 1895, Nos. 55-56, cf. J.S.Jha, *op.cit.* p.45.

⁴³ Times of India date 5 August 1894, Delhi, p.6.

⁴⁴ Notwithstanding these early and various other efforts, the evils of *Tilak* and *Dahej* and other items of extravagant marriage expenses still continue to plague the Hindu society. The incidences of dowry deaths are, of late, on the increase. Dowry has become the most burning problem these days, defying both anti-dowry laws and traditional customs. According to the traditional custom, money and material goods gifted to the bride served in a way to compensate her for not being eligible to inherit the family property. But the anti-dowry and Hindu succession laws have made the system redundant.

⁴⁵ F Buchanan, *Purnea Report*, *op.cit.* p. 167.

establishing the practice of *dwiragman*, according to which a married girl does not go to her husband's place immediately after the performance of the marriage ceremony. The *dwiragman* (loosely called second marriage) may take place after one, three or five years. Thus, the practice met both religious and social requirements, as well as the psychological one. However, there is no denying the fact that the rigorous practice of child marriage brought about many evils, the most common was great disparity in the age of the wife and husband because no such limit had been fixed regarding the age and number of a male's marriage. It was a popular theme in the folklore of the period. Munshi Pyarelal's movement had no doubt identified this evil also, but the emphasis was on the eradication of extravagant expenses on marriage. In 1884, B.M. Malabari, a Parsi leader, presented his two "notes on Infant Marriage and Enforced widowhood in India" to the government of Lord Ripon. To ascertain public opinion on the question the papers were sent to the several district officers for report after consulting local Indians of intelligence and position. The newspapers also joined the issue, according to the *Bihar Bandhu* (5 Sept., 1884) Malabari and Dr. Rajendra Lal Mitra were interlocked in a serious debate for a long time. The paper was of the view that there might be differences of opinion regarding widow remarriage, but abolition of child marriage was neither against religion nor social ethics. But to seek government assistance (interference) to prevent infant marriage or other social evils would be a mistake. The solution of the problem lay with the educated members of every community and they should come forward and give the necessary lead in the matter. *The Indian Chronicle* (Bankipore, 22 Sept 1884) was more critical in its analysis of Malabari's suggestion for putting down infant marriages. In its opinion the suggestion that "the Education authorities might rule that due notice given, no married student shall be eligible to go up for university examinations, say five years hence, would positively ruin the prospect to higher education in Bihar at least, where instead of five years notice, thirty to forty years notice would be necessary. In the schools of Bihar at least half of the students in the lowest forms then were already married, and it would be downright injustice to put Malabari's suggestions into practice. Instead of making marriage a disqualification, the government, by offering prizes, scholarships, medals and certificate of merit to unmarried students who passed the University examinations, might make it attractive to students not to marry before the proper age. It welcomed the suggestion that "no educated man should marry a girl too much under his age" and hoped "now that a discussion of the subject has been started in right earnest, success is only a question of time". And in view of the great influence wielded by the Maharaja of Darbhanga and the Maharaja of Benaras in social and religious matters, the support of even one of them, would assure the success of Malabari's movement.

The official view too was in favour of direct interference on the part of Government in social matters. Malabari's suggestions did not carry conviction with most of the district officials. As Nolon, the Collector of Shahabad, observed: "If we exclude Hindus from the professions and the public services for marrying too soon, we may also exclude Europeans for not marrying at all, Mohammedans for marrying too often, Buddhists for marrying without exclusive failing possession and men of all creeds for marrying rashly, and failing to keep their matrimonial engagement."⁴⁶ Endorsing the view F. M. Halliday, Commissioner of Patna Division, wrote to the higher authorities "that the question is not one for government interference. Reform must come from within and not from external pressures."⁴⁷ Major Garbyett, Deputy Commissioner, Singhbhum, felt that the ideas embodied in Malabari's note were the ideas of all thinking men and caste prejudices and superstitions were so strong that

⁴⁶ 'General Deptt. No. 227 G, 15 April, 1885, from F.M. Halliday, Commissioner, Patna, to Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal', cf. K.K Datta, *op.cit.* p 39.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*

government could do little in the matter. He feared that government interference would only arouse suspicion and opposition.⁴⁸ J.F.K. Hewitt, Commissioner of Chotanagpur Division, held identical views in the matter, "All that government could or should do", he wrote, "would be to promote as far as indirect official influence can do, the formation and maintenance of associations do them in the way that seems let these associations do them in the way that seems best adopted to secure the changes desired, without trying to impress forcibly these changes on those who are unwilling to accept them."⁴⁹ G.N. Barlow, the Commissioner of Bhagalpur division found Hindu opinion in favour of abolishing child marriage, but it was opposed to widow-remarriage.⁵⁰ Regarding the government action in the matter there was thus a consensus of official opinion that active interference should follow and not precede any such movement.

There was a section of educated Indians who considered mere reform of some social customs as a sheer waste of time and energy so long as Indians were kept out of all political power.⁵¹ But the occurrence of an unfortunate event soon forced the government to shake of its hesitation in interfering with social with social matters. In July 1890 Phoolmani Devi, a ten-year-old wife in Bengal succumbed to premature consummation, and the court under the existing laws found itself if unable to deal with the case. Hence the Age of Consent Bill was introduced in the Supreme Legislative Council. Its chief proposals were that intercourse with wife under 12 years of age should be made penal and in cases of infant marriage, the bride should be entitled to repudiate the marriage, if she so desired on attaining majority.

The Bill provoked strong opposition both in the Council and outside. The *Al-Punch* of 26 January 1891 wrote that the Bengalees were opposed to the government's move – processions and meetings had been organized against it. Placards were displayed with superscriptions "*Dohai Maharani ke consent Bill MazhabkeKhilafhai*" in Bengalee on one side and in English on the other. The paper found fault with the Bengalese who boast of their reforming zeal. They have allowed freedom to their women. They want them to move side by side with them and keep pace with males. "Then why this opposition now? Alright, government would not interfere. But why don't you affect the reform yourself. This has certainly exposed the hollowness of the Bengalee's claims." Again, in its issue of 16 March 1891, it derisively referred to the manners of Bengalese and their fondness for '*Chingudia*' fish. "As for Bihar and Western provinces" the paper wrote, "this law has always been treated as useless and will be treated as such in future also. There this crime is not allowed to grow". What it feared was the uncertain mode of investigation of a case under the proposed law by the Court; whether the court would satisfy itself by examining the witnesses or take help of the police in the matter or force the child wife to undergo a clinical test. Therein lay, in its opinion, the potential mischief.

While Tilak and many Congress leaders were opposed to the Age of Consent Bill, it had the support of men like the Maharaja of Darbhanga, Durga Charan Law, P.C. Mazumdar and Dr. Rash Behari Ghosh. The Bill was passed, but the agitation against it continued for some time. The *Al Punch* regretted that it had been passed without due safeguards against illegal harassments:

Instead", the paper bemoaned, "the Magistrate has been empowered to institute the case. The police Inspector will have right to interfere, that is to investigate, violating the time-honored *purdah*. What difference will it make

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ 'General Deptt. No. 384 CT 9, January 1885, from Commissioner of Bhagalpur to Secretary to the Govt. of Bengal', cf. K.K Datta, *op.cit.* p.94.

⁵¹ B.B. Mazumdar, 'Congress and Congressmen in Pre-Gandhian Era', cf. K.K. Datta, *op.cit.* p.96.

then whether it is a false case or true? The prestige of the family will be gone for ever.⁵²

During the period under review the prohibition to widow remarriage was confined to upper castes only. Buchanan found that among the Hindus more than three fourths of the young widows could remarry. But the widows of upper castes had to lead a life of austerity. Elaborate rules and precepts had been laid down by the *shastras* as to how a widow should spend her life to earn salvation. It was in short, a life of total abstinence. She could not wear good clothes or ornaments and could not attend auspicious ceremonies, such as weddings. But she was encouraged to perform charitable and welfare works. We have the examples of widows who excavated tanks, dug wells, built roads and temples etc., not to speak of those like Ahalya Bai and other widows of wealth who are still remembered with reverence for their manifold charitable works. In Bihar itself the *Bihar Bandhu* lauded the charitable work of Maharani Rajroop Kuwari of Tikari and gave her the appellation of Maharani Swarnamayi of Bihar. Bibi Sogra, wife of Abdul Aziz of the Soghara estate was likewise admired by the *Al-Punch* for creating Waqfs for the welfare of the Mohammedan community.

In Bengal Raja Ram Mohan Roy and later Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and others started a movement for widow remarriage which led to the enactment of Act XV of 1856 by the government. When the Bill was in the process of enactment the *Patna Harkara*, perhaps the earliest vernacular newspaper in Bihar, contained the following news, in its issue of 1 May 1855 under the caption "*Hindu Bewa Aurat Ka Dushra Nikah*" (Hindu widow's remarriage): "Sir James Colville, a member of Legislative Council and an officer of the Supreme Court is engaged in preparing a draft of an Act, for the remarriage of widows. The draft bill will be ready shortly and introduced in the Council. And it is also reported that there is a proposal to enact a law prohibiting a man taking a second wife if the first be alive." The *Akhbar -e Bihar* of 11 September 1856, informs that thirty five petitions signed by 60,000 Hindus had been presented to the government against Widow's remarriage, but it made no impression upon the Council. In 1884 a Brahma Samajist married a widow at Bankipore. She had become a widow at the age of eight. She was twenty-two at the time of remarriage. The *Bihar Bandhu* was, however, opposed to widow-remarriage and cautioned the government against the mistake of being guided by the advice of the so-called leaders of Hindu society. It wondered how persons favoring widow remarriage and opposing caste system could be leaders of Hindu society. They were in its opinion, actually renegades. In a rejoinder to the editor of *Hindustan* who had justified the claims of the social reformers, quoting evidence from the *Shastras* in support, the editor of the *Bihar Bandhu* observed: "In 1850 (1856? The government soon realized its mistake as no case was not brought to the court nor such a marriage took place in any good families. Lord Canning, Governor-General of India, himself criticized the government for enacting such laws and considered it to be a contributory factor of the Mutiny. These days the so-called social leaders have again begun to raise their heads and are memorializing the government for abolition of child marriage and other social practices. But the government is now fully aware of the fact that the Hindus have sound social systems and the misguided few (self - styled reformers) have no influence on the society. The *Bihar Bandhu* of 30 June 1887 contains about a dozen letters to the editor against widow remarriage. The Brahma Samaj movement which aimed at the emancipation of women (including widow-remarriage) was never strong in Bihar and was confined to some Bengalese families only. The Arya Samaj too favored widow remarriage and raised its voice against polygamy, unequal and child marriages. Several caste associations in Bihar were also seized with the problem of child widows, but their

⁵²*Al-Punch*, 23 March 1893, p.7.

sympathy did not go beyond rendering financial help to the indigent ones. And widow remarriage still remains a taboo.

Literacy among Women

Literacy was certainly not widespread in Bihar, but as women were the repositories of folklore, katha, Vidyapati's songs, epic texts such as the Ramayana, they could not all be labeled ignorant. Societal nuances hidden behind the walls of official verbiage can only be exposed when such fallacies in early western documentation are discarded. At times one suspects that the emphasis on public apathy was in part an excuse offered by these agencies to their superiors, in their limited success in advancing their task (Bhattacharya, 2000). In part it does reflect a genuine problem, as evident from Adam's Second Report on the State of Education in Bengal, 1836:

A superstitious feeling is alleged to exist in the majority of Hindu families, principally cherished by the women and not discouraged by men, that a girl taught to read and write will soon become a widow..... And the belief is also generally entertained in native society that intrigue is facilitated by knowledge of letters on the part of females... when a sister is observed imitating her brother's attempt at penmanship, she is expressly forbidden to do so.

Or from the extract of the five Inspectors' report for different regions:

The problem offered to us for solution is to organize female education on lines likely to be acceptable to the people. Their conservatism in regard to the *Purdah*, their social customs and caste prejudices are well known. *Purdah* must be maintained and this can only be done by employing female teachers. Again a low caste woman, however well educated, will not find ready access to the families of the aristocracy or even of the middle class. Hence we require not only female teachers but female teachers belonging to the higher castes. The difficulty lies in inducing high caste women to take to teaching. It is possible however that if more liberal stipends are given to female teachers than are given to male teachers under similar conditions, and if the female teachers are given facilities for carrying on instruction in *Purdah* under strictly female supervision, we may yet hope to achieve some success.⁵³

Needless to say, whether we consider the social formations prior to colonialism or the social structure in colonial India, caste and class and gender inequalities conditioned the distribution of educational opportunity and the material benefits that access to education secured to the privileged socially hegemonic groups. Though in their explication these observers possibly over-estimate the cultural and religious factors: "native apathy", "Hindoo prejudice", "Mohammedan backwardness", etc., and neglect the material explanations of the kind offered by Miss Crawford, a school inspectress:- "It cannot be said that many of the primary girls' schools are properly housed. Even in Municipalities the accommodation provided for our schools is of the poorest, and this must constitute a grave obstacle to the advance of girls' education in the province, for children cannot be expected to enjoy spending three hours or so in the dark, stuffy little buildings in which there is no room for them to stretch their limbs. Girls' education is still greatly neglected. More money needs to be spent on externals connected with it, so that it may be properly respected", or when the Director of Public Instruction, writes in the third Quinquennial Report (1912-17) on POE in Para 280,

⁵³First Quinquennial Review on the Progress of Education in Bihar and Orissa, 1912-17, Patna, p.103.

The first point that must strike the reader in connection with the Training Classes is the complete inadequacy of their number.....At the same time there are great difficulties in the way of establishing new classes, the chief being the cost, which, for the eight classes shown in the returns, works out at Rs.278 a year for each pupil under training. This is a high figure but at the same time it must be remembered that all but two classes are under Mission management and are intended mainly for the training of Christian girls..... If therefore the number of Training Classes is to be expanded so as to meet the needs of orthodox Hindu and Mohammedan parents it will probably be found that the cost per head will rise rather than diminish..... At the present time a very large proportion of the pupils in girls' schools never get beyond the Infant classes and consequently never learn even to read and write properly. This being so, it is little wonder that parents hesitate to send their children to school and are unwilling to pay fees for them while they are there. There are undoubtedly a great many parents who object to their girls being educated in boys' schools or by male teachers other than men so elderly as to be unlikely to be of much use as teachers. The only solution appears to be to increase the number of Training Classes and to distribute them so that the reluctance of women to proceed far from their homes for training may not prejudice their success.

or in the same Report in Para287: - "As noticed in the last year's report one of the causes which tend to keep girls from school is the difficulty of conveyances, for which parents as a rule are reluctant to pay. Miss Honeyburne writes: - The conveyance question is still one of the greatest difficulties in the education of girls of the upper and middle classes, this item being sometimes half the total expenditure of a school". Made painfully conscious of Bihar society's shortcomings the intelligentsia tended to obscure their own patterns of female teaching.

While upper caste women were certainly locked into domestic world without much exposure to outside happenings, they had maintained oral and written traditions through music, ballad (*katha*) and folk tales, during the survey of the districts of Bihar, Buchanan found in 1810-11, ten or twelve ladies in Shahabad who could read and write letters and understand accounts, he mentions that the ladies of Tilauthu, not only write a fair hand but understand the political effusion of Tulsidas.⁵⁴ Europeans frequently underestimated their learning and descanted the efficacy of such methods, "It appears from the correspondence of August 1884 that in "Koran Schools" the course of instruction does not go beyond the mere mechanical repetition of the Koran, and that they can scarcely be regarded as imparting any real practical education." "The proposal was made originally by the Director of Public Instruction, Bengal, with whom the Lt.-Governor agrees, and thinks that, uniformity of procedure being desirable, "Koran Schools" should, if excluded from the Bengal returns, be excluded from those of all provinces."⁵⁵ British officials eagerly relied on missionary opinion when framing their own meticulously detailed reports. However, their monotonic language generalizes on female ignorance, and betrays an ignorance of Bihar's intricate social variations and its tradition of philanthropy.

⁵⁴ F. Buchanan, *Account of Shahabad*, p.172.

⁵⁵ Diary No. 16, Document No.105, 18th Jan, 1892, Govt. of Bengal, A Proceedings, cf. K.K.Datta, op.cit. p.57.

