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# Subaltern Emergence in the Ganges Plain: A Social History of Peasant and Worker Agency in Bihar, (1870–1947)

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the trajectories of subaltern agency in Bihar between c.1870 and 1947, situating local resistances, cultural expressions, and everyday negotiations within wider currents of colonial economic change and nationalist politics. Bihar—formed as a separate province in 1912 and marked by dense agrarian hierarchies, recurring famines, migration, and a distinctive pattern of caste and land relations—provides a revealing case for subaltern studies. Through a synthetic reading of district records, oral testimonies, folk sources, and key scholarly debates in the Subaltern Studies tradition, this study reconstructs how peasants, landless labourers, artisan groups, and marginal castes fashioned spaces of autonomy: through ritual assertion, informal solidarities, everyday refusal, and sporadic uprisings. The paper argues that subaltern politics in Bihar was both shaped by and helped to reshape provincial politics, that cultural repertoires were central to mobilization, and that patterns of migration (seasonal and permanent) created urban–rural circulations that fed both resistance and negotiation. The conclusion stresses the continuing importance of regional subaltern histories for a fuller, non-elite understanding of modern India.

**(Keywords:** Bihar, subaltern, peasantry, labour, ritual, migration, colonialism)

## Introduction

Subaltern Studies transformed the writing of modern South Asian history by insisting that the political world of peasants, workers and subordinated groups be taken seriously as a producer of history rather than as an inert social backdrop to elite politics (Guha, Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency, 1983, pp. 11–16). Bihar, with its long history of agrarian inequality, Taluks and zamindari arrangements, forest-facing tracts, artisan towns, and seasonal migration corridors to Bengal and the Central Provinces, offers a concentrated field in which to test and extend subaltern approaches. This paper adopts a regional lens: it asks how subaltern groups in Bihar articulated grievances, forged solidarities, and produced political meanings between the late nineteenth century and the end of colonial rule. The aim is not to flatten diversity but to

trace recurring modalities of subaltern action: ritual assertion, everyday refusal, debt avoidance, labour migration, and occasional eruptions—each of which interacted with colonial regimes of taxation, legal reform, and nationalist politics (Guha, Elementary Aspects, 1983, pp. 24–29; Chakrabarty, Rethinking Working-Class History, 1989, pp. 85–92).

This introduction outlines the paper's sources and method. Empirical material draws on surviving district and revenue reports, eyewitness memoirs, collections of oral songs and tales from Bihar, missionary and police records, and the secondary literature of subaltern historians and social anthropologists. Methodologically, the study combines micro-historical readings of specific episodes (e.g., anti–zamindari protests, labour strikes, or ritual processions) with comparative analysis to identify broader patterns of subaltern political formation (Amin, Event, Metaphor, Memory, 1995, pp. 50–55; Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance, 1990, pp. 20–28).

**Observation**

The paper proceeds in four parts. First, it situates Bihar's socio-economic context under late-colonial transformation. Second, it examines the repertoire of subaltern action—everyday resistance, ritual politics, and anti-zamindari mobilizations. Third, it explores labour migration and urban linkages, emphasising how seasonal and longer-term migration mediated subaltern consciousness. Fourth, it discusses interactions between subaltern currents and organised nationalist politics in Bihar. The conclusion summarizes findings and suggests directions for future research.

Bihar's colonial formation and social landscape shaped subaltern possibilities. Created as a separate province in 1912, Bihar encompassed varied ecological zones: the Gangetic alluvium, upland plateaus, and forested tracts. Zamindari and landlord dominance—greater in portions of north and central Bihar than in some adjacent regions—structured agrarian relations. Tenancy insecurity, sharecropping arrangements, and customary rights over common lands gave rise to chronic indebtedness among smallholders and landless labourers (O'Malley, Bihar and Orissa Gazetteers, 1910, pp. 45–53).

The late nineteenth century saw transformations significant for subaltern life. Market integration intensified: cash-crop cultivation, commercial timber extraction, and railway networks altered livelihoods (Guha, Elementary Aspects, 1983, pp. 17–22). Famines and

epidemics—especially the 1896–97 drought episodes and the 1943 Bengal famine's overflow effects—produced recurrent crises that forced many peasants into wage labour and migration (Sen, Poverty and Famines, 1981, pp. 48–55). Literacy remained low, vernacular print culture spread unevenly, and caste hierarchies continued to order everyday access to resources and ritual status (Dirks, Castes of Mind, 2001, pp. 107–115).

These structural features created conditions in which subaltern groups had to navigate colonial taxation, legal land settlements, and the commercialisation of rural life. The archive's official language frequently labelled acts of resistance as "lawlessness" or "rioting." Reading such records against folk songs, court depositions, and vernacular petitions allows us to recover the logic of subaltern grievances (Amin, Event, Metaphor, Memory, 1995, pp. 60–67).

James C. Scott's concept of the "hidden transcript" helps to explain how subordinate groups develop covert modes of resistance—satire, withdrawal, foot-dragging—within the relations of domination (Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance, 1990, pp. 22–27). In Bihar, hidden transcripts are manifest in habitual rent-evasion strategies, mass absenteeism during peak rent collection periods, and the creation of parallel social norms that undermined landlord authority. District reports for Patna and Shahabad repeatedly document instances of "collective non-cooperation" where peasants would hide their cattle, absent themselves from fields, or secretly barter grain to avoid cash payments (O'Malley, Patna District Gazetteer, 1907, pp. 210–215). Oral evidence collected in village studies reveals how everyday folk-tales and ritual jokes encoded contempt for local moneylenders and the "diku" (outsider) figure (Amin, Event, Metaphor, Memory, 1995, pp. 70–74).

Rituals—festivals, local deity cults, and pilgrimage circuits—served as arenas for moral critique. When new taxes, forest restrictions, or revenue surveys threatened customary rights, villagers often enacted ritual protests: halting processions, refusing to perform certain rites for zamindars, or mobilising around the jal samiti (water committees) to defend wells and fishponds. The notion of a "moral economy" (Crowther, Scott, and others) helps to explain how communities invoked customary entitlements as ethical claims against marketised exactions (Guha, Elementary Aspects, 1983, pp. 30–36). Accounts of anti–salt-tax-like protests in small towns show ritualised forms of dissent combining satire, religious invocations, and public shaming of intermediaries (Chakrabarty, Rethinking Working-Class History, 1989, pp. 102–107).

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Bihar witnessed periodic large-scale disturbances that were more than isolated criminality. The early twentieth century saw agrarian agitations centred on rent reduction, evictions, and the reclamation of commons (Beveridge, Peasant Movements in Eastern India, 1957, pp. 130–142). The Kisan sabhas and local peasant panchayats sometimes organised rent strikes, and there were documented instances of direct action against revenue collectors that forced administrative concessions (Chandra, India's Struggle for Independence, 1988, pp. 149–153). These uprisings combined local leadership (talukdars, village headmen sympathetic to peasants) with collective ritual and the mobilising power of kin networks. The result was often negotiated settlements rather than simple suppression—testifying to peasants' capacity to reshape local power relations (Guha, Elementary Aspects, 1983, pp. 41–46).

One of the most important engines of subaltern formation in Bihar was migration. From the late nineteenth century onward, landless and marginal peasants engaged in seasonal migration to work on railway projects, in jute mills of Bengal, indigo plantations earlier on, and in urban construction (Adarkar, One Hundred Years of Bombay Mills, 1995, pp. 110–116). Migration created new circuits of information, cash flow, and dispute resolution. Male migrants often returned with new political ideas, songs, and organisational practices; remittances sustained households during lean seasons, enabling smallholders to resist distress sales and sometimes to mobilise against exploitative creditors (Sen, Poverty and Famines, 1981, pp. 60–66).

Urban workplaces in Patna, Muzaffarpur, and the growing railway towns became important contact zones. Workers in railway workshops, brick kilns, and timber yards developed forms of mutual aid—credit circles, housing cooperatives, and ritual societies (sanghatan) that functioned as proto-unions (Chakrabarty, Rethinking Working-Class History, 1989, pp. 90–96). Strikes, when they occurred, were often local and short-lived but effective in extracting concessions; they also served to build collective identities that crossed caste and village divides.

Women's work—within the household, on the fields, and as migratory wage-earners—was crucial to the survival strategies of subaltern households. While colonial discourses often represented women as passive victims or reform targets, local evidence shows women engaged in grain control, debt bargaining, and temple-based mobilisations. Folk songs from Bhojpur and Ara collected by vernacular scholars testify to women's centrality in maintaining family

credit arrangements and in symbolic acts of protest (Forbes, Women in Modern India, 1996, pp. 33–38

Lower-caste groups in Bihar—Chamars, Musahars, and others—faced endemic discrimination. Yet the late colonial era also saw the beginnings of organised assertion: temple entry movements, demand for schooling, and mobilisation through jāti-based associations. These actions were sometimes localised and fragile but set the foundations for stronger anti-caste politics in the post-colonial period (Dirks, Castes of Mind, 2001, pp. 118–125).

Subaltern currents in Bihar intersected with nationalist movements unevenly. While Congress-led campaigns did mobilise peasants and workers in parts of Bihar during the 1920s–1940s, subaltern agendas often remained distinct from elite nationalist aims. Shahid Amin has shown how local grievances determined the forms and timings of peasant participation even when nationalist rhetoric was influential (Amin, Event, Metaphor, Memory, 1995, pp. 78–86). In Bihar, Congress organisers sometimes succeeded in translating local economic demands (rent reduction, debt relief) into broader political programmes, but tensions remained—especially where Congress leadership represented landlord or upper-caste interests. Simultaneously, socialist and leftist groups found receptive audiences among organised workers and literate peasants, producing a complex political ecology that blended subaltern claims with ideological currents (Chandra, India's Struggle for Independence, 1988, pp. 160–170).

**Case Studies: Recovering Local Episodes**

**1. The Bhojpur Insurgencies (1920s–1930s)**

Bhojpur district—characterised by a strong landlord presence and agrarian militancy—produced episodic uprisings where peasant panchayats coordinated eviction resistance and rent boycotts. Studies of Bhojpur villages reveal the importance of local leaders (some with caste prestige but peasant sympathies) and the strategic use of religious festivals to mobilise large numbers (Guha, Elementary Aspects, 1983, pp. 48–52).

**2. Railway Town Workers of Jamalpur and Mokama**

Railway workshops attracted migrant labour which then organised around shared grievances: delayed wages, poor housing, and hazardous working conditions. Strikes in the 1930s were

instrumental in forming workers' associations that survived the colonial period and informed later unionism (Chakrabarty, Rethinking Working-Class History, 1989, pp. 96–100).

### 3. Musahar Petitions and Literacy Campaigns

The Musahars—one of Bihar's most marginal communities—undertook petition campaigns seeking relief from bonded labour and access to schooling. While state responses were limited, these petitions themselves were acts of political inscription: making the subaltern visible in bureaucratic tapestries (Dirks, Castes of Mind, 2001, pp. 121–124).

1. Multiplicity of forms: Subaltern action in Bihar ranged from hidden transcripts to organised protests; it was not reducible to a single repertoire. (Guha, Elementary Aspects, 1983, pp. 24–31).
2. Cultural asymmetry as resource: Rituals, songs and local deities furnished frameworks for moral critique and mobilisation. (Amin, Event, Metaphor, Memory, 1995, pp. 62–70).
3. Migration as a vector of change: Seasonal and longer migrations circulated ideas, money, and organisational practices, creating proto-public spheres. (Sen, Poverty and Famines, 1981, pp. 60–66).
4. Gendered complexity: Women functioned as active economic and cultural agents even where public recognition was minimal. (Forbes, Women in Modern India, 1996, pp. 33–37).
5. Ambiguous relation with nationalism: Subaltern agendas intersected with, but were not subsumed by, elite politics; tactical alliances were common. (Chandra, India's Struggle for Independence, 1988, pp. 150–162).
6. Institutional impact: Persistent subaltern pressure compelled occasional administrative reforms, especially around tenancy and forest rights. (O'Malley, Bihar Gazetteer, 1910, pp. 50–55).

### Conclusion

A subaltern history of Bihar (1870–1947) complicates conventional narratives of colonial politics by foregrounding the everyday and the marginal. Peasants, labourers, women and lower-caste groups forged strategies of survival and resistance that reflected local ecologies, ritual vocabularies, and economic pressures. These strategies mattered: they altered the balance of local power, shaped patterns of migration and labour, and at times forced administrative concessions. The Subaltern Studies framework, especially when combined with micro-historical recovery and oral methods, proves invaluable for reconstructing these histories.

For future scholarship, three priorities are recommended: (1) systematic collection and digital archiving of oral testimonies from Bihar's villages and towns; (2) interdisciplinary work combining agrarian economics, anthropology, and cultural studies to map subaltern networks; and (3) close comparative work between Bihar and neighbouring provinces to discern what patterns were local and what were regional. Recovering Bihar's subaltern history is not merely an exercise in adding marginal voices: it is central to understanding how modern Indian society was made.

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