

TRADITION AND MODERNIZATION
IN A NORTH BIHAR VILLAGE
A CASE STUDY

1. INTRODUCTION

The transformation of a traditional society into a modern well-knit organic structure can be demonstrated in various ways. In this paper an attempt will be made to study a village in North Bihar, in the district of Saran. This village, Dharampur, is about 8 miles north-east of Chapra the chief town of the district, and some 10 miles from Khairah, the nearest station on the North Eastern Railway. The old people claim that originally their ancestors inhabited another village, Panchpatra, about a mile

¹ Ed. Note: Explanations of the Indian terms given in the footnotes have been made by Rita Régnier.

to the south of the present settlement. There, according to legend, ghosts used to shower bones onto the roofs the houses. The inhabitants, disturbed at their work, and terrified, decided to seek the help of a Sâdhu¹ Ramadas² who lived in a nearby monastery. The saint indicated a site which he blessed, and the construction of the new village began. Thus it is clear that the migration as well as the site of the present village were linked with traditional factors, represented in this instance by the intervention of ghosts and by the Sâdhu. This incident may have happened about 200 years ago; today the former village is known as Diha, meaning ancient dwelling place.

In observing how modern techniques and improvements have been introduced into the life of this backward community (74 miles from Patna the capital of the Bihar State, and nearly 400 miles from Calcutta), we shall examine some aspects of modernization in the educational, technological, economic, political and social fields.

As a case study in terms of methodology this village has been selected for three reasons:

1) The process of modernization can be closely studied here because it is only 8 miles from the district headquarters, as already stated;

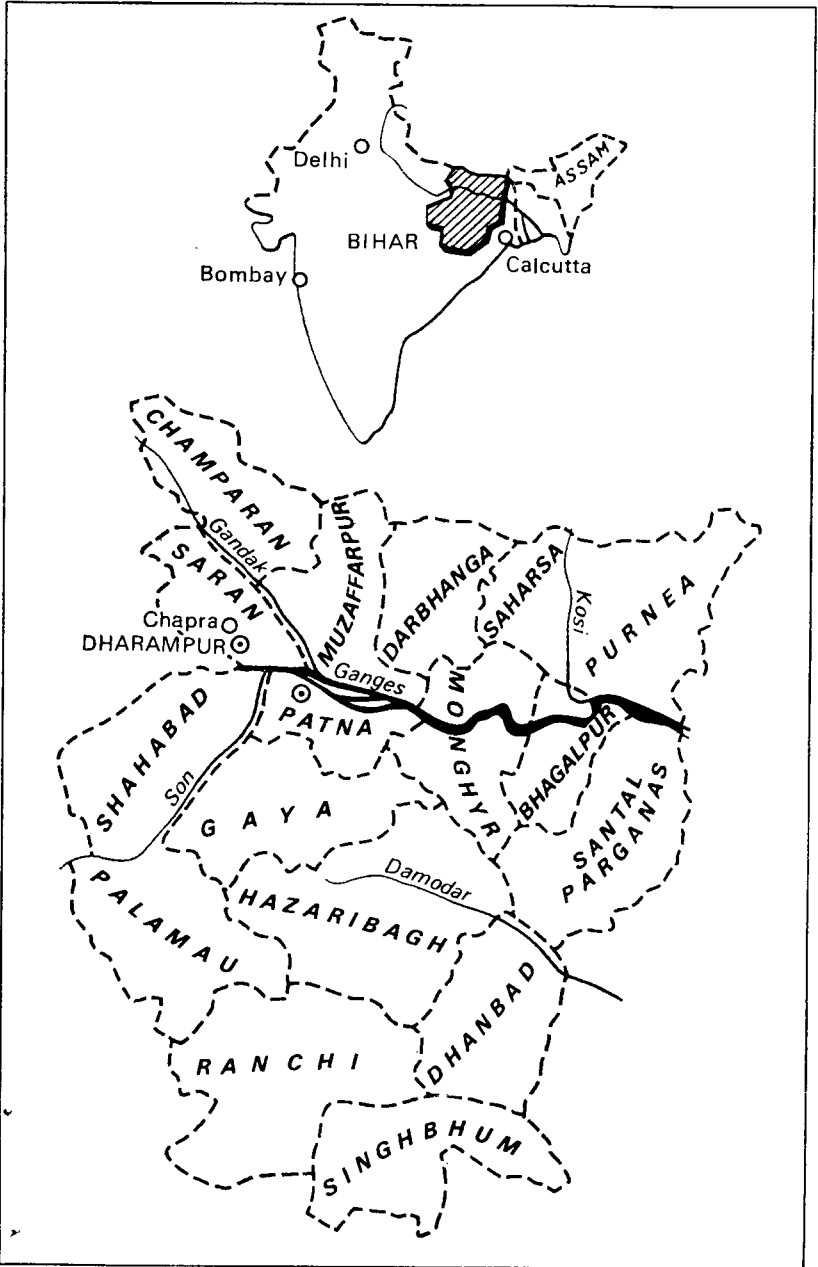
2) the village is small, which facilitates the concentrated study of motivations, of values, and of the organisation of local institutions;

3) lastly, the writer has an intimate knowledge of this village and so can use, to a certain extent, the method that Max Weber called *Verstehen*.

The inhabitants of Dharampur represent 5 castes; and the following table shows the division of the families and their land holdings:

¹ Sâdhu: a wise man, a religious recluse, recognizable by his yellow robe.

² Ramadas, for Ramadasa: "slave" or "servitor" of Rama, i.e., belonging to Ramaite sect.



Castes	Number of households	Number of adult men in the household	Approximate area of properties in bighas *
Kâyasthas ³	5	16	50
Brahmins ⁴	6	16	20
Kurmis ⁵	10	20	10
Nonias ⁶	9	24	13
Kânus ⁷	3	6	2

Originally the area consisted of houses, fields, gardens, orchards etc. covering 250 bighas, but nearly 80 bighas, or perhaps a little more, have either been sold or mortgaged to neighbouring villagers.

The grouping of the population is based on the caste system. Brahmins have one *tolî*, as do the Kâyasthas, the Kurmis and the Nonias have three *tolis*, while two of the Kânus' households are at the junction of the Brahmin *tolî* and that of Nonias. This arrangement of the buildings and the organisation on the base of caste shows well that though one speaks generally of the village as a community, in reality it is not a community of individuals, but of caste groups.

2. TRADITIONALISM AND MODERNIZATION

We will consider the traditional entities included in the life of the village. There is, first of all, the big temple (Mandîr) dedicated to the God Rama, devotional centre of the village for more than half a century where evening prayers are sometimes said together. This Mandîr was quite an imposing building, but the

* 1 bigha = 20 kathas. 27 kathas = 1 acre.

³ Kâyasthas: caste of the scribes.

⁴ Brahmins: also scribes.

⁵ Kurmis: agricultural workers of Bihar and Orissa.

⁶ Nonia: workers who, traditionally, were employed in the extraction of salt from the *noni*, land impregnated with brine on the right bank of the lower Ganges.

⁷ Kânu: workers employed in cutting into pieces the stalks of sugar cane before it was crushed; some of them also prepared the syrup from the cane.

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upper part collapsed in 1934 during the Bihar earthquake; it was repaired, but was not restored to its original proportions. Previously the ceremonial ritual was performed either by a Brahmin or a Sâdhu, but nowadays, demonstrating the influence of modern social values, the ceremonies are conducted by descendants of the original builders of the temple who secured its maintenance by the gift of about 4 bighas of land. Also, one can sometimes see—which never fails to astonish traditionalists—a Kâyastha widow of the donor's family conducting the sacred rites herself. It is possible that this has been motivated by economic considerations, the land given to the temple may be cultivated by the donor's family. What is certain is that it denotes an undeniable modernization of values and beliefs.

Then there is a small temple consecrated to the seven village deities (Maiâ), where generally only women go, from time to time; but in the month September-October (Shrâvan) it becomes a centre of worship. Some years ago some of the village Nonias pretended to have been singled out by one of the divinities (Devatâ Khelânâ) and uttered loud cries such as "Ho Vesha." At the end of the ceremony they would sacrifice a pig they called "Jânawara" (animal), a corruption of the Hindi word "Jânawar".

A third thing—and always in the domain of religion—is the Brahma Asthan; nothing definite is known about its history, but it would appear that the place was consecrated to the memory of one or several Brahmins. The fourth place, the Satî Asthan, commemorates a Kâyastha lady who committed voluntary suicide (Satî), this is of less importance than the others concerned with communal worship, but is used as a place of devotion by the Kâyastha family. The fifth "entity," known as the Baghaut, perhaps perpetuates the memory of a village hero who died fighting a tiger.

Consider now the survival of the old wisdom, the values, the myths and ancient beliefs of tradition—these are, above all, guaranteed by the recitation of the *Râmâyana* by the villages; on the other hand on certain occasions they celebrate the Pujâ (homage) of Satya Nârâyana that normally goes on for two or three hours. The third of these religious institutions, the Hari-kirtan, has been introduced into the village only within the last

10 or 15 years, and can be said to represent a more modern "technique" of community worship. The fourth is the Sharawani Pujâ—the cult of the village goddesses already mentioned. On the social level the best opportunity for general festivities is the Holî (Fagua)⁸ fête in which all the male population participates, as well as the women who also visit each other at home.

The more modern developments affecting village life include the Khairai Railway Station, Civil and Criminal Courts at Chapra the district headquarters, post offices at Khodaibagh and Rampur, the two neighbouring villages, a primary school at Mathis, the secondary school ("High School") at Khodaibagh, the senior school—to pre-university standard—at Rampur, and the "Block Office."⁹

The old-time village policeman and the modern secretary of the "Panchâyat"¹⁰ are also used in the progress of modernization on an administrative level.

The development of education is the most important of the innovations, a step forward in this direction being taken in 1879 when Sri Thakur Prasad began his secondary studies at Chapra. He was the first of the villagers to study up to the university entrance level; he became a Government employee and finally worked in the Law Court. His connection with the judicature—the Law Court being the most obvious symbol of the power of the Government—his standing as a land owner and Zamindar¹¹, and his competence, resulted in him eventually becoming one of the most influential men in the locality.

The possibility of attending college was the second important

⁸ Holî (Fagua): A festival celebrated throughout India which includes the throwing of coloured water in the streets.

⁹ Block Office: An abbreviation for "Block Development Project Office," indicating part of the five-year plan of the Indian Government for the establishment of projects for the improvement and modernization of villages. Each "Block" is concerned with the application of the project in a certain number of villages, generally five, where one finds the principle of co-operative agriculture.

¹⁰ Panchâyat (or, better, pañcâyat): the local Village Council.

¹¹ Zamindar: a term originally referring to a special kind of farmer and land owner who dealt directly with the government in connection with revenue from the property; a system abolished in June, 1951. (M.S. Renou, *L'Economie de l'Inde*).

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step in the development of education. Sri Ram Chandra Prasad, son of Sri Thakur Prasad, studied at Patna College, in those days (between 1909 and 1914) the most advanced educational institution in Bihar. He also entered Government service and eventually retired as District Inspector of Schools.

A third most important step in the field of education was in 1947, when a member of a Kâyastha family went to the United States to study, for four years (1947-1950). The idea of a better education for women came when two young girls of the Kâyastha family married, in 1953 and 1961 respectively, into educated families and both girls took their M.A. degree. This was obviously the fourth step forward; the fifth came with a Kurmi student obtaining a B.A. Honours degree, in 1966; while the latest improvement has come with the bringing of education to backward communities. At Dharampur the results of modern schooling can be seen as follows:

LEVEL OF EDUCATION	NUMBER OF PEOPLE
1. Ph. D.	1.
2. M.A.	3.
3. B.A.	1.
4. I.A.	3.
5. Matriculation	3.
6. To Matriculation level	3.

In contrast with the advance of modern education traditional teaching has not followed its usual course. Several adult Brahmins remain more or less ignorant of Sanskrit learning, two have a smattering of it without any real understanding, and have acquired their knowledge only by association with better informed people.

The second field of modernization is technological. In 1911 the railway was introduced, and a little later came the buses. Several villagers bought bicycles, watches, torches, thermometers, and an Inspector of Schools bought himself a car, while some people have hand water-pumps installed in their houses. Jeeps and trucks occasionally arrive in the village, especially in the marriage season. The principle obstacle to technological moderni-

zation remains the lack of main roads. From Dharampur to Chapra there is only a simple dirt track constituting a grave handicap as regards developments between the village and the local district centre.

The third level of modernization has been economic. Since 1889 there has been the possibility of entering Government service, today, in fact, there are eight Civil Servants: three have relatively important jobs in the Department of Education, there are four postmen, and a police constable, also two office workers. One University lecturer is from this village, three from the Kâyastha family work regularly in the Chapra Court as lawyers' assistants, and several people from the Kurmi and Nonia communities are employed in Calcutta factories, earning between 120 and 150 rupees.

About 90% of the Dharampur buildings are of mud, but two or three are built of baked brick with thatched roofs. One small house of baked brick and cement has been built by a Brahmin clerk who got a job in the Tax Collector's at Chapra office several years ago, which indicates that money earned outside the village is being used for the modernization of buildings.

The inhabitants have been exposed only to a very minor degree to contemporary aspects of politics, government and economics. For nearly a century the only semi-official requirement was the payment of a land tax once or twice a year to the villages of Patwari and Tahsildar. Until 1956 the agents of the feudal landlords collected this tax, from which it can be said that even this formality did not put the villagers in contact with government organisation. With the abolition of the zamindar system the collection of taxes became immediately a government matter in which the villagers are concerned.

For many years the villagers have had to go to the court at Chapra every time a sale of land or mortgage has been involved. The business of registering Deeds of Sale is one that touches the peasant most closely because it involves him in legal proceedings and with the administration, a new experience in that in the pre-British period there does not appear to have been any registration of financial transactions. In recent years several villagers were hit by the land tax and that for education, and there were some protestations against the increase in the tax concerning the

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wages of the village policeman which they have paid for years. At the time of the Second World War there was some rationing of textiles, and during the last decade small shops have been opened for the sale of rations controlled by the Government, in particular of corn and *masuria*¹², and a few other foodstuffs; but due to lack of money, and also to the bad management of the proprietors of these shops, the people have not been able to obtain the necessary minimum of grain.

After 1952 adults became involved to a certain extent in political affairs in connection with propaganda carried on in the area in favour of rival candidates for the Assembly and Parliamentary seats. Villagers have been heard to say that it was not until 1967 that they realised the efficacy of the vote. In the last three elections, however, there was little serious opposition, the victory of the Congressional candidates being more or less a certainty. But in 1967 there was a fight between the Congressional candidates and others for the Assembly seat, which introduced a note of emotion into the campaign.

In 1966 a number of the villagers became subject to a new tax on cereals. Another change to be observed is the decline of the profession of *Vaidya* (the traditional doctor); up to 1938 the vaidyas were consulted every time a member of a family became ill, but, thanks to showy publicity, homeopathic and allopathetic medicines have ousted the methods of the vaidayas. The prestige of the allopaths increases steadily and, with cash in their pockets, even the lower castes now try to obtain allopathetic treatment from nearby villages where there is a qualified doctor, or at Chhapra. Only a few Brahmins continue to consult the vaidya, and that more for reasons of economics than for the efficacy of the traditional methods of Indian medicine.

If, as has already been indicated, there are undeniable evidences of modernization in technological and educational fields, as well as in the possibilities of entering government and private service, little progress has marked social life. Even well-educated people are reluctant to pursue this; though in 1966 two widows of a Kâyastha family registered gift deeds to their daughters. This was clearly taking advantage of the new Acts of 1937 and 1956

¹² *Masuria*: (local Hindi, *masur*; Sanskrit, *masûra*), a type of lentil.

giving certain rights to widows. These gifts were to some extent the result of the division and cutting up of land belonging to this family, one of the most respected and influential in the neighbourhood, and the case is significant because it may influence later decisions of other widows who become conscious of the new economic rights granted to them in the wake of political and social independence.

On the ideological level, a representative of the Kāyastha community championed the ideas expounded by the Arya Samaj¹³ but so great is the influence of tradition that he was unable to oppose any of the Brahmin rites and had to conform to accepted practices in connection with both marriages and funerals. Another significant fact is that two Kurmi students have professed the doctrine of the Anand Marg,¹⁴ which, in its turn, is against traditional Brahminism.

3. IMPEDIMENTS TO MODERNIZATION

Speaking generally it could be said that at present there is no conscious desire for social change among the villagers. They are naturally anxious to improve their economic position, but not to the point of protest against the injustices, the ritualistic ideas, the religious and social practises that for centuries have sanctioned their exploitation. Lacking modern education they do not see their miserable condition in terms of social change or transformation of society.

The greatest obstacle to modernization is the extremely low standard of the village life at Dharampur. Most of the members of the Kurmi, Nonia and Kanu communities have so little land that it only provides their living for a few months of the year at a very low level. They have absolutely no access to modern technology or methods, and without some amelioration of their conditions of existence which itself depends on the adoption of western methods, any significant modernization cannot be expected.

¹³ Arya Samaj (or, better, Ārya Samaj), the Aryan Society founded by Dayānanda Sarasvatī in Bombay in 1875 to extol the return to the Vedic tradition and to combat idolatry and polytheism.

¹⁴ Anand Marg (or, better, Ānand Mārg), the "Voice of Happiness." It appears to be difficult to find any documentation on this movement which is probably of recent origin.

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The third impediment to development is the age-old character of the rituals and religious practices. A fourth is that nearly 95% of the female population have no education at all; recently some little girls have been attending primary school, but it is too soon to measure the result.

Traditional ideas are still strongly held. Sixty years ago a member of the Kâyastha community, Sri Laxmi Prasad, was offered a job as postman, which he refused because he would have had to carry a leather bag—a material considered impure among Hindus. Nowadays one does not meet such rigid traditionalism, but the domination of ancient prejudices, symbols, myths and superstitions continue to burden the villagers. Only modern education, with its scientific cosmology with its naturalistic and social disciplines and behaviour can root out these superstitions.

Another drawback has been that several villagers, particularly Brahmins, are reluctant to allow their sons to work elsewhere.

We have already pointed out the difficulties resulting from the fact that there is no tarred road between Dharampur and the main road of the area. An important factor in the development and modernization of the whole of North Bihar is the need for a road-cum-rail bridge over the Ganges at Patna, without which developments cannot be accelerated. It is true that there is almost a direct rail link now between Chapra and Calcutta, but a direct line between Chapra and Patna is absolutely essential.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

All the modernization in this village has been the result of voluntary effort and not of any social or economic planning. And as far as rural facilities are concerned, the intervention of the Jalalpur Block has been limited to a subsidy for the improvement of three dry-earth wells which have been converted to cement wells. Apart from this the Block has not aided Dharampur in any appreciable way. It is true that the organisation offered certain help in regard to the purchase of fertiliser and special seed corn, but most of the villagers are too poor to be able to profit by this. In 1967 three people received loans from the Block.

Faithful to tradition the Brahmins have been the interpreters of ancient values and systems, while the Kâyastha have been the

most ready to try new ideas and to accept modern conceptions of economics and education. While the desire to enter Government service or private administration grows daily, even among the Brahmins, which proves that there has been some degree of ideological change.

Among the backward castes the Kurmis have been more ready to accept change than the Nonias; the latter, after the sowing of crops usually go to Assam where they are employed on land clearing which has become their traditional work. Although five of the Nonias work in Calcutta, as a group they are not as interested in education as are the Kurmis. The best proof that the latter are keenly desirous of improving their status is to be found in the fact that two members of the community have begun wearing the sacred cord (*janeva*),¹⁵ which none of the Nonias have done.

It is very true, however, that in spite of material changes in the lives of the Kurmis and the Nonias, social position continues to depend more on tradition than on economic progress or rise in the social scale. Tensions in the village have not, however, been aggravated to a noticeable extent by virtue of any modernization.

Opportunities of finding jobs are not lacking either at Chapra or in Calcutta, or in other places, with the result that about 20 men have definitely left Dharampur. To a certain extent such jobs also constitute a source of modernization, because when they return to their region these men become directly or indirectly agents of change. Sometimes they bring back modern consumer goods, sometimes they describe changes going on in Patna or the suburbs of Calcutta, the factories there, and so in this way themselves becoming agents of modernization.

In terms of psychology, fatalism still dominates the village. Every time it rains the peasants think in terms of devotion, thanking God or Râma. There are no organisations or groups enabling the villagers to enjoy communal recreations, as far as general participation is concerned this is restricted to the traditional Holî fete, and other socio-religious festivities.

¹⁵ *Janeva*: (the sacred cord). This cord is composed of several threads that are given to young boys belonging to the three upper classes, then the Brahmin initiation makes them "twice-born." The cord passes over the left shoulder and falls, under the right armpit, nearly to the waist. It is worn for life and is renewed at certain moments.

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In general we can say that this village illustrates the difficulties of modernization in a society or community that is very poor. To be able to profit by modern techniques it is necessary to have basic equipment and resources.

The impression I gained from the case study of this village is that northern Bihar cannot escape the processes of modernization, however painful, or difficult or protracted changes may prove to be. The different aspects of life in this small village illustrate the fact that the techniques, the forces and the values of tradition are either on the decline, or on the defensive. However slowly, modernization is proceeding.