

BOOK REVIEW

Vishal, A. K. (2020). *The Pasis of Bihar: A Socio-economic Study (Bihar Subaltern Study Series-10)*. Patna: Janaki Prakashan & Xavier Institute of Social Research [ISBN: 978-93-86955-87-6], pp. 184 + xii. Price INR 650.00

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The Pasis of Bihar: A Socio-economic Study, the tenth book in the series of Bihar Subaltern Study of Xavier Institute of Social Research (XISR), authored by Dr. Ashutosh Kumar Vishal, is another contribution to the existing literature on the marginalised (Dalit) communities of Bihar undertaken by XISR. It is jointly published by XISR and Janaki Prakashan, Patna.

India has witnessed many social movements during the pre-Independence and post-Independence periods. Movements against caste discrimination were many. The movement launched in the pre-Independence era by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, continued after Independence. After the Independence, the Constitution of India stipulated to legally ban such discrimination to accord equality of all citizens across caste boundaries. Yet still today, casteism is continually being practised in India with devastating social effects on the so-called 'outcastes'. Nearly half a million Dalits formerly considered 'untouchables' joined Dr. Ambedkar, rejected Hinduism which sanctions casteism, and converted to Navayana Buddhism, in order to attain social equality, religious freedom and human rights. Though they became Buddhists, they continue to be considered low by the wider Hindu society. However, the converts themselves seem to have experienced liberation from the caste suffocation within the purview of Hinduism.

Various caste-related oppression and liberation attempts have been dealt with in this book. Chapter -1 deals with the 'Foundational Theory of Caste'. It takes us to a journey back to the Vedic period and connects the situation to the present period. It deals with the then prevailing caste system when Hindu society was divided into four castes Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Shudra, excluding the Dalits as 'outcastes' but at the same time, including them to a subservient position assigning various necessary but menial occupations to them without dignity and remuneration. In other words, the Dalits were co-opted in the Hindu society for utilising them for the economic benefit of caste Hindus. Caste segmentation has much to do with economic exploitation

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of the Dalits. The writer says, "I don't disagree that Indian society was divided, and social stratification became a key derivative in defining all spheres of human life" (Ch 1: 3). This chapter also deals with the castes and sub-castes within the Pasi community.

Chapter - II is a detailed study on the Pasi castes, their origin, myth, and history tracing from various historical and religious texts. But in the end the author gives his own different view what he calls a "contested view" regarding the history and origin of caste. The author says, "My aim in this book is to cast a new perspective on the established understanding of caste." The writer traces the mythical history of the Pasis in Uttar Pradesh where they seem to have been a ruling caste.

The Pasi have been traditionally associated with toddy tapping. But based on the responses of the respondents, he concludes that toddy tapping is not the caste occupation of the Pasis as a whole group (Ch. II: 76).

Chapter - III deals with the status of Dalits in Bihar keeping the main focus on the present situation of the Pasis. Included in this chapter is the economic situation of Dalits, especially Pasis, their land holding status (Tables 3a & 3b: 79 & 81), labour pattern, poverty, health, education, dropout rates from schooling, basic amenities, water and sanitation availability. The writer has tried to substantiate his arguments by presenting data findings in table form and describing them in detail. This chapter has used the data available through government sources.

Chapter - IV gives detailed information and analysis of the collected data from Bihar. Field data were collected from five selected districts: using a sample set of 304 households namely, 62 households (Gaya), 69 households (Muzaffarpur), 55 households (Patna), 49 households (Saharsa), and 48 households from Samastipur. The data is on the socio-economic life and education. Other areas are gender, age, quality of village roads, housing facility, toilet and sanitation facility, kitchen and cooking facility, electricity, basic needs, anganwadis, school education, school dropouts, government facilities to school-going children, benefits of government schemes, and main sources of livelihood. It is interesting to go through these pages which describe their situation using tables and numbers. The tables are interpreted well, and the information is well garnered which makes it easy for the reader to understand the main findings of the book. The tables clearly indicate how precarious the life of the Pasis in Bihar, how poor their condition is, how the families have very low economic earnings, how they lack basic amenities and how most of them are deprived of the government schemes.

Chapter - V is a presentation of the culture and lifestyle of the Pasis in Bihar. The Pasis worship different deities and offer different types of offerings to their deities. The author has also shown that they participate in Hindu pujas and ceremonies. The priests from their own caste though are somewhat educated, yet demand less money for worship than Hindu pujaris. In the social scene, the researcher has studied the problems of untouchability. Table 5b presents the responses and Table 5c presents the response on their being humiliated on the basis of caste.

This chapter also focuses on the caste occupation of toddy tapping. Table 5d is a presentation on their toddy business and their difficulties in this occupation. It is found that many of the respondents were in this business for more than ten years. They do not own their own palm trees, and are dependent on rented trees for their business. We can find their low-income situation from Table 5i. Somehow they survive due to this occupation. The author has also focused on the accidents and injuries that occur while doing toddy tapping and how these affect the families. The author has also presented the occurrence of different sicknesses that are found in this community.

Chapter - VI is a discussion on the 'Ban on Alcohol 2016' by the Bihar Government and its effect on the Pasis. It gives a clear picture of how the liquor ban has affected the Dalits and the poor in general and the Pasis in particular, because many of them are dependent on this occupation for their livelihood. Toddy business involves liquor production and sale. Here the author also talks about the alternatives given by the Government namely, through the 'Neera Project' on palm juice products. A memorandum of understanding was signed between Tamil Nadu Agriculture University and Bihar Agriculture University to develop various products out of *neera* (palm juice) about which a list is given on page 141. The effect of the liquor ban on one hand, and the black-marketing of liquor by others on the other, has put the Pasis in economic disadvantages. At the end of this chapter, the author says, there is no sincere attempt to implement the Neera Project and make products on a large scale as per the assurances of the Government. Even small projects in some districts have not brought any positive results (Ch. 6: 155).

Overall, it is a good attempt by the author to throw light on the lifestyle and socio-economic situation of the Pasis of Bihar. The book also speaks of their ups and downs in life, especially after the liquor ban and how their life became more challenging. We find in the newspapers everyday that despite the liquor ban, there is no dearth of people consuming liquor obtained through illegal sources. Thousands

of people are found using alcohol and are caught, arrested and are put behind the bars. Unfortunately, most of those put behind bars are the poor Pasis, while the big fish, the mafia gang involved in supplying alcohol all over the places go scot free. This has resulted in a grave disaster for the Pasi families. Their victimisation seems to be only because of their traditional association with toddy tapping. But the reality is that the Pasis as a caste group has been traditionally engaged in this occupation for their survival and livelihood. Hence the liquor ban has become a severe blow for them.

One cannot help but notice the interesting picture on the front cover page of the book: a Pasi man perched on the top of a palm tree and skilfully balancing himself while tapping the toddy. Normally we do not find people climbing the heights of several palm trees everyday risking their lives. Indeed the picture superbly depicts the struggle of a toddy tapping Pasi, who seems to say, "nothing is impossible if one has a strong will to achieve one's goal."

The book has a valuable thematic index at the end to help trace the running themes and topics dealt within the book. The presentation of the book is fairly good and is in hardbound format, priced nominally in order to make it affordable even to those readers with slender means. I congratulate XISR for bringing out yet another ground-breaking study on the subaltern communities in Bihar. Credit goes to Dr. Jose Kalapura, Director of XISR for launching the Bihar Subaltern Study Series, guiding this research, writing the Foreword to the book and getting it jointly published by XISR and Janaki Publication.

It has been my pleasure to have an overall view of this book going through each page. It created much interest in me to know more about the 'unknown' Pasis of Bihar, their struggles and their fight for survival in a cruel world. This book is not just a study of a Dalit caste to give information about that caste, but is also a invitation to the readers to be empathetic towards the unfortunate communities in our society and to goad them to help them. It is envisaged that this book will inform the policymakers to go beyond paper planning of projects for the upliftment of Dalits, and convince them to commit to realistic implication of the lofty projects. Then only the Pasis of Bihar can be brought to the mainstream of society.