

Tobacco : Trade, Tax and Tenants
(Study of Sarais Pargana, Tirhut, 1860-1920)

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This paper is an attempt to analyse the radical reorganization of agriculture as planned and executed by British administrators during the nineteenth and part of the twentieth centuries in Bihar. The colonial scheme was 'to develop techniques of regeneration of non-European societies, in comparison with industrial Britain'.¹ The tobacco cultivation and improvement schemes in colonial Bihar were part of this development techniques of regeneration of local society.² As the relationship among plants, peasants, state and economic activities always remains dynamic and lucid, so tobacco became the prominent cash crop along with indigo and sugarcane.

I

Tobacco was not native to Indian soil, and was introduced from South America.³ The introduction and rapid extension of the cultivation of tobacco was a notable feature of the agricultural history of the seventeenth century.⁴ There is no reference of tobacco in Ain- I- Akabari. By the end of the eighteenth century it was cultivated in every part of India. Like opium it required good soil and gradually occupied the great part of the rich land interspread among the peasants' habitations.⁵ During the whole of the seventeenth century, other European travelers-cum-merchants in India also mentioned in their accounts that the cultivation as well as sale of tobacco had been in abundance.⁶ By the late seventeenth century the tobacco trade involved both huge volumes and huge investments.⁷ Large areas in rural Bengal were now reserved for the cultivation of tobacco.⁸

As the cultivation and use of tobacco spread rapidly in India, and it became a rich source of government revenue during the 17th century. In the 18th century there was an enormous volume of trade in agricultural produce throughout Bengal, and tobacco was one of the 'valuable crops' traded within Bengal both as import and export.⁹ Dacca, Murshidabad and Patna developed as big marts and trading centres of tobacco and bulk of tobacco was exported to Calcutta.¹⁰ Before the advent of the Company rule in Bengal, tobacco trade was regulated by the government, and tobacco 'farms' existed in the areas where it was produced.¹¹

Early in the 18th century, the European traders quickly adopted this trade. But there were some objections over the Company's tobacco trade and when the English Company got privileges in trade in Bengal,

tobacco was not included in it. This restriction in tobacco trade remained till the East India Company assumed the power of Bengal. Now Bengal gradually developed a strong trade relation with England. This new trade relation was born under the Company rule and accordance to the English interests. Again now the English traders had an upper hand in choosing the trade items. Bengal fully transformed into an alternative supply region for England. Even till this time the East India Company was not interested in the trade of cultivated plants. The Company gradually intended to cotton, mulberry, poppy, indigo, sugar-cane and tobacco. These plants were identified as 'economic plants', and their cultivation and trade became prominent for the British administrators and traders.

In 1789, the Court of Directors instructed the Commercial Residents to gather information regarding tobacco and cotton produced in India. The monopolistic nature of trade and the willingness on the part of the East India Company to diversify its business put demand on officers to tour their districts and report on conditions of productions and trade.¹² they wanted to know about the volume and usual price of tobacco produced in the different districts and also about the quantity of export and import. They were only intended to explore the possibility of increasing the growth of this article.¹³ In 1789, the Collector of Purnea reported that the volume of tobacco produced in the district was not less than 50000 *maunds*.¹⁴ Out of which 30000 *maunds* of tobacco was exported to Murshidabad and Calcutta.¹⁵ Tobacco cultivation received considerable attention during this period. In 1790, first time foreign seed was used on experimental process.¹⁶ in Bhagalpur district experimental trails were made with 'Virginia tobacco'.¹⁷ in this experimental plantation 26.5 seers of tobacco was produced and activity was done on three *kottahs* of land.¹⁸ the entire expense involved was:-

	Rs	As	P
3 ploughs at one <i>anna</i> each	0	3	0
19 labourers at 1 <i>anna</i> each	1	3	0
Cost on watering and caring	0	4	0
Land rent	0	8	2
Total	2	2	2

Similar experiments were done in Tirhut, where Virginia tobacco was most successfully cultivated.¹⁹ Half a *maund* of tobacco was produced and then the government actively encouraged the cultivators to adopt this item. But still there was a problem the quality of this produce was not according the demands of the international markets. In 1818 total 99023 *bighas* of land was under tobacco cultivation in Bihar, out of in Purnea 60190 *bighas* and in Tirhut 28818 *bighas* of land was under tobacco cultivation.²⁰ There were

variations in the yield of tobacco in different regions. While Patana–Gaya region had the lowest yield of 2.14 *maunds* per *bigha*, the yield in Purnea was 3.45 *maunds*, in Bhagalpur 3.56 *maunds* and the highest yield of tobacco was obtained in Shahabad with 4.44 *maunds* per *bigha*. Overall the average yield in Bihar was 3.47 *maunds* per *bigha* in 1818. In the last decade of the 18th century average expense in tobacco cultivation was around 4 rupees per *bigha*.²¹ The price of tobacco in Calcutta mart was 20 sicca rupees per maund.²²

“A large area (29800 acres) was under tobacco, which was the most paying crop in Darbhanga district. Five–sevenths of the total area was found in Samastipur and Dalsinghsarai thanas, and maost of the rest was in Warisnagar and Benipatti. The fame of the tobacco of *pargana* Saraisa, which covered a large part of the Samastipur and Hazipur subdivisions had spread far beyond the limits of North Bihar, and every year purchasers used to come from distant districts and bought large quantities of it.”²³

In the first decade of the 20th century tobacco was mostly grown near homesteads and covered about 2300 acres only in Bhagalpur district.²⁴ In Purnea, the chief localities in which the crop was cultivated, around 1900, were the high loamy ridges which were frequent between the old beds of the Kosi and the Panar and between the Kankai and Mahananda, the best tobacco being grown on the upland strip of country extending from Purnea town northward and somewhat westward to Forbesganj.²⁵ the variety of tobacco cultivated in Purnea was as vilayati, which had completely superseded the desi variety.²⁶ In Purnea and Bhagalpur districts varieties of tobacco was cultivated; i.e. *mandhata* (*dhamakul*), *arena*, *ghangira*, *desla* (*thariya*).²⁷ In Champaran, the Collector reported that tobacco was one of the chief products. The above references make it evident that although cultivation of tobacco was carried on in every part of the province the intensity of its cultivation varied greatly from region to region.

II

Official policy of the East India Company was deliberately framed so as to give most favoured treatment to British economic interests.²⁸ India’s subordinate status encouraged the British traders and industrialists at home to consider India as a protected market for their products and subsequently in maintaining advantage through free trade. The British colonial attitude was that India would be better– off if she did not put her resources into unproductive industries and specialized in agricultural development.²⁹ No doubt, there had been commercial relationship between England and Bengal throughout the seventeenth century.³⁰ Yet though the East India Company had traded with the East Indies, it had had difficulties in selling.³¹ During the second half of the eighteenth century, the Company not only grabbed the political supremacy in Bengal, but it also recognized its commercial activities in two folds. The primary objective

of the Company was the external trade which was concerned with cotton, muslin, raw silk, sugar, indigo, opium &c. secondly, the emphasis was upon the inland trade. In inland trade, the local commerce of goods from one part of the province to another was prominent and the highlighted items were 'the ordinary commodities of life'. The chief commodities dealt in this trade were salt, grain, tobacco and many English goods.

Abuse of *Dustak* was mostly done for tobacco, salt and some other commodities.³² In 1764, the Court of Directors decided that tobacco trade " should be carried out solely through Indian *gumastas*."³³ In 1768 Clive started the 'Society of Trade', to regulate the inland trade and the controversial inland articles like salt, betel nut and tobacco. However, this society was formed to provide the Company's servants with a profit, smooth collection of revenue and to provide with reasonable prices for these commodities. This trade policy was laid down in 1773 for inland trade and the rate of duty on all articles was fixed. A sort of government monopoly was created over trade. After 1813, this monopoly on tobacco trade came to an end. By 1799, there had been around 15 Agency Houses in Calcutta, a majority of them British and run by former Company servants.³⁴ However, the Company's trade monopoly was put at end, but the Directors of the Company were not fully prepared to 'free' tobacco trade in Bengal.³⁵ The Company government levied high custom duties on tobacco cultivated in Bengal presidency during the first half of the 19th century.

Voices rose in English society for free settlement of Englishmen in Bengal and to help them invest in the improvement of tobacco cultivation like cotton and sugarcane. The quality of Indian tobacco was very inferior and was not fit for the European markets. Thus a special attention was given to plantation and the British tried to develop it as an industry where British capital and entrepreneurship could be utilized. The British Agency Houses not only channeled the tobacco trade but they utilized the private funds of the Company officials in their own names to promote this trade. In 1819, the Agricultural and Horticultural Society had been established in Calcutta.

Another striking feature of the government's decision to promote the quality of tobacco in Bihar, was to encourage certain castes peasants to adopt tobacco cultivation. In Bihar *koiri* and *kurmi* castes peasants were encouraged. *Koiri* (traditionally a trained gardeners) caste had championed the cultivation of vegetables and poppy in Bihar. *Kurmis* were also traditional agriculturists. In last hundred years, many steps for the improvement of plantation agriculture were taken by the government and private investors. In 1872, a minute of G. Champbell of 23 November 1871 was circulated to the Commissioner of Patna Division, in which the Lieutenant- Governor of Bengal directed to establish 'model farms' in the different

zamindarees and especially big farms in Darbhanga Raj zamindaree to promote the improvements of agriculture and cattle breeding.³⁷

In 1870s, the tobacco improvement scheme in Bihar got the emphasis in the Government of India's agricultural development schemes.³⁸ Tobacco improvement meant that colonial officials during the 1870s agreed making Indian tobacco fit for the London market. It can be said that this tobacco improvement scheme was a tool of colonizing bypassing local tastes and demands, and was for the markets of London and Europe.³⁹ The Lieutenant-Governor's scheme of establishment of such model farms was a calculated steps towards tobacco improvement. Patna, Shahabad, Tirhut and Saran were among the largest tobacco producing districts in Bengal, but the techniques of leaf-preparation was not adequate.⁴⁰ So the taste and texture of the produce were becoming inferior. The government desired to adopt such measures which could improve the indigenous tobacco to compete with the American produce in the foreign markets. A systematic course of experiments for improving both the growth and curing of the plants under state supervision.⁴¹ Tirhut in Bihar, which was bearing the finest soil for tobacco cultivation, locally known as Saraisa *pargana*, was selected as the target area for this purpose.

Pusa which was created in 1795 and was spread over 1500 *bighas* on the bank of the Burhi Gandak in Samastipur subdivision. This farm also lies in the mid of Saraisa *pargana*. In 1805 this farm was transformed in horse breeding institution, along with a plantation nursery and lab for 'the latest European scientific ploughs, harrows, hoes, drills and winnowing machines'. Several agricultural experts were recruited for this farm.⁴² In 1872, the horse- breeding was completely stopped here and it became a fully equipped agricultural farm. S. C. Bayley, the Commissioner of Patna, considered this farm for 'the model farm' for tobacco and indigo plantation.⁴³ The minute of Lieutenant-Governor also paved the way of Agricultural School at Pusa. Upto 1905, Pusa farm became full-fledged agricultural research and educational institute.

Till 1870s, Tirhut was the hub of European planters, who were dealing mainly in indigo plantation. A series of indigo factories owned by the Europeans were located in Tirhut, and frequent frictions between the planters and *ryots* were taking place. Unlike Bengal, the European planters in Bihar were dealing only in indigo, they rarely tried their luck in tobacco, sugarcane or jute plantation. In other words one can say that indigo was a single colonial plant in Bihar, where peasants still cultivated tobacco and sugarcane 'willingly'.⁴⁴ The most interesting aspect of the tobacco cultivation like sugarcane, it was seen as the commodity of the 'native *ryots*' while indigo was associated with the European planters.⁴⁵

Saraisa *pargana* (Tajpur *thana*) was the chief producer of tobacco. A *ryot* had to pay upto Rs. 15/- per *bigha* for good land which was suitable for tobacco cultivation.⁴⁶ Reports of the time show that the zamindars were taking keen interests in tobacco cultivation. As tobacco fields were returning good assured advance rents and thus these lands were generally settled with the koiri caste people and they could easily be tamed by the zamindars. While indigo cultivation was completely carried out by the European planters and most of them were problem creating and were returning less to the zamindars. The indigo planters were aggressive and offensive, these indigenous planters (koiries) were industrious, peaceful and contented cultivators.⁴⁷

After collapse of the international market of indigo, in 1905 Lord Curzon advised the Pusa institute to concentrate upon the improvement of tobacco cultivation. Between 1905 and 1920, the Imperial Institute at Pusa made tremendous improvements in tobacco, new seeds, and hybrid variety competent to international markets, new curing and planting techniques were developed here.

III

Improvement schemes accelerated tobacco yield and lastly the acreage of cultivation. Tobacco cultivation required class – one highlands close to the village and irrigation sources. Again the tenants who were holders of these types of lands had had to pay high rents. Another hurdle in this way was the rate of rent. The rate of rent was variable not only according to the character and situation of land and also according to the caste and position of the cultivators. A high caste cultivator had to pay less than a lower caste cultivator.⁴⁸ The bigger portion of tenancy involved as laborers in tobacco cultivation. The peasants of upper castes like *bhumihars*, *brahmins*, *rajputs*, *muslim* upper castes and *jeth- ryots* of the zamindars, and some middle castes like *kurmies*, *koiries* and *gowalas* were mainly involved in this cultivation. As tobacco cultivation required more labors for curing and land preparations and high rate of rent made it more cost effective cultivation.⁴⁹ The upper castes tenants had a problem that they could not involve their women in fields due to caste prejudices, thus they totally depended upon the hired labors, which was more cost effective. On the other hand the middle caste tenants usually involved their women in curing and land preparation works and thus they got better returns and results in tobacco cultivation. Again the lower caste tenants had less land and crunch of capital to invest in this cultivation. Alongwith these limitations the lower caste tenants had to pay higher rent. Under these social and economic constraints the tenants of *bhumihar* and *koiri* castes chiefly adopted tobacco cultivation.⁵⁰

IV

Darbhanga Raj possessed maximum land in Saraisa *pargana*. The Raj was levying Rs. 6/- per *bigha* for *bheet* land in Saraisa *pargana* in 1878. This rate of rent gradually rose upto 20 to 25 rupees per *bigha* in 1920s. As tobacco cultivation required maximum highlands well equipped with irrigation facilities, the rate of rent always remained high. Again zamindars levied some more taxes from the tenants engaged in tobacco or cash crops cultivation, as they were getting better returns from their produces. Per *bigha* rent was apart from the cesses like *muthi*, *likhai*, *hati*, *chutaki*. These cesses were the customary taxed levied on any produce and were also levied on tobacco.

There was a tobacco and grain duty to be paid to the area's landholder on every bundle and every bag of grain transported through a locality. *Bardana* in Patna necessitated a fee of one half *anna* on the *maund* for sale on pack bullocks, while in Tirhut *bardana* (*barana*) was levied five to six *annas* per bullock. When tobacco or any article was loaded or unloaded a boat a cess called *kisti bojhai* at the rate of one *anna* on every boat was levied.⁵¹

Market oriented produces were taxed some extra throughout the colonial era. Tobacco growers were charged from one *anna* and four pies to five *annas* for every *bigha* of land devoted to tobacco. *Khunti* and *khapta* were cesses levied on cultivators at the rate of twelve to one rupee-four *annas* per *bigha* for raising tobacco and for growing special crops respectively.⁵² Where *khapta* generally directed at *koiries* and it was primarily a tax upon opium cultivation. But when opium cultivation slowed down and tobacco cultivation became more popular the tax continued and now the *koiries* had to pay this tax on tobacco cultivation.

V

Fourteen *melas* in Muzaffarpur district and twenty three *melas* in Darbhanga district were held annually, on an average of 25000 to 35000 persons' attendance.⁵³ These *melas* were the locus of economic activities of concerned zone and a number of traders and purchasers of nearby and far-flung areas used to visit them. Hats were the local periodical markets and many of them were famous for certain agricultural products and some other commodities. Many hats of the Darbhanga district were famous for tobacco trading.⁵⁴ '*Ganjs*' were some bigger marketing places located on highways or river ways. Dalsinghsarai, Dholi, Samastipur, Singia, Warisnagar, Rusera etc. were famous trading marts (*ganjs*) dealing in tobacco and some other spices.⁵⁵ Towns, like Darbhanga, Muzaffarpur, Samastipur and Patna were big trading centers of tobacco and as reports reveal only in Patna there were sixteen wholesalers, who were dealing in

tobacco.⁵⁶ Till the late nineteenth century Patna remained one of the premier entrepôts of north India.⁵⁷ Patna had the largest trade of any district in Bengal in which 9398 *maunds* of tobacco was imported and exported.⁵⁸ Development of railways, in 1860s, terminated the Patna's commanding role as regional entrepot.⁵⁹ traders of tobacco used to purchase article from Tirhut and then exported it to Nepal and Bengal.⁶⁰ The Ganga and the Burhi Gandak were the most 'important trade routes' for tobacco.⁶¹

In 1907, the Imperial Tobacco Company started its cigarette manufacturing unit at Monghyr, and soon ITC not only became the largest cigarette manufacturer in India, but it also regulated and commanded the tobacco cultivation, production and distribution in Bihar. This company also solved the financial hurdles of tenants and started to make handsome advances to them.

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