

Concept Note: Bengal-Bihar Dialogue

Wanderer, there is no way. The way is made by walking

--Antonio Machado, Spanish poet

The primary objective of the proposed Bengal-Bihar is to rethink the constant process of making and remaking of the two contiguous regions, divided by politico-administrative, economic and cultural boundaries, in a comparative and connected framework. The various borders between West Bengal and Bihar, like every other border, mark different histories of transgressions and spillage. Histories of flows of people and ideas in between these two regions can be traced back to precolonial times. Although they were separate *subas* under the Mughl Empire, overland trade networks connecting the subcontinent with the inland south-east Asia linked the production centres and markets of the precolonial Bengal and Bihar within a single network. Since the downfall of the Mughals, the administrative borders of the two states have been constantly shifting. Bihar became a part of the Bengal Presidency during the colonial rule. Then in 1912, it was seceded from Bengal and merged with Orissa to form a new province. The first half of the 20th century witnessed repeated attempts at redrawing the administrative boundaries. The colonial rulers carved out a separate district called Manbhum from the earlier Jangalmahal territories and it was included in the new state of Bihar-Orissa in 1912. After decolonisation, Manbhum fell within the newly created state of Bihar which led to strong protests from the Bengali-speaking population of the district. On 23rd January, 1956, Chief Minister of West Bengal Bidhan Chandra Roy and Chief Minister of Bihar Srikrishna Sinha issued a joint statement calling for Bihar-Bengal merger with the support from the Union Cabinet and the Congress Working Committee. The new state, it was declared, would be named Purva Pradesh. Following a mass movement led by the left parties in West Bengal, Bidhan Roy had to withdraw the proposal very soon. When Indian states were finally reorganized on linguistic basis in 1956, most of the Purulia sub-district became part of West Bengal. A final redrawing of Bihar's border happened in 2000 when Bihar when the state of Jharkhand, comprising of the Santhal Pargana Division and Chota Nagpur Division of South Bihar, was created. Inside and outside of a region or a culture is never natural but historically produced. Repeated remaking of the borders and their management, the cartographic anxieties of the two states and the movements of labour and capital had a major role to play in the making of regions. It is from this premise Bengal-Bihar dialogues are initiated.

Colonial rule had a major role in integrating Bihar and Bengal under a single network of capital. The Permanent (Zamindari) Settlement of 1793, Rent Act of 1859, the Tenancy Act of 1885, and other colonial laws and regulations orchestrated a major restructuring of the land and labour relations in eastern Indian rural societies. Accumulation of colonial capital resulted into massive dislocation and inter-regional movement of labour since the early days of the colonial government. A shared history of famines in Bihar and Bengal is an evidence of this. East India company government facilitated the establishment of monopolies in grain trading paving way for a catastrophic famine between 1769

and 1773 in Bengal Presidency which included Bihar. British market policies resulted into the return of famine in East Bengal and Bihar again in 1873 and in 1896-97.

Colonial economy formed new structures of inter-dependence between the regions of eastern India. Following the growth of jute mills and factories in Calcutta and its surrounding areas, a new pattern of labour migration from Bihar to Bengal developed in the 19th century. The Bihari mill workers living in the industrial belts of Bengal like Titagarh, Rishra, Serampore and others mostly came from the Bhojpur region. The informal service-sector of colonial Calcutta was also dependent on Bihari migrant labour who worked as maids, coolies, milkmen, cart drivers, rickshaw-pullers, guards etc.

Another form of labour migration connected these two regions within the larger colonial world. After slave labour was abolished in the British colonies in 1834, a new system of slavery emerged in the form of indentured labour. Migrant labourers from Bihar, Bengal and other north Indian regions were sent to Fiji, the West Indies, Mauritius, British Guyana, Trinidad & Tobago and other places. Calcutta was one of the transit cities for the out-migration of these indentured 'coolies'. From 1830 to 1870, roughly 3,42,575 people were shipped from Calcutta as indentured labour. Before 1870, on an average 17 to 20 per cent of the labourers died before they could reach their destination.

Stories of these out-migrations constitute a significant part of the popular memory of the Bihari society. Folksongs like Sohar and others narrate the stories of the migrant labourers from villages or small towns of Bihar who went to Kolkata or the Caribbean Islands. Bihari migrant labourers in Calcutta brought their own indigenous culture with them. As a result of this, many localities in Calcutta and other towns of West Bengal have developed a mixed culture. The existence of a significant number of Bihari population in West Bengal has also led the government to declare Chhat Puja a state holiday.

Decline of industries in West Bengal after independence did not stop in-migration from Bihar. Bihar continues to be the main state of origin of inter-state immigrants in West Bengal with 63.68% in 2001. Besides Kolkata, Siliguri, the gateway to north-east India and Nepal, has emerged as a popular transit city in the labour migration network of eastern India. One needs to turn their attention towards the border towns of Bengal and Bihar as sites of various subversions of borders in terms of dynamic exchanges of people, commodities as well as cultural traditions. Apart from the flows of migration between the two states, both West Bengal and Bihar have a large share of their population living in other states for work. A dialogue between the two states will therefore help us to compare between different experiences from the two inter-connected regions and draw crucial insights about the changing patterns of inter-regional migration in and from eastern India against the backdrop of a larger history of capitalist accumulation. Such an attempt will be able to identify the continuities as well as discontinuities from the colonial to the postcolonial times which contributed towards the making of the two separate, but deeply connected regions of West Bengal and Bihar.

If one looks at the unfolding infrastructure projects like the Ganga Waterway, the Amritsar–Delhi–Kolkata Industrial Corridor enveloping parts of UP, Bihar, Jharkhand and West Bengal, and Bihar exploring the feasibility of developing a port facility in Odisha, it is apparent that once again eastern

India is all set to become an important centre for trade and commerce. This brings the question of logistics and logistical labour to the forefront. The borders and the border towns like Siliguri, Gorakhpur and others become crucial in this context. As these recent infrastructural projects are all aimed at ensuring a smooth and quick circulation of commodity and labour under the rule of neoliberal capital, it is an opportune moment to rethink the ontology of the borders between the eastern states. It is important to look at how the politics of development has been reshaping the regions by seeking to control and manage the movement of people and commodities surpassing the inter-state borders. A successful dialogue between West Bengal and Bihar will also seek to highlight how the fixity of administrative borders has been challenged by natural calamities and ecological disorders.

Inter-regional migration of populations and ideas in South Asia can be better understood from the vantage point of a comparative and connected framework, and in terms of a *longue duree* structure. Also, one must take into account the various mediations by caste and gender which structure these inter-regional flows and processes of region-making in particular ways. Critically engaging with the histories of social justice is therefore of utmost importance. A critical dialogue between Bihar and West Bengal aims to find out and discuss possible areas of future research along these lines with a specific focus to the experiences of the eastern Indian regions. It is hoped that valuable lessons can be drawn from our shared river basin ecology, history, culture and interconnected economic and political realities. It is only by situating the flow of population and capital against a connected history, one could hope to arrive at a more nuanced understanding of the present political geographies of Bihar and Bengal. An effort is required to change the current imperial and official architecture of dialogue in a historical vacuum where consultation is being defined as consent. This effort is needed to secure a public sphere where ordinary mortals can breathe. While the first set of dialogues will be confined to West Bengal and Bihar, observers from Odisha and the North-East will be invited. In future, these dialogues hope to include Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand and other regions in its ambit as well.

Themes for the dialogue

Following themes have been suggested as broad guidelines for the proposed Bihar-Bengal dialogues:

- A) Migration of populations, and ideas;
- B) Languages, cultural exchanges and interlinked political histories;
- C) Borders, border towns, logistics and logistical labour;
- D) Media and the popular with a special focus to the local medias;
- E) Ecology of rivers and deltas, natural disasters and displacements;
- F) Caste, gender and histories of social justice