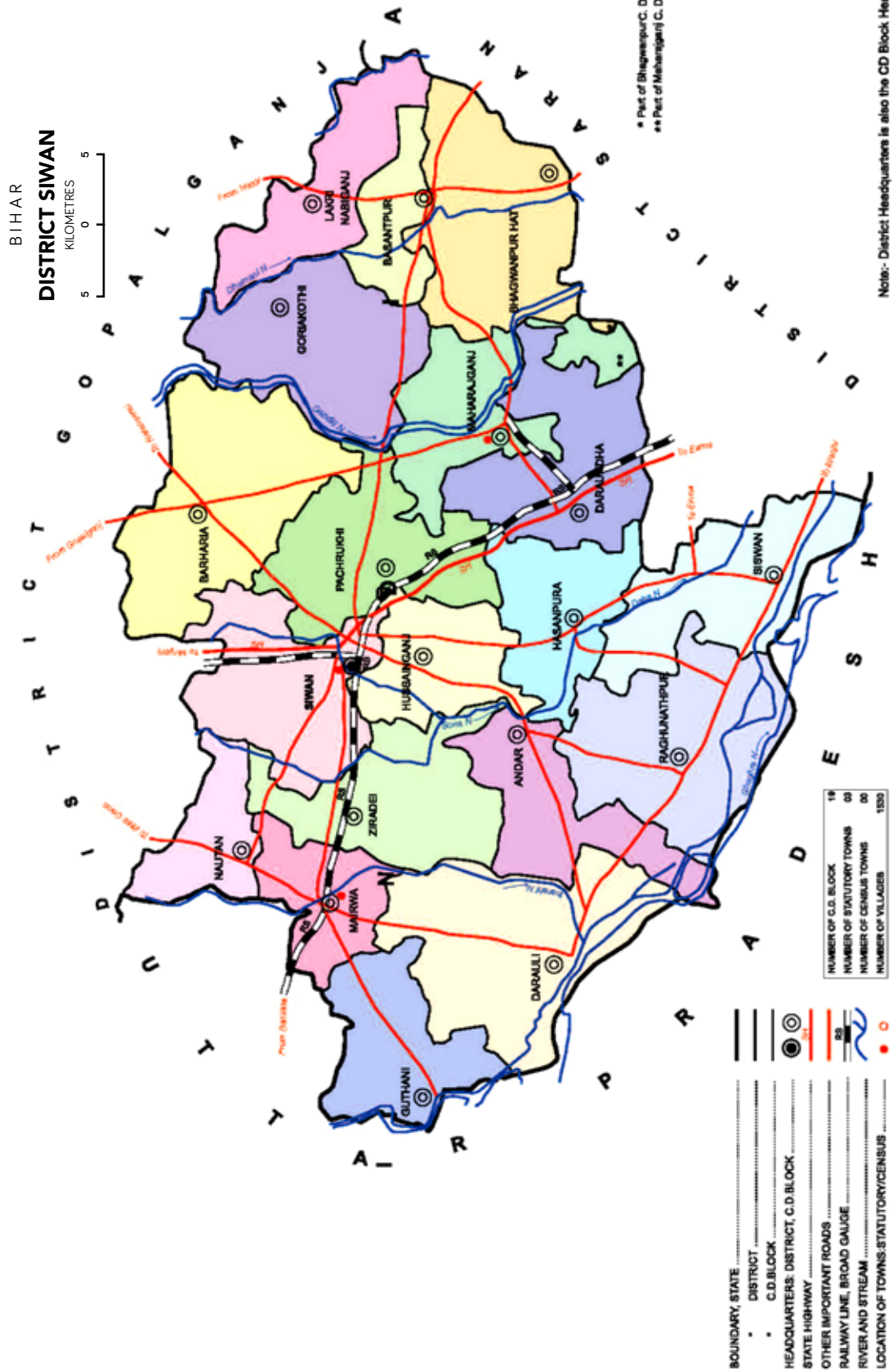


SIWAN





Source: India Administrative Atlases, Census of India

Realising India Series (2017-2018)

District Siwan

This Realising India report is a part of the series compiled by the ISDM Knowledge and Research Centre to disseminate the secondary research put together by the students of the PGP-DL programme at ISDM along with their reflections from the field as an output of their Rural Immersion.

Each part of this series contains findings from secondary research on the district in the first section and individual reflective pieces written by the students in the group while in the specific district. Some of these pieces have also been published in blogs and/or other web portals.

**Names have been changed to protect identities and privacy of persons students interacted with.*

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SIWAN

Culture of Siwan

Bihar is one of the most ancient states in India. It was the centre of power, learning and culture. Magadh, in southern Bihar, was home to India's most famous dynasties, the Mauryas and the Guptas. (District Administration , State Profile, 2017)

Art

Bihar is home to the famous Madhubani paintings. Madhubani paintings have their roots in mythology. It is believed that when Sita got married to Ram, her father Raja Janak asked the villagers to paint the walls of their homes to celebrate her wedding. Hence Madhubani was originally painted on walls. When India was suffering during the great famine the women of Bihar started painting these on cloth and used it as a tool for economic welfare much against the will of the patriarchy in society. (Department of Industries, 2017)

Religion

Buddha received enlightenment in Gaya, Bihar. Gaya remains an important destination for Buddhist pilgrims world over and center for Buddhist studies. Islam, Hinduism, Christianity and Sikhism are the other religions followed in Bihar. (District Administration , State Profile, 2017)

Festivals

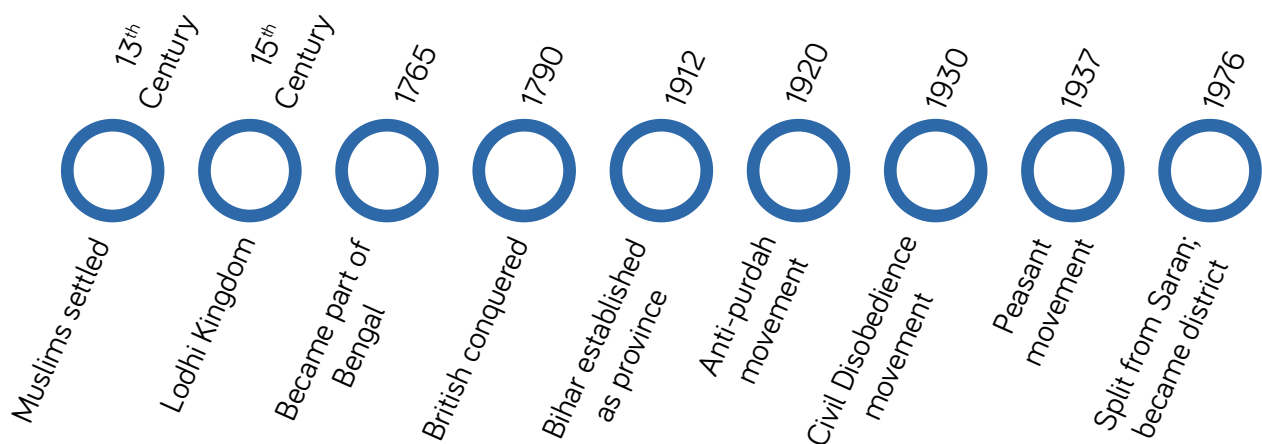
One of the three major festivals in Bihar is Chaiti puja, which is an ancient festival celebrated to thank the Sun God for providing energy to sustain life on planet Earth. The other two major festivals are Makar Sankranti and Holi.

Performing Arts

The Chau dance form, that depicts mythological stories, performed only by men is one of the most famous performing arts in Bihar. There is also a culture of singing folk songs during Holi known as "phagua".

Bharat Ratna, Ustad Bismillah Khan the famous Shehenai player was born in Bihar. Traditionally Bihar has had Hindustani classical style of singing, especially Thumri and Drupadraag.

History of Siwan



According to a local legend, Siwan district is named after Bandh King 'Shivan Man' whose successor had continued to rule over Siwan for a long time. Coincidentally, the name Siwan is also a derivative of the name Aliganj Sawan, after Ali Bux, a feudal lord who dominated the region. Etymologically, 'Siwan' can be said to denote 'Border of a place' in Bhojpuri language since Siwan borders southern Nepal. (District Administration, State Profile, 2017)

Circa 8th century, Siwan was part of the Banaras Kingdom; subsequently in the 13th century with the advent of Sikandar Lodhi, Siwan was brought under his kingdom. By the end of 17th century, the Dutch had occupied Siwan followed by the advent of British. Following the Battle of Buxar in 1765, Siwan was annexed by the Bengal province. (District Administration, 2017)

Siwan played an important role in the independence movement of 1857. The district is also famous for 'Bhoj-puries' who were noted for their martial spirit and physical endurance and who have formed a large part of police and army. A good number of them rebelled and rendered service to Babu Kunwar Singh. The last ruler of Siwan was Ismail Khan (District Administration, 2017)

Post-independence, Siwan was part of Saran district and was then declared a separate district in the year 1972. (District Administration, History of Siwan, 2017)

Geography of Siwan

Siwan is one of the western districts of Bihar bordering the state of Uttar Pradesh. The district is surrounded by district Gopalganj in the north and north-east, district Saran in the south-east, and district Balia and Deoria of Uttar Pradesh in the west and south.

Bihar is home to three agro-climatic zones, out of which Siwan figures into Zone-1, i.e., North West Alluvial Plains. On the basis of physical factors such as soil, relief and drainage, geology and natural vegetation, Siwan can be divided into two natural divisions: Ghaghra Flood Plain and Gandak Plain. Siwan district forms part of the alluvium of the broader Indo-Gangetic Plain.

Owing to its Himalayan source, Ghaghara is the only perennial river in Siwan. (District Survey Report of Siwan, Bihar, 2017)

Climatic conditions

The district has generally a tropical humid climate. January is the coldest month and the month of May is the hottest month. The monsoon season begins in the second half of June and lasts until September and maximum annual rain falls during the monsoon season. (District Survey Report of Siwan, Bihar, 2017)

Rainfall

As per the data available with the Directorate of Statistics and Evaluation of Bihar (India Meteorological Department, 2017), during the last decade, the average annual rainfall in the district varied between 478.6 and 1,386.1 mm. Maximum rainfall occurs during the month of June to September when the district receives almost 80 percent of its average total rainfall. (District Survey Report of Siwan, Bihar, 2017)

Demography

As per the 2011 Census, Siwan had a population of 33,30,464 of which male and female were 16,75,090 and 16,55,374 respectively. As per the 2001 census (Primary Census Abstract, Census 2001), Siwan had a population of 27,14,349 of which males were 13,36,283 and remaining 13,78,066 were females. This represents 22.7% increase in population between 2001 and 2011. Between the 1991 census and 2001, Siwan recorded a population increase of 24.78%.

With respect to data regarding children, there were total of 5,51,418 children aged of 0-6 (5,49,611 in the 2001 census), at a male to female ratio of 1.063. In 2011, Children under 6 years formed 16.56 percent of district's population compared to 20.25 percent of 2001 representing a decrease of 3.69 percent over the period (Census of India 2011).

Child Sex Ratio as per census 2011 was 940 compared to 934 of census 2001 (Census of India 2011).

Administration

The district of Siwan is divided into two subdivisions namely Maharajganj and Siwan Sadar. It is further divided into 19 blocks. (District Administration, 2017)

| S. No. | Sub-Division | Block Name |
|--------|--------------|----------------|
| 1 | Maharajganj | Basantpur |
| 2 | | Bhagwanpur Hat |
| 3 | | Goriakothi |
| 4 | | LakriNabiganj |
| 5 | | Maharajganj |
| 6 | | Daraundha |
| 7 | Siwan Sadar | Andar |
| 8 | | Barharia |
| 9 | | Darauli |
| 10 | | Guthani |
| 11 | | Hasan Pura |
| 12 | | Hussainiganj |
| 13 | | Mairwa |
| 14 | | Nautan |
| 15 | | Pachrukhi |
| 16 | | Raghunathpur |
| 17 | | Siswan |
| 18 | | SiwanSadar |
| 19 | | Ziradei |

Education

As per the 2011 Census, the literacy rate of the district stands at 69.45% in comparison to the literacy rate of 51.65% as per the 2001 Census report. Looking from the perspective of gender, according to Census 2011, male and female literacy stood at 80.23% and 58.66% respectively in comparison to 2001 figures of male and female literacy rate at 67.26% and 36.88% respectively. (Government of India, 2011)

| | Census 2011 | Census 2001 |
|----------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Literacy Rate | 69.45% | 51.65% |
| Male Literacy Rate | 80.23% | 67.26% |
| Female Literacy Rate | 58.66% | 36.88% |

ASER Report Statistics (District Estimates, 2017)

| | Private School | Not in School | Std III to V learning tools | | Std VI to VIII learning tools | |
|-------|----------------|---------------|---|--|--|--------------------------------|
| | | | % Children who can read at least Std I level text | % Children who can do at least subtraction | % Children who can read at least Std II level text | % Children who can do division |
| Bihar | 12.9 | 3.0 | 45.8 | 40.2 | 65.5 | 53.9 |
| Siwan | 19.1 | 0.6 | 54.0 | 50.4 | 71.9 | 54.0 |

Health Statistics

| S. No. | Title | Count |
|--------|---------------------------------|-------|
| 1 | No. of Sub-divisional Hospitals | 1 |
| 2 | No. of Referral Hospitals | 3 |
| 3 | No. of Doctors | 85 |
| 4 | No. of ANMs | 615 |
| 5 | No. of Grade A nurse | 17 |
| 6 | No. of PHCs | 19 |
| 7 | No. of APHCs | 54 |
| 8 | No. of HSCs | 439 |

Source: (District Administration, Health | Siwan, 2017)

In terms of health centres, there are a total of 439 facilities available in the district.

Siwan ranks last among Indian districts in terms of family planning method usage (27.9%). The wider use of family planning methods is an unmet need of married women in Siwan at 56.4% compared to the state average of 31.5%. This is the highest reported unmet need in the country. The capital of the state (Patna) has a much lower average unmet need of family planning at 20.7%. (Annual Health Survey Bullitin Bihar 2010-11, 2010-11)

Siwan ranks 1st in Bihar in least number of chronic illness cases (5,084) as compared to the state average

of 10,219. (Annual Health Survey Bulletin Bihar 2010-11, 2010-11)

| Health Indicators | India | Bihar | Siwan |
|---|-------|-------|-------|
| Infant Mortality Rate (IMR) Number of infant deaths (< 1 yr) per 1,000 live births | 40 | 42 | 49 |
| Maternal mortality Rate (MMR) Number of female deaths per 1,000 live births | 167 | 208 | 203 |
| Total Fertility Rate (TFR) Number of children born per 1000 women | 2.3 | 3.4 | 3.5 |

Source: (Annual Health Survey Bulletin Bihar 2010-11, 2010-11)

Industry

The backbone of Siwan's economy is agriculture with no large-scale industries in the district. It has only medium, small, and micro enterprises (MSME) (Economy of Siwan, 2017). Total number of registered MSME are 3885, and there were 5 industries out of which only 3 are in production at present and the other 2 are cement units (MSME - Development Institute). Area allocated to industries in Siwan is 0.0712 km square out of 2219 km square area. (MSME - Development Institute). The geographical area of Siwan is only 0.023% of the area of Bihar, but the production of milk by the district is more than 3% which shows the efficiency in milk production in the district. (District Agriculture| Siwan, n.d.)

Migration

Compared to other states in India, Bihar has had the largest rates of migration. According to the latest figures of the Protectorate General of Emigrants (PGoE), Bihar stands 2nd in labour migration from where most migrant labourers go to other countries. In the year 2016-17, Bihar contributed 15% emigrants to Gulf. (Nishant Sinha, 28.01.17)

“According to data from the Union Ministry of Overseas Affairs, the number of emigrants from Bihar surged from 36,493 in 2006 to 84,000 in 2012. It has now (Jan.'17) gone up to around 1.5 lakh.” (Nishant Sinha, 28.01.17)

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Stories from the Field

☞ The Mirror of Reality

Since I had never worked in a village before, I wanted to make the most of my Rural Immersion Program. On the first day in the field, we visited an additional PHC (Primary Health Centre) which was a five-minute walk from where we were staying.

We spoke to the only doctor present there to understand the centre. We later found out that there was only one doctor on duty per shift who receives additional support of a mid-wife i.e. only two doctors visit the PHC every day. She told us how she had to travel from the district which was 10 kms away and if she didn't leave on time or didn't have her own vehicle, it got difficult to find transportation to get home as the state of public transportation was quite poor in the area.

I couldn't believe there was only one doctor present in that entire centre with one mid-wife to help her. I kept thinking to myself, what if there were a fire or an accident and there were more casualties than anticipated? What would happen to the victims? Who would attend to them in that moment? The district hospital was 10 kms from the additional PHC and as I mentioned above, the transportation available wasn't ideal.

After a long discussion with the PHC doctor about the cases they attend to, the average number of people who visit the PHC, the state of public health facilities and a lot of other things, I asked her if I could just go around the centre since I had never been to one before. As I moved around it was nothing I had ever imagined of. The hospital looked empty and lonely, it looked like the ones I've seen growing up in horror movies. I was confused, I wasn't sure if I had to be happy because they didn't have patients, or should I be worried?

The floors were dirty, and the beds had accumulated dust on them and looked too uncomfortable to rest any sick body on. The pale walls made sure I wouldn't feel any better. And the equipment, well there weren't any. No, I wasn't expecting a colourful hospital, but the least I expected was a decent bed and a clean environment. How else would people have gotten better, sooner?

The doctor told me that they do normal deliveries here, however for C-section deliveries, one had to go to the district hospital. Two hard-surface delivery beds kept parallel to each other, with a scissor and unclean washrooms in the entire hospital made me wonder what was really going on far away from our busy city lives.

I have always dreamt of becoming a mother and I will always hope to get the best medical service at a renowned hospital in Mumbai. Don't we all? Anything for our children, right? But not all of us have that choice.

—Wyonna D'souza

☞ A school that really 'teaches'

District Siwan in Bihar is bordered by Gorakhpur in the west and Gopalganj in the east. During our Realising India programme we got a chance to closely observe Parivartan's work in around 45 villages. Parivartan, located in Ziradei block holds its own importance. India's first president hails from Ziradei block. This place is also important for having one of the best schools in the district. This school is named "Mahendra High School" after the elder brother of Dr. Rajendra Prasad. During our visit to the various villages across the block we got to know that the high school was built quite early in 20th century and the quality of education imparted here is high. After listening to all these stories, we as a group decided to visit the school and see it for ourselves. We finally reached school and even got the permission from Principal to visit a few classes. During this, we met Professor Rathore. He teaches Physics to all science sections and is a graduate of the class of 1984.

During our conversation he explained to us about the school administration. He said the school has more than 3000 students. Every grade is divided into six sections which further has 150 students each. He said admissions for all classes are on the basis of merit and hence at times nasty fights do happen during the admission processes. In response to this we enquired about the responsiveness of the state government in solving the issue. Prof. Rathore replied that the issue has already been raised by the administration but the Babus (bureaucrats) in Government offices increase seats for private schools rather than Government because they receive bribes to do so. He says, it is a win-win situation for both the parties.

Private schools get extra seats and earn more money while Babus receive commissions per seat that is increased for the school. Because of this the students who are not able to take admissions in this high school are forced either to drop out of the school or approach private schools with heavy fees. The current structure of the school doesn't hold any Laboratory facilities; a new block has been constructed but due to lack of resources they aren't able to access it. The state government is unresponsive to accelerate the process of resource allocation that would help the grade-12 students avail the facilities. The high school being the best one in block is a dream school for students. Students from various nearby villages cycle for 10 kms at a time to reach this school. The Chief Minister's Cycle scheme has helped give wings to many girls and boys to attend school, especially girls to break the shackles and pursue their dreams. There is a ray of hope in the eyes of every student studying here, every teacher and every local person that one day things will change and everybody will have free access to quality education.

—Vinod Chavan

☞ Keeping hope alive

During my visit to Gadar village of Ziradei block, I came across "Kamla Devi", who was 45 years old and was sitting outside her kaccha house which had bottle gourds planted across the roof. She was busy de-husking rice grains.

After observing her for few minutes, I started interacting with her by asking her,

“how you are separating the rice grains?” Gradually, she started telling about her family which included 13 members and their economic condition. How she had got all her daughters married but out of her 4 married daughters she has to have “Gauna” performed for (sending away ceremony) 3 of her daughters. She takes care of 2 of her grandchildren who go to Anganwadis. She spoke of the manner in which both her sons were depriving them of any money. All these concerns keep Kamala Devi worried.

While speaking to me, she introduced me to her husband “Ram Avatar”- who was busy doing something with small wooden sticks.

I asked what he was doing. Ram Avatar replied, “Kuch samaan bana raha hoon (I am making an item)”

I asked, “what item”? He replied, “hai kuch (something)”.

I observed that the family had a few cows. I asked if these were theirs. Ram Avatar said these belonged to him and that he would look after the cows. These cows often only gave enough milk for the family to use, not enough to be sold.

Despite all their suffering, Ram Avatar is hopeful that one day or the other he will get water to till his fields and cultivate plentiful crops. I think it is this hope that is making him survive the hardships of life.

—*Srishti Sharma*

My Rural Immersion Experience: Call to action

The eerie silence in the room stopped. The rays of the sun slowly illuminated the room changing from pitch black to crimson orange. The light woke me up and I quickly sprung up to see the sunrise. It was a beautiful morning in Awin, a small village in the state of Bihar. It was our first day in the village and I could not control my excitement as it was my first field experience.

As a group of ten members we had undertaken a comprehensive secondary research before visiting the district to understand how the diverse actors function in the district, their associated challenges and their complex interrelationships.

We decided to explore Awin as a group of three. We wanted to see first the School in the village and luckily for us we heard that the Anganwadi centre was just opposite the school. We approached a red coloured building thinking it was the school as students in blue uniforms were running around the place. I climbed two steps to see a broken door ahead which was locked. I heard giggling sounds nearby and proceeded towards the room. There were a group of children who were sitting on the ground with a broken floor. Some of them did not have uniforms and most of them did not have textbooks with them.

We asked the Anganwadi worker if we could talk with her and she agreed to have a conversation with us. I was observing the children lost in thought not taking part in the conversation. A sense of powerlessness engulfed me and I became paralysed not able to help the children.

My parents used to tell me that they would walk 5 kms to school and used to do a lot of work other than just going to school like supplying milk to their neighbours and

tailoring to earn some money to go to school. I cannot imagine myself even for a second in their situation back then. My assumptions were shattered like glass and I did not know how to process that experience. I remembered how I used to go to school in perfectly ironed clothes, polished shoes, textbooks and more than one notebook in which there were only scribbles.

These children were just left there so that they could at least get one meal a day. The worker mentioned that most the children do not go to primary school which was really disheartening to hear. We went out to see the state of the kitchen where they made the mid-day meal. It was a dark damp and unclean place.

A plethora of emotions did not allow me to sleep that night. The image of the children from the morning etched in my mind. I sincerely hope that all those children find the spark that gives them courage and hope.

—Roopesh Kumar

🌀 A story from Realizing India

Arun Sharma 28, a boy from an upper-class Brahmin family in a small village, has an Engineering degree and works in a gas plant in Bombay. He was one of those who had studied at a well-known college, but despite his education, he did not respect women in his family or workplace.

My interaction with Arun and his family brought me to realise that the country may have become free of our colonisers, but we are yet enchained to regressive structures of class, caste and patriarchy. These structures keep us from becoming better human beings and continue to oppress the marginalised. During my conversation with him, he only spoke about the men in his family and said that he considered women unimportant. His views about caste were also unpalatable. He remarked that women of lower castes who need to work all day to eke out a living were without integrity. “Woh aurat idhar udhar mooch marti rehti hai (These women keep finding opportunities with men).”

Arun’s family was more affluent than others around them and belonged to a higher caste, but these shackles kept them narrowminded and cruel to their own family members and community.

Interaction with this family shook me from inside and raised many questions regarding the so called educated people in our country.

—Parish Dudeja

🌀 When caste kills

As part of my ‘Realising India’ journey, my group and I went to a district in Bihar. This journey was a rural immersion where we interacted with various stakeholders within a rural community. We interacted with the people of a small village of 81 households. On our first day there, they were scared to speak to us, they viewed us as some government representatives that had come to investigate or conduct some kind of a survey. Under this assumption, they were visibly wary of talking to us. After the initial hesitation, one man told us about an incident that had happened in the

village because of which the atmosphere in the village was painfully calm.

A young boy, of 18 years had recently been abducted and murdered. He was in love with a girl from another caste and this girl had been married off forcefully to a boy within her caste while her boyfriend was murdered.

The incident had happened just about a month before we reached there. As we kept interacting with these villagers, we found out various facts and about this case. What we came to know on our last day was that the whole family of this boy had left the village and no one knew where they went. This came as a shock to me when a saree clad woman holding a sickle narrated it to me whilst working on her farmland. A police complaint had been filed and the due processes of law were followed.

You know, that is the thing with humans, ‘Fear and Shame’ are very powerful drivers of the human species. They were scared for their lives and ashamed of what had happened. Even though they were not at fault, they still bore the brunt of it in addition to the loss of life of their loved one. Oh! such pain.

I was fairly disturbed by all of this—from the most empowered of us in urban communities who can fight against odds—to the bottom 20 per cent of us who do not have such good fortune— ‘fear’ becomes a common driver. While I was in school, we used to recite this poem in school as part of our assembly and prayer. I think it is time for us to remind ourselves and the nation the things that this poem conveys. A poem written pre-Independence holds true and is relevant even today. I present Rabindranath Tagore’s—

“ Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;
Where knowledge is free
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
By narrow domestic walls
Where words come out from the depth of truth;
Where tireless striving stretches
its arms towards perfection;
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way
Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit;
Where the mind is led forward by thee
Into ever-widening thought and action;
Into that heaven of freedom, My Father, let my country awake.”

I end with the hope that not only my country, but we as humanity would wake up and smell the coffee, before it is too late for us and our children and the generations to come.

—Janhari Welukar

Siwan Realisations!

On the first day of our visit to Parivartan in Siwan I was amazed to see a huge, beautifully constructed and well-maintained campus and couldn't help myself falling in love with it instantly. One of my most favourite spots in the campus was the fish-pond where I spent my evenings in peace with reflections.

As I met all the people working in various departments in the Parivartan campus, they would explain their work. It was beyond my imagination to see certain pieces of art the children had showcased in the art department! As I moved along with my team to the next section of the campus, the music department welcomed us with a beautiful rendition of a medley of songs which gave me goose bumps. Such rich

voices with clarity in pitch and rhythm was a great sight to see and listen. One of the most fascinating effort was their aim to save the art of pottery by bringing people from Tamil Nadu to make “Ayyanar” sculptures.

An interesting story of a nurse who chose to stay in a village nearby just for the relationships she had built with the people in the village. She has been the mid-wife for several years and took care of innumerable pregnancies without demanding money and served people of the village in return for whatever they could afford. She one of the most inspirational women I have met. Living in cities, I never had an opportunity to witness people being helped by others around them. I grew up thinking that if you do not have money, you don't deserve to get any services. She just proved me wrong, that too in a tiny village that wasn't very 'developed'.

Around the village was acres and acres of farms, almost empty houses, primary school, private schools and an Anganwadi.

Certain common problems of the people were:

1. Inadequate resources at the Government school
2. Lack of hospitals- the village had no Primary Health Centre (PHC), they had to go to Zeeradei (Panchayat) or to district hospital in Siwan for better treatment and facilities
3. Insufficient rains that led to crop failure.

Sadly, people had no idea about the various schemes which are supposed to help them, this clearly shows that these schemes that are offered never reach the village. These questions made me curious and I was concerned deeply to know the reason. All the government officials we met had notions of development of Siwan, but when it came to the village we visited in particular, I felt the questions remained unanswered.

But an interesting and engaging conversation with the Additional judge of Siwan, gave us an insight into the problem of accountability. Owing to poor implementing and monitoring mechanisms and legislations, government officials do not do their work properly. This insight kept me thinking a lot that day. Had there been a law that guaranteed the implementation of government programmes, people of the village we visited would have received all the benefits.

On another day in the village, I felt that there should have been someone listening to a weeping mother about the loss of crop due to the insufficient rainfall. She had no money to irrigate her fields artificially and was totally dependent on the rains for water. Diesel subsidy, which was introduced to help the poor irrigate their fields by digging bore wells to access the ground water had also not reached the village.

Interactions with others in the village made me feel humble and grateful for all that I have and receive. It also made me realise that us city dwellers had become very transactional and that we would need to reflect more to become humane.

—Abinaya Rangarajan

Do you need to be good to do good?

It is the 29th of October and I find myself in a 200-household village, sitting in a small private school with two of my female colleagues talking to the headmaster about student learning outcomes. As we talk, in walks a man who is introduced to me as 'Vikram Singh' the owner of the school. He's a stout man in his early fifties standing around 6 feet tall, grey hair, wearing a white kurta and dhoti accompanied with a perplexed look on his face.

The conversation continued but this time with the headmaster visibly uncomfortable. Despite being the most educated person in the room, his voice now was barely audible. Vikram Singh on the other hand was very vocal, but alas, he didn't speak about the students. He talked about his family lineage which he followed up with a detailed family tree (9 generations) that he carries around as a medal.

As the conversation proceeded, the headmaster faded away from the conversation and from the room. My colleagues and I found ourselves walking with Vikram Singh as he showed us his school which shared a wall with the government school in the village. He proceeded to tell me about how the government school land also belongs to his family and he plans to take some back to expand his own school ground. This same school also opened into a dairy farm with 15 cows and 10 workers, and a fish-pond.

Do I need to tell you that he owned all of them?

It took me little time to understand and later verify from other villagers that Vikram Singh was the key actor of this village. Generations of compounding wealth had led to this vast divide in the village where on the one hand you had a man who owned most of the village, and on the other 200 families struggling for sustainable livelihoods.

Five minutes into our conversation with him, we were asked about our castes, our family background, their jobs, in short, their wealth. This was a moment which made me very angry followed by deep sorrow for this man and his narrowmindedness. My Christian friend was told how all Christians are good teachers and she should send someone to come stay and teach at the school. My south Indian friend was appreciated for her ability to speak the mysterious foreign language called 'Hindi'.

I spent that night replaying the day, every moment, every word said and unsaid. How a man who was so evidently selfish in his pursuit of private dreams was creating the community's reality. My learning was that maybe we don't need to define 'Good' for others. Everyone defines his/ her own good. Their 'Good', will be founded in their chosen universal human values.

Only in darkness are we revealed. Goodness is not goodness that seeks advantage. Good is good in the final hour, in the deepest pit, without hope, without witness, without reward. Virtue is only virtue in extremis*

* Latin phrase meaning "in the farthest reaches" or "at the point of death"

—Bijesh Prasad

Breaking the 'Grass' Ceiling

As soon as you enter the village chowk, you hear indiscernible voices. Upon closer inspection, you observe a group of women having an open debate in front of men on daily issues that concern them. They did not care about covering their faces when meeting outsiders, which to me was surprising.

They welcomed us and asked who we were and where we were from, to which I replied that we were students and had come to understand life in their village. Upon hearing this, their eyes suddenly glistened. They patiently narrated to me stories of their trials and tribulations that they have felt about the notion of 'Development' in the last decade. They were not too appreciative of the ideas of the current Prime Minister and lambasted him for his nation-wide mission on cleanliness, which according to them was another way of singling out the poorest of the poor and have them publicly shamed by the safai doot (cleanliness officer). I chanced upon meeting a newly elected woman Sarpanch, who gave a brief overview of the village. She reminded us about the district's literacy rate, which happened to be greater than the state and the national average, but she still seemed concerned about the quality of education in her village. She was accompanied by her daughter, who went on to state that there have not been math and science teachers in the village for years. Her daughter was kind enough to take us to the Anganwadi and the elementary school. Out of the eleven teachers listed outside the classroom on the day of our visit, only the headmaster was present to take responsibility for 430 students. Situated opposite the primary and middle school was the Anganwadi comprising of filthy rooms, where all the students also took their meals. The situation to me seemed quite alarming—a whole generation of students were to progress in their life without ever studying maths or science properly and not have an environment conducive to learning. This was later brushed aside during our meeting with the district officials.

The Sarpanch's daughter told us about how it can get tough to manage her own education and helping her family out, especially during the time of harvest, but her pink cycle would get her through everything. A ninth standard student, she would cycle day-in and day-out to go to school in another block. Upon returning from school, she would teach village kids lessons on life skills through sports as part of her training at an NGO, which has been involved in creating local champions and engaging village children in sports and after-school lessons. She told us that we would not have noticed so many pink cycles in the village if we had come 7–8 years ago. Previously, girls riding cycles and travelling outside of village was not encouraged but currently the situation in the village has changed. For them, their pink cycle is more than just a means of transportation, it has become a symbol of freedom, a symbol of pride.

This, for me, was the silver lining. A change cannot be successful if it is not warranted by the change in beliefs and norms. Here, change had begun to bear shape.

Vaibhav Parakh

Aspirations on Wheels

In India, whenever one thinks of Bihar, images of poverty, violence, crime, oppressed women and underdevelopment comes to mind. During my visit to Siwan,

however, I saw a different picture. While in Siwan, I met Tina, a 17-year old girl from the Banthu Sriram village in the district. Tina studies in the X standard and since her own village has only an Upper Primary school, she has to travel 10 kilometers far to continue to study. She cycles 20 kilometers every day.

The Chief Minister's Balika Cycle Programme has brought change to a state that has known crime and underdevelopment for many years. The wheels have now become instruments of change and have bridged long distances to schools for girls. The scheme has positively impacted the backward castes- the Dalits and the Mahadalit families.

I noticed, Tina was confident and assured. She spoke without hesitation and answered my questions with conviction. I have had met several girls in other states where they have fixed gender roles. Girls are supposed to bring water and tea for visitors and aren't allowed to speak to strangers. But in Bihar picture has completely changed.

Tina goes to school and to tuition classes after that and then she goes to the market to buy groceries and provisions and makes new friends. She does not depend on male members of her family and the cycle has helped girls find an independent spirit in an extremely patriarchal society.

I think, these 'Pink' cycles create amazing systemic and cultural shifts. I also met several other girls in the village- Geeta, Santosh and Seema. They also have similar stories. They all want to continue their education. They also talked about a career. Girls now nurture dreams and aspirations.

—Lalit Joshi

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