

# 1. The Province, The District, And The Place Of My Birth

## *The Province of Bihar*

To me the most memorable date, in the history of the world, is the 10th of November, 1871, when I saw the light. I was born at a small town, called Arrah, long the official headquarters of Shahabad, the western-most district of the British-Indian Province of Bihar, adjoining the eastern districts of the Province of Agra, which lies to its west, and which with Oudh constitutes the United Provinces.<sup>38</sup> These contiguous districts and some others of the Province of Agra, included in the two commissionerships (or revenue divisions) of Gorakhpur and Benares, are integral parts of Bihar, and constitute, along with it, one cultural, linguistic, and sociological unit, and should have formed one administrative unit as a Province of British India but for the lack of imagination on the part of the British rulers of the country.

The salient points of the remarkable history of Bihar-particularly the memorable part played by it in the cultural, political and spiritual developments of ancient India-were felicitously summarised in a compendious paragraph by Mr. (afterwards Sir) Edward Gait-later, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bihar and Orissa – in his *Report of the Census of the Province of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa*, for 1901, in the following terms:-

“The Province of Behar is known to us from very early times. The ancient kingdom of Magadha comprised the country now included in the districts of Patna, Gaya and Shahabad. Its capital was at Rajagriha, some thirty miles north-east of Gaya. North of the Ganges was Videha, or Mithila, which included the modern districts of Darbhanga, Saran, Champaran, and Muzaffarpur; south of the latter district constituted the small kingdom of Vaisali. To the east lay Anga, including Monghyr, Bhagalpore and Purnea, as far as the Mahananda river. There are constant references to these countries in the *Mahabharata*. Magadha is even mentioned (under the name of Kikata) in the *Rig Veda*. It was in Magadha that Buddha developed his religion, and that Mahavira founded the cognate creed of the Jains. Soon after Buddha’s death, a Sudra named Nanda wrested the throne from the Kshattriyas, and founded a new dynasty. He made his capital at the confluence of the the Sone and the Ganges, near the modern

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<sup>38</sup> Bihar is a province lying on the middle Gangetic plain and together with United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh) constitutes part of North India. The region of Bihar has been prominent in the history and culture of India and indeed the ancient world for being the centre of the Mauuryan Empire; birth of the first republic in Vaishali; centre of philosophical schools of Nyaya, Mimansa, Sankhya; being the land of Yajnavalkya, the Buddha, Mahavira, Chanakya and many other intellectual giants of the ancient world, and so on.

Patna. Chandra Gupta, a contemporary of Alexander the Great, overthrew this family, and founded the Maurya dynasty. He successfully resisted Seleucus, one of Alexander's generals, and it was at his court that Megasthenes compiled his great work on India. His grandson, Asoka, established a hegemony over the whole of India. He was a great protagonist of Buddhism, and sent his missionaries to every known country. In the fourth century the Gupta dynasty rose to power. Their capital also was at Patna, and their supremacy was acknowledged by the kings of Bengal and Kamrupa (the latter now known as Assam). In Hiuen Tsiang's<sup>39</sup> time North Bihar was divided into Vriti, to the north, and Vaisali to the south, both countries stretching eastwards to the Mahananda".<sup>40</sup>

To the above historical and political sketch, I may add an extract from an address delivered, in 1944, by an eminent Indian historian and scholar – Dr. Radha Kumud Mookerji-on the University of Nalanda, situated in the Patna district, which was the greatest educational and cultural institution of Bihar, for centuries, and which lasted till the invasion of the Province by Bakhtyar Khilji, in 1197, that is, till the end of the twelfth century. Said Dr. Mookerjee : “The University of Nalanda brought to its portals students and scholars from places as distant as Korea (in eastern Asia), and it was very intimately connected with China. The Chinese traveller, Hiuen Tsiang, spent a number of years at Nalanda. To feed her ten thousand students, and hundreds of teachers, ancient Nalanda did not depend on any town market, but on its own fields and dairy farms.”<sup>41</sup> Now that the excavations at Nalanda had been nearly completed, and the great monuments of the past had been, once again, exposed to view, they offer a highly instructive chapter in the history of Indian archaeology, and the site being quite close to a railway station can be easily visited, and should not be missed by travellers in, and visitors to, India.

It is not necessary to follow the fortunes of Bihar during the pre-Moghal period. But with the establishment of Akbar's Empire it again emerged into prominence, and was constituted as one of the major provincial administrations, a detailed account of which is available in that great Indo-Iranian Classic called the *Aiyen-e-Akbari* (or “The Institutes of Akbar”), prepared by that erudite scholar and statesman, Abul Fazl, which is a monument of learning and

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<sup>39</sup> Hiuen Tsiang (602-664) was a seventh century Chinese Buddhist monk, philosopher, traveller, and translator who spent many years at the ancient University of Nalanda studying philosophy and Buddhist texts. The famed University of Nalanda located in the province of Bihar was a great centre of learning in the ancient world until it was destroyed and its ten-storey library burnt down by the Islamic invader Bakhtiyar Khilji in 1197 CE.

<sup>40</sup> E.A. Gait, Census of India 1901 Volume VI (The Lower Provinces of Bengal and their Feudatories) Part I The Report, Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1902, p. 4.

<sup>41</sup> It is quite likely that this address would have been given at Patna University during the Vice Chancellorship of Sachchidanand Sinha. Otherwise, on the University of Nalanda as well on ancient Indian education, Radha Kumud Mookerji has written a voluminous work, Radha Kumud Mookerji, Ancient Indian Education: Brahmanical and Buddhist, London: Macmillan, 1947.

research, and which is available in an excellent translation made into English by Professor Blochmann and Colonel Jarrett. Bihar remained a separate Province of the Moghal Empire till a quarter of a century after the death of Aurangzeb, in 1707. But in the period of anarchy that ensued subsequently, it was amalgamated, in 1732, with Bengal, for purely administrative purposes, by the then Governor of Bengal, from which year till 1912-that is, for the long period of a hundred and eighty years-Bengal and Bihar continued to be united under one Provincial Government, both under the Indian rulers, and also under the British.

From 1765-when the titular Indo-Moghul Emperor, Shah Alam, conferred upon the victorious Clive the *deewani* (or revenue administration) of the three Provinces of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa-until 1833, all the British territories in Northern India constituted one administrative unit, called the "Presidency of Fort William in Bengal". But under the provisions of the Act of Parliament, placed on the statute-book in 1833, the Presidency of Fort William was divided into two separate provincial Governments-one to be called the Bengal Presidency (containing the now four separate provinces of Assam, Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa), and the Presidency of Agra, comprising the rest of the British territories in Northern India, at that time. The latter existed, however, for a very short period, and was replaced, in 1836, by "North-Western Provinces". Under a Lieutenant-Governor, instead of the Presidency of Agra under a Governor. The annexation of the Punjab, in 1849, made the cumbrous title of North-Western Provinces singularly inappropriate from the geographical standpoint, but it lasted long until the beginning of the twentieth century, and it was not till 1902 that the official designation of North-Western Provinces and Oudh (the latter Province having been amalgamated with the former in 1876), was replaced by that it still bears-the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh.

As in the case of the Presidency of Agra, so in that of the Presidency of Bengal, the latter also started as a separate Province under a Lieutenant-Governor, in 1853; it having been governed, for a period of twenty years, from 1833 till then, by either the Governor-General himself, or by a Deputy Governor appointed by him to administer the affairs of "Bengal" which included the now four separate provinces of Assam, Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. Of these four Provinces Assam was the first to be detached, in 1874, and constituted into a separate administration, leaving Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa as one joint Provincial Government. In 1905, Bengal was partitioned, under the scheme of redistribution propounded by Lord Curzon-Eastern Bengal and Assam constituting one Government, with Dacca as its capital; and Bihar, West Bengal, and Orissa another, with its seat of Government continuing in Calcutta. In 1912, however, Bengal, and Bihar and Orissa, were constituted two separate administrative units, under the terms of the Proclamation made, in person, by King-Emperor George V, at the famous Darbar held at Delhi, on the 12<sup>th</sup>

of December, 1911, when Eastern and Western Bengal were re-united, Assam was again separately re-constituted an administrative unit, and the Province of Bihar and Orissa came into existence on 1<sup>st</sup> April, 1912. The two latter provinces continued to be administered as a joint administration until the 31<sup>st</sup> of March 1936, when Orissa was constituted a separate Province, from the 1<sup>st</sup> of April in the year. This brief reference to the changes, in the provincial administrations in Northern India, should be kept in view, by the reader, to be able to follow the incidents of my career, as sketched out in these articles.

### *The District of Shahabad*

The District of Shahabad of Bihar (at the headquarters of which-called 'Arrah'-I was born) is famous for many historical incidents and events during the medieval and modern periods of India history. Baber invaded Bihar in 1529, and the spot is still pointed out at Arrah, where the Emperor pitched his camp, and pro-claimed himself as the ruler of Bihar. But on Baber's death, Sher Shah-later the Indo-Pathan Emperor (from 1539 to 1545)-became supreme in Bihar and Bengal, so much so that, in 1539, Baber's son, Humayun, had to personally advance against him. He was met by Sher Shah's army in the Shahabad district, at a place close to Buxar (now a station on the East Indian Railway), called Chausa, where Humayun was utterly routed and his army put to flight. It was this victory, at Chausa, that secured to Sher Shah the throne of Delhi, and led to the expulsion of Humayun from India for many years. Thus Sher Shah, the greatest Indo-Pathan Emperor of India, who had succeeded in expelling Humayun from India, and ruling as Emperor from Delhi, was intimately connected with the Shahabad district, in which he himself built his mausoleum at Sasaram (the headquarters of the sub-district of the same name), and which is one of the most famous architectural monuments of the mediaeval period of Indian History. It is a station on the East Indian Railway, and well deserves a visit.

Sher Shah's magnificent mausoleum, at Sasaram-and the smaller one of his father, Hasan Khan, east of it-are among the most important ancient monuments in the province of Bihar. The former, which is one of the best specimens of Indo-Pathan architecture, is an imposing structure built entirely of stone, standing in the middle of a spacious, artificial lake, measuring about a thousand feet square, and rising from a terrace, thirty feet in height, and three hundred feet square in area. It stands on a large platform with a flight of steps leading to the water's edge, and built not squarely upon it, but obliquely to its sides. Mounting from the causeway-restored by the British-Indian Government, in 1882-to the terrace, the building is entered through a wide verandah, running all round, with three large arches on each side. The interior of the tomb consists of

a large octagonal chamber surrounded by an arcade of Gothic-looking arches, from which springs a second octagonal storey, and above this rises the colossal dome with a span of seventy-two feet. The grave of Sher Shah lies in the centre, with the right side turned towards Mecca, and is distinguished from the other graves, near it, by a small column placed at its head; while the latter are ranged in two rows at its foot, and are said to be of the Emperor's companions in arms.

The chamber, or central apartment, is lighted by a series of windows, above the verandah, which are filled with stone tracery, and the Mecca niche is richly ornamented with passages from the Koran carved on the stone. Two broad terraces, at each corner of which are cupolas supported on columns, lead round the building, the first being over the verandah, and the second at the base of the dome. Traces of coloured enamelled tiles still exist on the domes of the different kiosques, and also the walls of the tomb-showing that these parts of the structure were originally encased in enamelled tiles. The height of the monument from the floor to the apex of the dome is one hundred and one feet, and its total height above the water is over on hundred fifty feet. The octagon forming the tomb has an interior diameter of seventy-five feet, and an exterior diameter of one hundred and four feet. The tomb is thus remarkable for the great span of its dome, which is thirteen feet wider than even that of the world-famous Taj Mahal, at Agra. Thus for grandeur and dignity Sher Shah's mausoleum is quite unequalled in Northern India. Though its architecture is predominantly Indo-Pathan in character, yet some experts maintain that the influence of Hindu architecture is distinctly noticeable in the design of this famous monument. That, however, is a matter for experts to discuss and decide, and not for laymen.

### *Sher Shah's Mausoleum*

SHER SHAH'S mausoleum had attracted the attention not only of travellers, who had lavished panegyrics on it, but also of the two British historians of Indian Architecture. Mr. James Fergusson, in his standard work *The History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* describes the tomb of Sher Shah (whom he justly calls "the most illustrious of his race") in terms of high appreciation, from which I may quote some general observations:- "from its locality and its design, it is a singularly picturesque object. Its dimensions too are considerable. On the exterior, the terrace on which it stands is ornamented by bold octagonal pavilions in the angles, which support appropriately the central dome, and the little bracket kiosks between them break pleasingly the outline. In the same manner the octagonal kiosks that cluster round the drum of the dome, and the dome itself, relieve the monotony of the composition without detracting from its solidity or apparent solemnity. Altogether, as a royal tomb of the second

class, there are few that surpass it in India, either for beauty of outline, or appropriateness of detail. Essentially Pathan in style, it was erected at Sher Shah's native place in Bihar, far from Moghal influence, at that time, and in the style of severe simplicity that characterised the work of his race.<sup>42</sup>

Similarly, Mr. Percy Brown, another great authority on the subject, in the second volume of his *Indian Architecture* (dealing with the Muslim period), offers the following critical observations on Sher Shah's tomb: "Those responsible for this architectural masterpiece were unquestionably gifted with phenomenal vision, for the spectacle of such a ponderous building-solid and stable in itself, yet apparently floating on the face of the water, its reflections creating the illusion of movement, and at the same time duplicating its bulk-is unforgettable. Viewed as an example of architectural expression, it is an inspired achievement, a creation of sober and massive splendour, of which any country would be proud. There must be few who can look on this great, grave monument, silent and solitary, without being deeply moved by its calm and stately dignity. The proportions of its diminishing stages, the harmonious transition from square to octagon, and from octagon to sphere, the variety and distribution of its tonal values, the simplicity, breadth, and scale of each major element, and, finally, the carefully adjusted mass of the total conceptions, show the aesthetic capacity of the Indian architect at its greatest, and his genius at its highest."<sup>43</sup> Than this there can be no higher praise.

In the town of Sasaram there is also a slightly smaller mausoleum of Sher Shah's father, Hassan Shah, standing in an enclosed courtyard; and about a mile to the north-west is the tomb of Sher Shah's son, Saleem Shah, which was evidently intended to be even larger than his father's, but was never completed; it also stands in a tank. These mausoleums, at Sasaram, constitute perhaps the most famous group of architectural monuments of Indo-Pathan times. The town of Sasaram which, as stated above, is a railway station on the east Indian Railway route to Calcutta, via Gaya-can easily be visited and should on no account be missed by a visitor to India. Twenty miles south-west of Sasaram lies Sher Garh with a now ruined fort, built by Sher Shah on the edge of a precipice commanding beautiful view over the valley and the hills beyond.

After his accession, as the successor of his father, Humayun, on the throne of Delhi, Akbar sent his near relation Raja Man Singh, as his Viceroy to Bihar, and the Raja selected as his stronghold the historic hill-fort of Rohtasgarh (in the Sasaram subdivision of the Shahabad district), where he built, for his residence, a fine palace in Indo-Saracenic style, which also is well worth a visit. The fort of Rohtasgarh is picturesquely situated on an outlying spur of the Kaimur

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<sup>42</sup> James Fergusson, *The History of Indian and Eastern Architecture Vol II*, London: John Murray, 1910, pp. 217-221.

<sup>43</sup> Percy Brown, *Indian Architecture (The Islamic Period)*, Bombay: D.B. Taraporevala, 1942, p. 87.

hills, and is about fifteen hundred feet above sea level. The ascent from the village of Akbarpur, at the foot of the Kaimur range, is over hills of limestone covered with a scrubby brushwood, succeeded higher up by a sandstone cliff, cut in places into rough steps, which lead to the crest of the hill, form ledge to ledge and gap to gap, well guarded with walls, and an archway of solid masonry. Passing over these to the summit, a walk of about two miles leads to the palace built by Raja Man Singh, which was visited, and described by the famous botanist, Sir Joseph Hooker, as follows :-

“The buildings are very extensive, and bear evidence of great beauty in the architecture; light galleries supported by slender columns, long cool arcades, screened squares and terraced walks, are the principal features. The rooms open out upon flat roofs, commanding views of the long endless table-land to the west, and a sheer precipice of a thousand feet on the other side, with the (river) Sone, the amphitheatre of hills, and the village of Akbarpur below.” These buildings in the Indo-Saracenic style, of Akbar’s period, are of unique interest, as being the only specimen of Indo-Mughal civil architecture in the Province of Bihar, and as such affording a striking example of the conditions of military life under the Empire in the time of Akbar.

Another Place of historic interest in the district of Shahabad-and close to Chausa where Sher Shah defeated Humayun-is Buxar, a station on the main line of the East Indian Railway, which is famous for the victory won (on the 23<sup>rd</sup> October, 1764), by the British and Indian forces of the East India Company, against Shuja-udaullah, the Nawab Vizir of Oudh and Mir Quasim, the Ex-Nawab of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, which battle was even more decisive for the fortunes of the British than Plassey. It strengthened materially the position of the British in Eastern India, and ultimately led (in the next year, 1765) to the formal grant to the East Indian Company, of the *deewani* of the Provinces of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, by the titular Indo-Mughal Emperor, Shah Alam (mentioned above), who also surrendered himself to British protection, as the result of the battle of Buxar. At the site where the fight took place there stands a monument with an inscription on it-not far from the railway station-which deserves a visit from students of British Indian history.

Though I have referred to the fortunes of the Shahabad district mainly during the Indo-Muslim period of history, it has nonetheless a great historic past. Along with the other districts comprised in Bihar, Shahabad was a part of the Mauryan Empire of Chandra Gupta and Asoka, and an Asokan inscription is still extant on what is now called Chandanpir hill, at Sasaram. The Chinese pilgrim, Hiuen Tsiang, visited the Shahabad district in the seventh century of the Christian era. In the Bhabua subdivision of the district, at the village of Chainpur, there stands a great mausoleum of Bakhtiyar Khan, which is a noble monument of the Indo-Pathan period. Of the same period is another interesting building, namely the fort at Chainpur, which is surrounded by a moat, and

defended by a stone rampart, flanked by bastions. Such are some of the historic monuments of the district of Shahabad, at the headquarters of which (Arrah) I was born, And such the province of Bihar, justly famous in Indian history as the nucleus of the great Empire of Chandra Gupta, and his world-famous grandson-Asoka the Great.

### *My Native Town:- Arrah*

Arrah, the headquarters of the Shahabad district, had gained unenvied notoriety in the annals of the Indian Mutiny of 1857, and its name, accordingly, figured very prominently in the histories dealing with that memorable episode in the history of British India. The special interest attaching to Arrah centres round the defence of the “little house” (still standing in the Judge’s compound) against the mutinous sepoys from the Dinapore cantonment. While details of the siege are to be found in the standard histories of the Indian Mutiny, there is a particularly interesting account of it given by Sir George Trevelyan in his well-known book called *Interludes in Verse and Prose*.<sup>44</sup> The salient facts are that on the 26<sup>th</sup> July, 1857, the sepoys, having mutinied at Dinapore, marched to Arrah, without any hindrance being offered by British troops. The “little house” at Arrah, which had been prepared for defence by Vicars Boyle, an Engineer, then working on the construction of the East Indian Railway, was held up against two thousand mutineers as besiegers by twelve Britons, and some Sikh soldiers. The attack commenced on the 27<sup>th</sup> July, but the garrison in the “Arrah House”, led by the District Magistrate, Herwald Wake, and Vicars Boyle, the Engineer, met their assailants with so heavy a fire that they rapidly fell back.

Later, the mutineers subjected the besieged to a fire, and also made an effort to smoke the defenders out, but failed in their efforts. They then tried to mine the garrison, but they had not succeeded in their attempt before relief arrived on the 3<sup>rd</sup> August. The privation of the besieged for want of water, was so great that they were driven to sink a well, eighteen feet deep, inside the “Arrah House”, to provide themselves with it. Such is the famous “Arrah House” which is mentioned in all the guide-books to India, and which was declared by Lord Curzon, for the purpose of being preserved by Government, as a “historic monument”. It is a square two-storied building, with verandahs on three sides, supported by arches, which the besieged garrison had filled up with sandbags. The lower storey of the building, which is just over ten feet high, was held by the Sikh soldiers. Such is the historic building for which Arrah is famous in the annals of the Indian Mutiny. *Two months in Arrah* in 1857, a book by J.J. Halls

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<sup>44</sup> Sir George Otto Trevelyan, *Interludes in Verse and Prose*, London: George Bell and Sons, 1905, pp. 129-158.

(published in London, in 1860), is a graphic record of the siege of the “little house” at Arrah, my native town.<sup>45</sup> I was present on a memorable occasion when an old attendant, aged eighty five, who was one of the besieged in the Arrah House, was introduced to a Governor of Bihar, and who was received by him with not only great kindness and courtesy, but respect bordering on honor. He was a Government pensioner, and died at the advanced age of ninety, thus breaking the last link with the siege of the historic house at Arrah, so famous in the annals of the Mutiny of 1857.

The most notable incident in the fortunes of Arrah in the post-Mutiny period, was the visit paid to the town by the King-Emperor George V in December, 1911, where he stayed, for some time, on his way from Delhi to Calcutta (to be able to attend Divine Service at the Memorial Church, and to visit the Arrah House) soon after His Majesty’s declaration, at the Delhi Darbar, of the separation of Bihar and Orissa from West Bengal, and their constitution as full-fledged Provincial Government. As a member of the Imperial Legislative Council, I was invited by the District authorities to be present on this memorable occasion, in the fortunes of my native town, and I shall never forget the scene of genuine and unparalleled enthusiasm amongst the vast mass of humanity that had mustered in force to have a *darshan* of His Majesty the Emperor, and of His Royal Consort. The crowd, which had been trooping in from the neighbouring villages since the dawn, and had assembled round the Memorial Church, was an enormous one, which was estimated to be not less than forty thousand. But there was no disorder until after the service was over. Then, as His Majesty’s car slowly drove out of the Church compound, there was an attempt made by the crowd to rush the cordon set up by the police, which induced the latter to offer opposition for maintaining it. The people were naturally anxious to catch a glimpse of their Majesties by going closer to their car. But as the police would not allow it, the situation was becoming acute, and any moment it might have led to a *fracas*.

No one knew what to do, or what would happen. The police Officers had their orders to carry out, which was to maintain their cordon at all cost; the people were no less insistent by reason of their intense desire to see their Emperor and Empress, on pressing as close to their car as they could, in spite of the Police and their opposition. Just then, when the situation had become tense, one of the officers accompanying their Majesties came out the car, and announced to the Police Officers in charge that His Majesty desired the cordon be removed forthwith, which was no sooner said than done. The crowd set up a hilarious uproar, as they were able to obtain a good view of their Majesties, who graciously stood in the car, which was halted sufficiently long to enable the people to come forward, and have *darshan* of their Sovereign to their heart’s

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<sup>45</sup> John James Halls, *Two Months in Arrah in 1857*, London: Longman, 1860.

content. The crowd then dispersed peacefully-shouting at the pitch of their voice “Jai, Jai” (“Victory, Victory”) to their Emperor and Empress.

Thus a serious situation was tactfully averted by their gracious act of His Majesty George V, and the incident had left an abiding impression on my mind, as showing to what an enormous extent the exercise of imagination, sympathy, and tact can help in the solution of Indian problems-whether those affecting the illiterate masses, or the educated classes. It may be recalled that King-Emperor George V, on his return home, six year earlier, after his visit to India as the Prince of Wales, had (in the course of a speech delivered at the Lord Mayor’s banquet in the Guildhall) declared that what was wanting in the administration of India was sympathy with the legitimate aspirations of the people. He himself was the very embodiment of such sympathy; but, being a constitutional monarch, he was naturally unable to influence the policy of the British Government in relation to India; with the result that ever since the dawning of national consciousness amongst the educated and politically minded classes in the country, there had existed bitter relations between them and government.