



Jake Lyell for LWR



GET TO KNOW... BIHAR!

WHAT IS THE GEOGRAPHY OF BIHAR?

The project area sits within the Chota Nagpur Plateau, located in north-eastern India. The total area of the plateau is approximately 25,000 square miles with an average elevation of 2,300 feet. The plateau region's topography ranges from plains to hills, and its climate is mostly dry. Portions of the plateau are covered in what is known as dry broadleaf forests, while the remainder is dry with poor vegetation. The region is somewhat comparable to regions of the U.S. southwest like northern New Mexico.



WHAT IS GOVERNMENT LIKE IN BIHAR?

India is a parliamentary democracy divided between federal and state power with three separate branches of government—executive, legislative, and judicial. India's state governments are administratively divided, at the highest level, into divisions, then into districts.

In rural districts, like where our partner communities are located, it is further divided into blocks, which are made up of villages. At this local level of rural government, villagers vote for people to represent them in the Gram Panchayat, or village council. The Gram Panchayat then elects representatives to the Panchayat Samiti, or block. The Panchayat Samiti elects the members of the Zila Parishad, or district council.

There are seats reserved at these local levels of government for women, but often it is the case that the husbands of elected women take the seat instead.

All eligible adults are able to elect members of the Indian Parliament's lower house, the Lok Sabha, much like American House of Representatives. The leader of the party who wins the majority in Lok Sabha elections becomes the Prime Minister.



WHAT IS SCHOOL LIKE FOR CHILDREN IN BIHAR?

The majority of schools in Bihar are public, though there are a few remote Christian missionary schools and private schools in more populated areas. In the communities where we work, if children can go to school at all, they usually attend public school.

India law states that elementary education is compulsory, free of cost and that children should have to travel no more than 1.2 miles to get to school. In reality, however, those provisions are not enforced in the region where our partners live. The school dropout rate is high in these communities, due to the physical and financial burden of getting to and from school, the overcrowding of classrooms and the often low quality of instruction and school resources. If children make it through elementary school, they often cannot go further because their families cannot afford school fees.

WHAT IS AGRICULTURE LIKE IN THE COMMUNITIES WE ARE WORKING WITH?

More than 75 percent of the farmers in the area are marginal farmers, owning less than 2.5 acres of land. Another 10 percent of farmers could be considered smallholder, owning up to 5 acres of land. Farmers here traditionally focus on one crop on their land, like rice, maize or wheat. Most farmers depend on the monsoon season to water their fields, meaning they are only able to cultivate one crop a year, and that's if the rains are sufficient. A few farmers cultivate one or two vegetables for their own household consumption if they have the land. Drought, lack of agricultural technology and lack of knowledge in best practices are the major impediments to agricultural development in this area.

WHAT ARE THE FAVORITE SPORTS IN THIS REGION?

Cricket is huge in India. It's considered the national pastime in the same way baseball is in the United States. Football (soccer to Americans) is also gaining in popularity. Children in the region also play a few local games with marbles and any locally available material.



WHAT IS THE RELIGIOUS MAKEUP OF THE REGION?

The principle religion in the region is Hinduism. However, there are minority populations of Christians and Muslims in the area as well. In India as a whole Hinduism makes up 80.5% of the population, Muslims 13.4 percent and Christians 2.3 percent.

WHAT LANGUAGES ARE SPOKEN IN THESE COMMUNITIES?

Hindi is the official language of India. In these communities many different dialects of Hindi are spoken by non-tribal groups like Bhojpuri and Khortha. Tribes have their own languages like Santhali. Dialects can differ so far from mainstream Hindi that they often prove to be a barrier for tribal members in schools and in accessing certain services.

WHAT ROLE DOES THE CASTE SYSTEM STILL PLAY IN INDIA AND IN THE LIVES OF THESE COMMUNITIES?

India officially banned discrimination on the basis of caste in 1950 and developed quotas for people considered to be of 'lower castes' (as well as "tribals" who did not even rank in the system) in government and educational jobs. However, discrimination rooted in the caste system is still rampant today and significantly affects the day-to-day lives of members of the lower class and tribes, especially in the rural areas our partners live in.

For example, if a member of a lower caste or tribe seeks a service or to interact with someone from a higher caste, they might be required to pay a high bribe or else they get the run-around. Marriage and other important social structures are also still heavily influenced by the caste system. These realities ultimately limit the access of our partners to services and political procedures which limits their voice.



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