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Name of the Topic-**Business Communities of Bihar (1575-1733 AD)**

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**ABSTRACT**

Trade, market and business communities are interrelated notions in the historical context where one proceeds from trade to market and from the market to the business communities to understand the process of socio-economic changes during medieval period. Modern Bihar, an important region in eastern India has a special socio-economic and political significance in context of regional history of medieval period particularly during the period under review i.e. 1575-1733 AD. The period of study begins from 1575 AD when the Mughal ruler Akbar was successful in suppressing the resistance of Afghans (culminating in the formation of the suba of Bihar) and ends in 1733 AD when Bihar was merged with Bengal during the reign of Nawab Shujauddin Mohammad Khan, the subedar of Bengal. However in the historical context of sixteenth and seventeenth century, Bihar was usually denoted by the term "Bengal" by the Europeans in spite of the fact that it did have an independent identity. This duality of identities had existed even during the period of Sultans of Delhi when Bihar was either included in or followed the fortunes of Bengal, Delhi and Jaunpur.

This research has attempted to delineate various aspects: a) Identified various business communities active in the region of study, b) Examined the nature of business communities, c) Process of their evolution-both economic and social, c) contribution to the growth of medieval business system, d) Social dynamics of business communities. An attempt has been made to understand their social world both within their community and also outside the community with emphasis on their approach towards, family, faith, etc., e) Continuity and change-in terms of social composition, manner of life, social identity, upward social mobility, etc.

Prior to the establishment of the Mughal rule in Bihar it was strong hold of the Afghans like Nuhanis, Farmulis, Jilwanis, Surs, etc. Suppression of Afghans by Akbar in 1575 AD realisation of its strategic importance resulted in creation of independent suba of Bihar in 1680AD with seven sarkars and later under Aurangzeb the number of sarkars was increased to eight. The importance of this province was such that it was always placed under important subedars who at times were of royal blood. The headquarter Patna was not only an important administrative centre but also commercial centre. It emerged as a principal enterpot for the trade between Bengal and North-West Frontier Province, a collection point for the products of its hinterland that were distributed locally and regionally and an important centre of trade with Nepal and beyond. Besides Patna, Chapra, Singhiys, Lakhawar, etc., were some of the other centres and were known for their specialised product.

In context to Bihar one can discern two broad business communities: a) native business communities and b) non-native business communities i.e. business communities of foreign origin. The native business communities were extensive, heterogenous, hierarchical, segmented by their own identities at times. They comprised of merchants or traders, kothiwals (bankers),shroffs, mahajans, paikars, banians, etc. There existed thin line of distinction in terms of expertise and at times it was overlapping. An important aspect of business communities in Bihar was the migrant business communities which came from different parts of India and in course of time settled down permanently. For example, Khattris, Marwaris, Prachyas (of east Bengal), merchants of Tipperah(Tripura),etc. Apart from these groups, the local business communities were also involved in economic activities but only at local level. Here reference can be made of Kapuriya mahajans, Bais baniyas, Mahuri, Barnawar, etc. An interesting aspect of local business communities was that even the artisans like sunri and Telis were involved in trading and money-lending indicating social mobility.

Of the business communities of foreign origin, reference is of Central Asians, Armenians, commercial groups of Himalayan region and the Europeans. Of them the most important were Armenians, Portuguese, Dutch and English. They played an important role in bringing out the commercial potentiality of Bihar especially of commodities like textiles (both fine and coarse variety),

saltpetre (for military purpose) and opium. However the intense feeling against the Europeans in general and the English in particular in the region of Bihar developed in late 18<sup>th</sup> century when the native business communities began to lose their hold over profitable trade.