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Subaltern Resurgence

A Reconnaissance of Panchayat Election in Bihar

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The decision of the British Council to wind up its cute library in Patna and the surfacing of a new social composition, as revealed in the recently held Panchayat Election in Bihar, probably hold promise of a unique political, academic and cultural potboiler in the firmament of this state. If the British Council Library was the last citadel of a Euro-centric worldview, the social constellation which has emerged out of the Panchayat Election will be the final triumph of a Bihar-centric rural worldview. The chasm between these two worldviews was being witnessed for a long time; but with the decision of the banishment of the library from this benighted state and further democratization and electoral empowerment through the recent Panchayat Election, there will now be a symbolic breach in the dialogue between these two worldviews. If this process of democratization had not occurred in this election, possibly, Bihar could have 're-forged' its link with the national polity.

The Panchayat Election of 2001 in Bihar was held after a lapse of twenty-three years. In spite of being Rajiv Gandhi's pet dream and, subsequently, a part of the Constitutional fief of the 73rd.Amendment, the Panchayat Election was not held earlier either by the Congress party, or later by the Janata Dal, and still later by its progeny RJD. The reluctance of the state leaders of the Congress was understandable. Earlier Indira Gandhi and later Rajiv Gandhi tried to forge direct links with the lower power centres, ignoring the regional power satraps. Indira Gandhi had limited this strategy to the party-fold to marginalize the 'Syndicate' and their regional counterparts by directly approaching the masses. Rajiv Gandhi had then tried to institutionalize it by fabricating the Panchayati Raj structure, as he had disdain and contempt for the regional leaders. Both Indira and Rajiv increasingly perfected the art of 'plebiscitary' politics, where party structures and regional power centres proved to be the stumbling block. Apart from this political implication, decentralization and the accompanying devolution of resource to the rural areas were also expected to arrest the trend of a shrinking home market. With liberalization and opening of the home market, the stagnation could be circumvented by a buoyant rural market which could be ensured through

decentralization and devolution. But since such decentralisation entailed weakening of the state-level leadership, even during the fragmented tenures of Jagannath Mishra or Bindeshwari Dubey or even Bhagwat Jha Azad as Chief Ministers of Bihar in the eighties, election for the panchayats was not held.

Even in the Panchayat Election of 1978 itself, that was held no less than twenty-three years ago, there was visible shift in the political centre of gravity. Karpoori Thakur, the then Chief Minister, had implemented the Mungeri Lall Commission Report, which entailed reservation in the state government jobs, for the lower backwards (Annexure I castes) and the upper backwards (Annexure II castes) in Bihar. After the implementation of the Report, the whole state got engulfed in agitation either in favour or against the reservation. This measure of Karpoori Thakur completely changed the political and social discourse in Bihar. The social divide that followed in Bihar was dramatized in an intensely fought bye-election of Samastipur Parliamentary seat, necessitated by the resignation of Karpoori Thakur, after his being elected as the Chief Minister. A greenhorn in politics, Ajit Mehta, could defeat the glamorous Tarkeshwari Sinha after a fierce fight. For the first time, a pan-backward upsurge could be seen for Ajit Mehta, which was going to script subsequent political development in Bihar.

There were two immediate fall-outs of Karpoori Thakur's measure. First, the lower backwards, distributed amongst 108 castes and who constituted about 33 percent of the population in Bihar, were brought onto the centre stage for the first time and, thus, they got a distinct identity. Secondly, most of the homogenous political formations, based on ideological moorings, got split vertically on the basis of the social divide. The spectacle of CPI was most unnerving. This premier Communist Party, even while fighting unsuccessfully Jay Prakash's movement in the seventies, never allowed its base to be eroded or its organization to be affected. In fact, during that period, the organization got strengthened and emerged as well-oiled machinery. But, Karpoori Thakur's reservation policy completely fractured its organisational homogeneity, from which it could never recover.

Karpoori Thakur's strategy of reservation and Panchayat Election was the stroke of a political genius. In the absence of a full consolidation of his political support at the state level and the possibility of a legislative coup, with a powerful adversary like Satyendra Narain Sinha lurking around, Karpoori Thakur opted for decentralization by democratization of the polity. The mix of 'Panchayat' and 'Mungeri Lall' was answer to this strategy. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) followed this strategy of decentralization in West Bengal. Having been ousted several times earlier, either through a legislative coup or through President's rule, CPI (M) wanted to ensure a substantial transfer of resources from the state level to Panchayats when they once again came to power in the late seventies. They felt that in case of any legislative destabilisation in future, they could hold on to the lower power centres. Interestingly, the process of decentralization was introduced both in Bihar and West Bengal in 1978, when the Congress party was briefly eclipsed from power in New Delhi. Even after the fall of the Janata Party government in Centre, the CPI (M) continued to rule in West Bengal and the process of decentralization was strengthened; whereas in Bihar it had relapsed back to the old power configuration. West Bengal in recent years has witnessed the highest growth in agricultural production and a substantial reduction in the rural poverty, which is being attributed to decentralization. Fortunately, even in the absence of decentralization, the process of democratization could not be stopped in Bihar. After all, the efforts of Karpoori Thakur did not go totally in vain. The Congress in the eighties again came back to power in Bihar with the help of the old social and political network. However, in spite of its conservatism, it had to give space and take cognizance of the reality of the new social stirrings and many had to be co-opted into the power structure from the social justice segment from below and above. During the tenure of Bhagwat Jha Azad, several key portfolios and posts were given to ministers and officers from the social justice group. But, these efforts remained more as a token rather than a substantive effort. As a result, the Congress could not build authentic inroads into these social groups.

By the time Laloo came to power, with the dexterous social engineering in the wake of the Mandal Commission, the electoral empowerment of the social justice group was final and complete. While the legislative uncertainty of Karpoori Thakur hastened the

process of decentralization, Laloo could afford to ignore it because of his relative social and political stability. Class limitation of Laloo also came in the way of decentralization. Coming from the 'Cockney' segment of the local elite, he could never understand that decentralization could develop provincial market and, thus, trigger development. He was politically more engaged about the implications of the collapse of upper caste citadel in 1990 Assembly Election in Bihar, rather than consolidating this gain through development. The subsequent elections of 1995 and 2000 in the last decade further strengthened the social justice group, specially its upper segment. This put the question of 'development' on the backburner. Thus, the political purpose of decentralization, like the land reform, was over for the upper backwards in Bihar. In case of the Panchayat Election, it was feared that the backward coalition which was built so assiduously over the years will be fractured at the grassroot level, specially in the absence of an organised and disciplined party structure. Even after the formation of Samata Party and the subsequent split of the Janata Dal into JD (U) and RJD, the hegemony of the social justice group was not threatened at the state level. But, this could not be stated with certainty at the grassroot level in case of the Panchayat Election. It was probably in the mind of the RJD leaders that a strategic and stable coalition was threatened to collapse, if Yadavs, the pre-eminent caste of the social justice group, jockey for power with the Muslims at the local centres. Further, with the meagre resources at the command of the state government, the decentralization will aggravate the financial crisis. Lastly, with the possibility of an increased transparency, Panchayat Election was not a palatable proposition for the political managers, Cabinet Ministers and apex civil servants of the state. However, the Panchayat Election could not be avoided thanks to the intervention of the judiciary. The broad results of the election largely conform to the above social and political trends in Bihar since the last Panchayat Elections in 1978, which had gradually strengthened the hold of the upper backward castes on the political power structure of Bihar. The most significant result of the recent Panchayat Election is another round of consolidation of the political power of the now famous M-Y (Muslim and Yadav) combination. Though this combination appeared to be fragile at the Panchayat-level elections, but by the time the chairmanship of Zilla Parishads was being worked out, the magic of M-Y (Muslim & Yadav) combination started working. But, along with that most significant and obvious trend,

the recent elections have also revealed a few more interesting phenomena, each of which has got a clear political implication/s.

To begin with, one should first note that the 2001 Panchayat Election will go down in the history of Bihar as a turning point for the electoral empowerment of the lower backwards (the castes listed in Annexure I). Till recently, they were not taken into political or social cognizance in spite of their population being more than 33 per cent of the total. With about 108 castes in their rank, no individual segment had an overwhelming presence as is the case with the Yadav. In spite of being socially and economically marginalized, they were not given any special attention like to the Dalits or other minorities. There was also no dramatic moment for them to forge a pan-lower backward castes unity. The social and economic position of the castes in this category was not better than that of the Dalits. In fact, they felt very deprived for being denied a discriminatory protection. Further, in the absence of a pan-backward class movement like that in the South or Western India, the possibility of any social mobilization exclusively for them was forestalled. Such was not the case with the people from other backward castes.

This was not the case with the people from upper backward castes. While most of the anti-feudal movement led by Kisan Sabha before independence was successful on the economic agenda (like unseverance of permanent settlement), they could not absorb the 'social aspirations' of the backward class tenants. That necessitated the formation of organizations like 'Triveni Sangh' way back in the thirties, responding to the social aspirations of the upper backward castes like Koeri, Kurmi and Yadav. Later, this segment not only benefitted socially, but surged forward in an unprecedented way on the economic front as well. Before independence, establishment of Patna as the State capital, location of Bihar Regimental Centre at Danapur (an adjacent town of Patna), laying of railway line connecting the region to metropolitan centres like Calcutta – all created a huge market for vegetable, milk and other food products grown in the region. The support base of the 'Triveni Sangh' comprised the main beneficiaries of this market, which triggered agro-capitalism and led to substantial accumulation. Thereafter, the devastating earthquake of the thirties led to a sudden spurt in the construction activities which, in turn, led to fortuitous conditions for 'brick capitalism', again utilized by the upper backwards, mostly the Kurmis and partly the Yadavs. In the

post-independence period, with the abolition of the Zamindari system, large amount of '*bakasht*' land was also transferred to the upper backwards. They, in fact, along with the former Bhumihaar tenants of the Zamindari system, led the 'green revolution' in Bihar. Thus, the combination of 'numbers' and 'accumulation' ensured their electoral empowerment, which led to their independent identity. In fact, Srikrishna Singh, the first Chief Minister of Bihar, could marginalize his powerful opponents like Anugraha Narayan Sinha by promoting and accommodating several upper backward caste leaders in the cabinet. Laloo's advent by the nineties signalled the final transition of political power to the social justice group, with the combination of 'HYV seed and Fertiliser technology' and electoral empowerment.

The status of lower backward castes during all those years had, however, remained unaltered. While economic empowerment had touched a fraction of the upper backward castes, the large segments of the lower backward castes remained economically disadvantaged. Politically too they were marginalized. Karpoori Thakur brought them to the centre stage by implementing Mugerl Lall Commission Report, which ensured separate reservation for them. They also had to bear the brunt of the anti-reservation agitation along with the upper backward castes. During the early part of the tenure of Laloo's chief ministership, he found them to be his natural ally, specially during his conflict with the other segments of the upper backwards led by Nitish Kumar. Like Srikrishna Singh, Laloo had also outmaneuvered his powerful opponents by promoting several lower backward caste leaders, like Rameshwar Rai (Amat), PUNCHAM Mandal (Dhanuk), Rabindra Kumar (Tanti), Ramdev Bhandari (Keot), Ram Karan Pall (Gareri) and Jai Narain Nishad (Mallah). Whereas Karpoori Thakur had reserved only 10 per cent of the government jobs for them, Laloo increased it to 14 per cent earlier, and after the vivisection of the state, to 18 per cent. Even after the rise of Karpoori Thakur or Dhanik Lall Mandal (former Governor of Haryana), the lower backwards did not acquire a separate identity. Both the above leaders were considered to be powerful leaders of the Socialist movement, who had given fillip to the macro backward caste movement. But, it was Laloo who through his deft political management converted the support of lower backward castes into bedrock of social justice upsurge. In fact, they could vote freely for the first time in the 1995 General Election, as a result of their heightened motivation as well as better security provided by T N Seshan, the then Election Commissioner of India. Over and above, during the last two decades,

reservation resulting from Mungeri Lall Commission Report has ensured substantial presence of the lower backward castes in the state civil service, albeit at the middle and lower levels. In this Panchayat Election, however, they have decisively established their identity. Not only one from their own rank has emerged as the Chairman of a Zilla Parishad, but a large number of them have been elected either as a Mukhia (3.9%) or as members of Zilla Parishad (3.5%) (See Table 1). This election has, thus, revealed that they no longer want to remain as the electoral fodder of upper backwards and would like to be at the helm of different power centres. For the first time, they have tried to forge a pan-lower backward alliance at different levels. Their success in the Panchayat Election is certainly not spectacular, but their presence in the power structure has at least become noticeable and it indicates a promise of new equation in the provincial politics and social alliances.

A second important phenomenon to be noted from the results of the Panchayat Election is that although there has been a change in the structure of power in the lower centres in favour of upper and lower backward castes, the upper castes or the traditional elites still retain a substantial part of the social and political power at the grassroots level. In India, unlike in the higher centres, there is complete integration of economic, political and social power in the lower centres that is at the village or the Panchayat level. In this respect, the spectrum of Bihar is no different. But, at the higher echelon this integration has been breached substantially. It can be said with certainty that the social forces which are at the helm in Bihar are qualitatively different from anywhere in India. The 'traditional elites' were relegated to the background in Bihar long back. The 'vernacular' elites, who had spearheaded the 'Green Revolution', are abdicating in favour of the 'Cockney' elites. The emergence of the later section is the result of an 'electoral' rather than the 'economic' empowerment. They are not wedded to the Euro-centric model. Nor do they aspire to be the Vernacular '*Bhadralok*'. Their worldview does not extend beyond the Panchayats and their parlance is in local dialect. Intellectually, and through their class disposition, they are equipped to manage just the Panchayats, not anything beyond.

Table 1 : Percentage Distribution of Chairman, Members of Zilla Parishads and Mukhias by their Caste Background

Caste/ Caste Group	Percentage of		
	Chairmen	Members	Mukhias ¹
1. Upper Caste Hindus	35.2	25.3	34.0
Of which (i) Brahmin	8.2	5.0	7.7
(ii) Bhumihar	13.5	9.1	12.1
(iii) Rajput	13.5	10.3	13.4
(iv) Kayastha	—	0.9	0.8
2. Middle Caste Hindus	45.9	42.1	45.7
Of which (a) Annexure I castes	2.7	3.5	3.9
Of which (i) Dhanuk		0.5	0.6
(ii) Mallah / Gorhi		1.2	2.0
(iii) Others ²	2.7	1.8	1.3
(b) Annexure II castes	43.2	39.6	41.8
Of which (i) Yadav	35.1	24.2	24.2
(ii) Kurmi	2.7	4.1	5.8
(iii) Koeri		5.2	6.3
(iv) Bania / Vaishya	5.4	4.4	3.6
(v) Others ³		1.7	1.9
3. Scheduled Caste Hindus		16.9	1.06
Of which (i) Dusadh		5.6	0.7
(ii) Dhobi		0.9	0.07
(iii) Passi		1.2	0.05
(iv) Musahar		0.8	0.2
(v) Others ⁴		8.5	0.04
4. Scheduled Tribes		0.6	0.5
5. Muslims	16.2	13.0	15.6
6. Marwari	2.7	0.3	—
7. Others		0.8	2.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
No. of Chairmen/ Members	37	1160	7120

- Note :**
1. Data based on a report published in 'Prabhat Khabar', June 27, 2001, Patna. Although the total number of 'Mukhias' is 8438, this data relates to 7120 Mukhias, for which caste data was available.
 2. 'Others' include — Gangota, Barai, Lohar, Hazam, Kumhar, Bind, Suryapuri, Mandal, Nonia, Tharu, Cheneu etc.
 3. 'Others' include — Kalwar, Halwai, Kanu, Surhi, Teli etc.
 4. 'Others' include — Chamar, Dom, Nat etc.

The social support base of this elite essentially comprises those sections who are either on the fringe of the market or outside. Unfortunately, this empowerment of the ‘Cockney elite’ is more electoral rather than being economic. Unlike in South India, where social empowerment had followed economic development, there is practically an economic stagnation in Bihar. Admittedly, upper backwards have extended their political support base in the Panchayat Election of Bihar — Chairmanship (43%), Membership of Zilla Parishads (42%) and Mukhias (42%), but the upper castes are still holding the substantial power base in rural Bihar. Their share in different elected posts is — Chairmanship (35%) and Membership of Zilla Parishads (25%) and Mukhias (34%) (See Table 1). This integration of political and economic power could be possible for the upper castes in Bihar in substantial measure, because of a near absence of economic empowerment of the social justice group in Bihar and near collapse of the state. This has resulted into the continuation of earlier patron-client relationship, specially in the rural areas. Amongst the upper castes, performance of the Bhumihars is exceedingly well in comparison to their share in total population (Table 1). Swami Shahajanand’s enlightenment and institutional support of Ganesh Dutt had earlier catapulted them into a most dynamic social group. Their highest involvement in the atrocities in the Bihar plains indicates their social determination and class cohesion to hold onto the power base (See Table 2). Further, even as an agro-capitalist, they are not ready to give up their political, economic and social power. The present Panchayat Election clearly indicates that they have been reasonably successful in that effort.

Table 2 : Distribution of Cases of Atrocities by Period, Area, Caste of Offenders

Characteristics	Up to 1989		1990 to 1994		1995 to In. 2000		All Cases	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Area								
North Bihar	2	4.0	3	8.1	11	13.1	16	9.4
South Bihar	48	96.0	34	91.9	73	86.9	155	90.4
Total	50	100.0	37	100.0	84	100.0	171	100.0
Caste of Offender								
Bhumihar	11	22.0	7	17.5	37	45.7	55	32.5
Rajput	13	26.0	2	5.0	0	0.0	15	8.7
Yadav	7	14.0	2	5.0	2	2.5	11	6.4
Kurmi	5	10.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	05	2.8
Multi-caste	0	0.0	4	10.0	0	0.0	4	2.3
Police	5	10.0	8	20.0	8	9.9	21	12.3
Radical Organisations	5	10.0	12	30.0	25	30.8	42	24.5
Unreported	4	8.0	5	12.5	9	11.1	18	10.5
Total	50	100.0	40	100.0	81	100.0	171	100.0

Note : 1. Agrarian violence is essentially a South Bihar Plain phenomenon.
2. There has not been any change in the geographical spread of agrarian violence.

Besides the lower backwards castes, even the scheduled caste candidates have performed well in this Panchayat Election. A number of schedule castes members have got elected from the flaming fields of south Bihar plain, the very area where they had to face the main brunt of the atrocities, and quite significantly most of them had won in a straight fight. Most of the carnages in Bihar had taken place after the last Panchayat Election (See Table 2). And, most of the atrocities were directed against the Scheduled Castes of South Bihar plain, which is the most developed track of the state. In spite of development, this area has always got convulsed with the peasant movement. This area was also the main bastion of the Kisan Sabha. Subsequently, various streams of the Communist movement had a powerful base there. Ironically, this area is also home of most anti-peasant armed outfits like Ranveer Sena. Thus, most of the atrocities had taken place there, as it was very much linked with the peasant movement. Unlike the peasant movement in North Bihar, in South Bihar it has not only been intensive but has also been prolonged. The peasant movement in South Bihar is due to a combination of several factors; it may be due to the fallout of the capitalist transformation in agriculture or due to the quagmire of stagnation and semi-feudalism. Apart from the economic parameters, some attribute it to the problem of social oppression which has sometimes proved to be the proverbial “last straw on the camel’s back” for the rural poor. However, a social phenomenon does not necessarily follow a unilinear track. The peasant movement in South Bihar could be the combination of all the above factors. In reality, the relation between inequality and social conflict is extremely complex. Whereas one might expect conflict to be particularly common where inequalities are sharp and visible, they sometimes appear in their most acute forms where inequalities are actually declining. In all such cases, one has to consider inequalities not only as they exist, but also as they are perceived. Under the conditions of social and economic change, a real decline in inequality may be accompanied by a heightened comprehension of the differences which persist. The present Panchayat Election has indicated the heightened awareness of the Schedule Castes, who have faced the main brunt of the atrocities, by getting elected as an independent Mukhia (See Table 3). About 1.6 percent of the total number of Mukhias is from Scheduled Castes and they all got elected in the direct contest. In this case, they were not given the luxury of the reservation. Most of the Scheduled Caste Mukhias had got elected in those districts which had experienced worst atrocities, like Gaya, Aurangabad, Kaimur, Jehanabad, Patna, and Rohtas. Some of the districts of North Bihar (Darbhanga, Begusarai, Munger and Supaul), where Scheduled Castes have done relatively better, were also powerful centres of the Sharecroppers’ movement led by the Communists.

Table 3 : Share of Scheduled Castes in General Population and Different Layers of Elected Representatives in Different Districts (in Percentage)

Districts	S C Population	Mukhia
Gaya	29.6	2.4
Nawada	24.4	0
Aurangabad	23.3	5.5
Kaimur	21.7	5.9
Vaishali	19.8	0
Nalanda	19.4	0
Jehanabad	19.4	3.7
Lakhisarai	18.4	—
Samastipur	18.1	1.8
Shekhpura	18.0	0
Jamui	17.4	1.3
Rohtas	17.3	4.1
Madhepura	16.3	0
Muzaffarpur	15.7	—
Saharsa	15.5	0
Supaul	15.5	2.8
Patna	15.5	3.3
Buxar	15.2	0.7
Darbhanga	14.6	2.7
Khagaria	14.5	3.1
Begusarai	14.5	3.5
W. Champaran	14.4	1.2
Munger	14.1	3.0
Araria	13.7	0
Bhojpur	13.5	2.7
Sheohar	13.2	—
E. Champaran	13.1	0.5
Madhubani	12.8	0
Purnea	12.5	0.8
Gopalganj	12.2	0
Sitamarhi	11.8	0.4
Saran	11.7	0.6
Banka	11.6	1.6
Siwan	11.1	1.7
Bhagalpur	9.8	0.4
Katihar	8.8	0.8
Kishanganj	6.6	0.8
Bihar	15.5	1.6

The left parties generally claim that their poor results in the assembly or parliamentary elections are no indicator of their real strength; at the grassroot they are very much present. The recent Panchayat Election results indicate that the above assertion has some substance. Amongst the Hindi heartland states, the Communist movement was

powerful only in the state of Bihar. It had a powerful presence in the Peasant movement as well as in the Trade Union movement. Whereas the Peasant movement was strong in the Bihar plains, the Trade Union movement was powerful in Jharkhand. The genesis of the Communist movement in Bihar was the Kisan Sabha. Earlier, while the CPI had limited its discourse to economic issues, later CPI (ML) and other radical organizations gave sufficient thrust to the social issues. While the CPI and CPI (M) had stagnated, the CPI (ML) had surged forward dramatically in the recent period. With the advent of Laloo, with his slogan of social justice, the Communist movement got a severe setback. The social bases of Laloo and the Left are essentially non-antagonistic. Even then they could not work out a viable joint strategy. The present Panchayat Election indicates that the mainstream Communist movement is still a force to reckon with. Though these elections were not fought on the party line, a closer examination would indicate that the Left got a substantial number of seats (See Table 4). In fact the CPI (M), the weakest of the Communist outfits in Bihar, could win the Chairmanship of Supaul Zilla Parishad; the CPI missed the Chairmanship of Begusarai District only by a whisker; and they have won 7.1 per cent of the Mukhia seats. The results for CPI (ML) were nevertheless surprising. They were expected to get more seats, but could not do so possibly because, in their strongholds in South Bihar, the battle was fierce. The better record of the CPI and the CPI (M) is also due their proximity with the literacy movement which was fairly strong in many districts. In fact, in many of the districts, literacy functionaries have emerged as the successful candidates in the Panchayat Election, possibly because their activities are viewed as 'class-neutral'.

Table 4 : Performance of Left Parties in Panchayat Elections

	Chairmen		Zilla Parishad Members		Panchayat Samiti Members		Mukhias	
	No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage	No.	Percentage
CPI	—	—	47	4.0	495	4.2	302	3.5
CPI (M)	1	2.7	31	2.7	139	1.2	150	1.8
CPI (ML)	—	—	20	1.7	225	1.9	133	1.8
Total	1	2.7	98	8.4	859	7.3	585	7.1
Total number of seats	37	100.0	1162	100.0	11650	100.0	8438	100.0

Note : Figures in this table are based on the information provided by each Communist Party about its own performance.

This Panchayat Election will, thus, go down the history of Bihar as the resurgence of the peripheral subalterns.

The Asian Development Research Institute (ADRI) Society was established and registered by a group of social scientists in 1991. The motivation for starting yet another Institute in Patna was not merely to expand social science research, but to lend it a distinct development orientation and deliver all research output to its potential users in a demystified form. In this research perspective, the broad objectives of ADRI Society are:

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