**Dignified development: Democratic deepening in an Indian state**

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**Abstract**

*Beyond questions of transition to and backsliding from democracy, scholars are beginning to debate the contours of democratic deepening. This paper develops an account of ‘dignified development’ to elaborate understandings of democratic deepening through an interpretive synthesis of the secondary literature on Bihar between 1990 and 2005 when the much-maligned Lalu Prasad Yadav controlled the State’s governance.*

*At a time when democracy is under threat not only in India but across the word, reflections on democratic depth offer us lessons on how democracy might be renewed and reinvigorated.*

India; Bihar; Lalu PrasadYadav; democracy; dignity; development

**The problem**

The proliferation in the number of political regimes that qualify as democratic is among the most remarkable developments of the last quarter of the twentieth century. The reversal of these developments is a major source of worry for political analysts in the present century. These twin processes have generated a rich literature on ‘transitions’ to democracy (Coleman and Lawson-Remer, 2013; Haggard and Kaufman, 2016; Hollified and Jillson, 2000; O’Donnell, Schmitter, and Whitehead 1986; Przeworski 1991; Linz and Stepan 1996;Linz and Stepan, 1996; Przeworski et al. 2000; and Rustow, 1970), and ‘backsliding’ from democracy (Ahmed 2014, Alem´an & Yang 2011, Bermeo 2016, Erdmann 2011, Finkel et al. 2012, Svolik 2014; and Waldner and Lust, 2018). Beyond these dichotomous perspectives, scholars have taken pains to explain the varied processes through which democracy is ‘consolidated’ (Linz and Stepan, 1996), thereby producing a “global divergence of democracies” (Diamond and Plattner, 2001). We have also learned much about defining and measuring the ‘quality’ of democracy (Diamond and Morlino, 2004), and the ways in which it impinges upon and shapes transitions, consolidation and backsliding. In this context, some scholars have explored the ways in which ‘democratic deepening’ (Fung and Wright, 2003) develops the qualities of any given democracy (Morlino, 2012), enhancing the possibilities of consolidation (Linz and Stepan, 1996). Contesting this view, others have outlined the disjunctions between consolidation, quality and depth, arguing that the conceptual and empirical connections between them may not always be symmetrical (Roberts, 1998; Heller, 2000; Huber, 2012; Fung and Wright, 2003; Baiochhi, 2005; and de Sousa, 2005). Beyond questions of transition and backsliding, and of consolidation and quality, scholars find it increasingly more fruitful to debate the contours of democratic deepening.

An emerging literature has sought to define and specify the conceptual boundaries of democratic depth. Contrasted with authors who have used the concepts of democratic quality and democratic depth interchangeably (Diamond and Plattner, 2001) or have explained democratic depth as “the process of developing what in different normative perspectives are considered the qualities of democracy” (Morlino, 2012: 195), a growing body of scholarship insists on distinguishing democratic quality from democratic depth. Some scholars writing in this vein emphasise political participation that supplement conventional electoral practices and representative institutions (Roberts, 1998; Heller, 2000; Fung and Wright, 2003; Baiochhi, 2005; and de Santos, 2005). Other scholars of democratic deepening highlight the importance of mechanisms that permit members of socially disadvantaged and/ or historically oppressed groups to gain effective political influence (Huber, 2012; and Fernandes, 2015).

Following Fishman (2011), I draw on both strands of the scholarship. Democratic deepening is, first and foremost, a process through which socially disadvantaged and historically oppressed communities claim equal membership in the political community. Democracy deepens when such claims are in turn are recognised, endorsed and advanced by political actors. In such a conceptualisation, democratic deepening is not only a top-down process initiated by political actors and social activists but enmeshed with bottom-up processes in which members of oppressed communities exercise their agency. For the purpose of this paper, democratic deepening is thus a conjoined process that entails taking seriously the claims of the oppressed and the manner in which political actors respond to those claims and further them through political and institutional mechanisms.

Analysis of democratic depth assumes particular salience given the growing challenge posed by creeping majoritarianism and widening economic inequalities across the world, including in consolidated democracies. Such majoritarianism is often animated by supremacist worldviews that valourise imagined pasts and strive to assert the dominance of specific social groups. Scholars of politics in India have noted with alarm the growing influence of Hindu majoritarian parties on India’s polity (see excellent contributions in Hansen et al, 2019). They have also documented the growing incidence of violence perpetrated by Hindu majoritarian activists against the country’s religious minorities (Anand, 2011; Ruparelia, 2006; and Sen, 2007). Such majoritarianism is underpinned by widening economic inequalities in Indian society, with top 1% incomes galloping far ahead of the earnings of the bottom 50% of the population (Chancel and Piketty, 2017). Nevertheless, increasing majoritarianism and growing inequalities coincide with a widening of electoral participation (Yadav 1999), an increase in effective contestation between political parties and mounting challenges posed by popular movements against the exclusionary policies of the Indian government (Jodhka and Manor, 2017). These dissonances, hardly peculiar to India, illuminate the urgent challenges to democracy in the early twenty-first century.

**India: Varied trajectories of democratic deepening**

The present paper develops an account of ‘dignified development’ to elaborate understandings of democratic deepening. To do this, it draws on a case from India, often heralded as the world’s largest democracy. India’s significance to formulations of democratic deepening are obvious. Since its adoption of a republican constitution in 1950, India has held regular elections and democratic rule has been uninterrupted (with the exception of the nineteen months in 1975-77 when a national emergency was imposed), allowing it to be labelled a ‘consolidated democracy’. Nevertheless, the Indian state has been erratic in its record of protecting civil liberties and upholding the rule of law consistently across its territories, thereby exemplifying Linz and Stepan’s (1996: 6) observation that “within the category of consolidated democracies there is a continuum from low to high quality democracy”. Furthermore, as Heller (2000) notes, the country’s constituent States demonstrate varying “degrees of democracy” within the unitary institutional domain marked by the boundaries of the Indian nation-state. More recently, Tudor and Ziegfeld (2016) have shed further light on the historical and political dynamics of sub-national democratisation in India. Harbers et al (2017) have suggested indices to measure sub-national democratisation in India

The patchwork quality of India’s consolidated democracy should not detract from the important ways in which it has deepened since at least 1989 (Yadav, 1999; Palshikar and Kumar, 2004; and Yadav and Palshikar, 2009). Electoral participation has widened to include impoverished members of historically oppressed caste communities, as demonstrated through the mobilisation of regional parties such as the DMK and AIADMK in Tamil Nadu (Sathyamurthy, 1989; Jeyaranjan and Vijayabaskar, 2011). Effective contestation between political parties has deepened and widened the choices available to voters. Vibrant popular movements across the country continue to challenge governmental policies that threaten the lives and livelihoods of India’s poorest people. Understandably, such processes have been far from uniform across the country. Democratic depth varies enormously across its many States, making it a highly appropriate site for studying the social origins of such a process.

If India’s experience exemplifies the dissonances within different dimensions of democracy, we must remain attentive to sub-national variations to the general pattern. Some scholars have provided evidence of the ways in which democracy has deepened in select regions and/ or States within the country by directing attention to improvements in people’s well-being. Heller (2000) emphasises the spectacular success of the southwestern State of Kerala in instituting land reforms, reducing poverty and implementing social protection measures. Kohli (1987) argues that a disciplined leftist government in the eastern State of West Bengal secured law and order while also alleviating poverty. On a similar note, Wyatt (2013) avers that the southern State of Tamil Nadu capitalised on protracted anti-caste and sub-national movements to generate greater political participation and institute social welfare programs.

Conversely, authors have also commented on appalling deficits in the democratic experience within India. Kohli (2012) remarks that neopatrimonialism in Uttar Pradesh inhibited people’s well-being in this northern State. Likewise, Diamond (2002: 28) condemns the experience of democracy in the neighbouring State of Bihar as a “degraded one”, while Zakaria (2003) uses the case of Bihar to develop his account of an ‘illiberal democracy’. Journalistic[[1]](#footnote-1) and policy[[2]](#footnote-2) accounts resonate with this view of Bihar, contributing to the view that democracy in that State operate as somewhat of a counterfoil to democracy in India, an internal “other” as it were, representing a permanent blemish on a glowing national record. Remarks such as “India moves forward: Bihar falls back[[3]](#footnote-3)” is a common refrain among observers. Contemporary accounts lay much of the blame for Bihar’s troubles on the caste-centred ethnic politics practiced by Lalu Prasad Yadav, the State’s Chief Minister from 1990 to 2005[[4]](#footnote-4).

An emerging scholarship seeks to correct the skewed perspective of Bihar as a black spot on India’s vibrant democracy. Even as they recognise that the State lagged behind other Indian States on indicators of social and economic development, that corruption and administrative incapacity may have worsened under Yadav, and that lawlessness was rife in everyday life, these scholars carefully situate such developments in historical and contemporary context. Not only do they excavate the historic roots of underdevelopment in Bihar, which predated the emergence of Yadav (Minato, 2011; Gupta, 2016), but they also emphasise the manner in which impoverished members of the State’s historically oppressed caste communities gained a sense of dignity during his chief ministership (Corbridge et al, 2005; Bose, 2013; Witsoe, 2013; Roy, 2013; Blair, 2017). Bihar’s legislature became far more representative of its population than it had ever been (Robin, 2009). An analysis of official data compiled by the National Crime Records Bureau suggests that cases of atrocities against communities discriminated against as ‘untouchable’ (Dalit) and ‘primitive’ (Adivasi) remained lower than national averages through most of the fifteen years of the Yadavs’ chief ministerial tenure. Furthermore, despite continued deficiencies in administrative capacity, the State remained largely free from the recurring Hindu majoritarian attacks on religious minorities that have plagued the rest of India since the closing years of the 1980s (Wilkinson, 2004). Since 1990, Bihar exemplifies the disjunctions of democratic deepening vis-à-vis democratic quality.

Within the formal framework of constitutional democracy in the Indian nation-state, variations are unsurprising. Bihar offers one of several possibilities for deepening democracy within and beyond India. I argue that Yadav’s politics of ‘dignified development’ contributed to deepening democracy in Bihar after 1990. I begin this essay by offering, in Section 1, a conceptual account of ‘dignified development’. In Section II, I outline the specific ways in which feelings of dignity were cultivated among the people of Bihar under Yadav’s leadership of that State. I conclude by returning to the concept of ‘dignified development’ and its relevance for understanding democratic depth in Section III.

**I**

**Dignified development and deepening democracy**

Debates on democratic deepening have been considerably enriched by an earlier generation of scholars who insisted on boring through the electoral, constitutional and procedural institutions at the level of the national state. They disaggregated formal, participatory and social dimensions (Huber et al, 1999) to direct attention to the differentiated and variegated ways in which democracies in fact function. In this paper, I define democratic deepening as a process through which political actors recognise, endorse and advance the claims by socially disadvantaged and historically oppressed communities to equal membership in the political community. Such a definition entails taking seriously the discursive claims focused on human dignity (Anderson, 1999; Carter, 2011; Dan-Cohen, 2002; Kateb, 2011; Nussbaum, 2001; Ober, 2012; and Taylor, 1994) as may be advanced by poor people, exploited classes and marginalised communities. In this understanding, the notion of democratic deepening takes us well beyond the domain of adopting and implementing redistributive welfare policies and affirmative action programs to the nurturing of ideas pertaining to human dignity by political agents.

Recent scholarly debates have considerably enriched contemporary understandings of development beyond conventional measures of economic growth and gross national income. In this regard, Amartya Sen’s (1999) formulation of ‘development as freedom’ have been particularly influential. Drawing on Rawls’ (1971) ideas about the centrality of ‘justice’ as a normative goal for political institutions, Sen argues that the normative ideal for development initiatives ought to be the achievement of ‘freedom’. While both ‘justice’ and ‘freedom’ are slippery terms whose meanings are continuously contested and renegotiated in society, Sen’s interventions nevertheless have shaped an emergent understanding that meanings of development must exceed conventional economic measures. Sen’s persuasions have sometimes been interpreted as endorsements of the view that the goal of development is to ensure people’s well-being (Stiglitz et al, 2009; Easterlin, 2010; Stevenson and Wolfers 2008; Veenhoven and Hagerty, 2006; Kahneman et al, 2011).

A more influential application of the understandings of development promoted in Sen’s scholarship has been the development of the Human Development Index (HDI) by the United Nations (UNDP, 1990; ul Haq, 1999). The HDI projects a composite index that takes into account life expectancy and educational attainments in a country in addition to gross national income. Sen’s insights have driven home the perspective that economic growth might not “trickle down” to the poorest people in a national community. Instead, specific attention needs to be directed to the poor and towards means to reduce poverty, leading to an appreciation that poverty-reduction needs to be an explicitly-stated goal of development. The Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) adopted by the United Nations and many national governments signals this appreciation (Alkire et al, 2017).

Himanen (2014) argues that the ethical core of the perspective of development enunciated by Sen is the concept of dignity: “the worthiness of every human being” to hold rights by being worthy of having rights (Himanen, 2014: 293). Even as the concept of dignity has been vigorously contested among those who have identified it with (unequal) status and (equal) intrinsic worth (Rosen, 2018: 40), it remains at the heart of contemporary narratives of development. For example, the United Nations in its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) declared their “collective responsibility to uphold the principles of human dignity, equality and equity…” (UN, 2000: 55/2.I.2). Nevertheless, we must not ignore the fact that such conceptual enmeshing of dignity with development is not of course the preserve of global institutions such as the United Nations. Long before world leaders adopted the MDGs at the UN Head Quarters in New York, peasants and agricultural labourers stigmatised as “low castes” and “untouchables” were battling dominant elites to ‘dignify’ development in the Gangetic Plains of eastern India’s Bihar State.

Dignified development entails the coalescing of two distinct narratives. On the one hand, the concept signals understandings of development as intentional projects, initiated by political or social agents, aimed at engineering economic and social change (Cowen and Shenton, 1996). On the other hand, the concept gestures towards incorporating ideas about dignity, “the worthiness of every human being” to hold rights, within narratives of development. Understandings of development as *intentional* projects, rather than immanent processes, allow us to identify the specific initiatives that trigger social and economic change. Considerations of such intentional projects as initiated by political *or social* agents alerts us to the possibilities that such initiatives could be attributed to actors beyond governments, such as civil society, social movements and popular struggles. Such considerations enable scholars to think about development being initiated not only by governmental policies that favour agricultural commercialisation, industrialisation, land redistribution and the like but also social protests that seek to subvert the status quo in society. Where such contestations against oppression, exploitation, marginalisation and discrimination imbibe the notion that *every* human being is worthy of bearing rights, the emerging narratives contribute to ‘dignify’ development.

**II**

**Dignified development in Bihar after 1990**

In March 1990, Lalu Prasad Yadav of the Janata Dal was elected Chief Minister of Bihar State. Yadav was Chief Minister for eight years and his wife Rabri Devi for a further seven years: between them, Yadav and Devi ruled Bihar for a total of fifteen years. During those fifteen years, Bihar’s social landscape was irrevocably transformed, as claims for ‘social justice’ permeated the State’s political lexicon, providing an anchor for public discourse to both Yadav as well as his opponents. The Janata Dal’s election call for ‘social justice’ touched a chord with the masses of impoverished populations inhabiting the State, the overwhelmingly majority of whom belonged to communities oppressed as ‘low caste’, ‘untouchable’ and ‘primitive’ communities. A strong votary of affirmative actions for the ‘low castes’, Yadav took care to emphasise his own humble origins as the son of a landless buffalo herder. A member of the Yadav community, one of the numerically dominant “low caste” communities, he identified the State’s privileged castes as the cause of widespread poverty and economic backwardness, and called for their elimination[[5]](#footnote-5) from the cliques that had hitherto ruled Bihar under the Congress Party.

The Janata Dal’s campaign for “dignity, not development”[[6]](#footnote-6) targeted the prevalent understanding of development that obsessed with infrastructure such as roads, dams and industrialisation. In so doing, however, the party appears to have expanded the conceptual definition of development to include within its rubric the idiom of dignity. By 1995, the Janata Dal election slogan altered to “Rozi, kapda aur makan; sabko shiksha aur samman” (Literally: employment, clothes and houses; all will have education and dignity)[[7]](#footnote-7). The idiom of dignity brought the state in Bihar closer to the State’s subaltern citizens, who provided the bedrock of support for Yadav till 2005. Long after Yadav’s departure from the Chief Ministership, the idiom of dignity popularised in the 1990s remains prevalent among subaltern citizens across town and country. He allied his Rashtriya Janata Dal with the Congress Party in 2004. The successful United Progressive Alliance went on to introduce the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, a legislation for social protection which reached the poorest of the poor across India from 2004 to 2014 (Maiorano and Manor, 2017; Manor and Jenkins, 2016). Yadav’s RJD held the Ministry of Rural Development portfolio and was thus responsible for the successful passage of the law in Parliament.

The Janata Dal’s election to power in Bihar during the spring of 1990 confirmed the crumbling of the Congress Party in the State and the elitism that had come to be associated with it. Contrary to the convention of Chief Ministers taking oath of office in the luxurious environs of the Governor’s Mansion (Raj Bhavan), Yadav insisted that his swearing-in be held on the grounds of a public park in the heart of Bihar’s capital Patna. This break with the pomp and pageantry that had come to be associated with the postcolonial rulers in India appealed to Bihar’s subaltern public, conveying to them Yadav’s seriousness in dismantling the hierarchical order that had been cemented by the British and their successors in the Congress Party. That oath of office, administered to Yadav and his colleagues in a public place with the statue of socialist politician Jai Prakash Narayan serving as a backdrop, signalled that the new government intended to decisively break with the colonial and postcolonial past and bring government closer to people.

**A hierarchical inheritance**

Yadav inherited a State with deeply entrenched hierarchies of caste and class. The colonial state governed under the aegis of the Permanent Settlement of 1793. The Permanent Settlement sought to facilitate revenue collection by creating a class of landlords as revenue intermediaries. As a result, the settlement established a hierarchy over the land, with the colonial state at the apex. Below the state- but enmeshed within it- were the estate holders, or landlords, locally called *zamindars.* Landlords were bestowed permanent rights over allocated estates so long as they met their revenue obligations. Theygranted their estates among favoured richer peasants as under-tenures, (*raiyats*)who further parcelled out their holdings to a whole range of middle peasants as sub-holders of tenurial rights with degrees of rights over the land and its produce. At the base of this hierarchy were a variety of poor peasants and sharecroppers with limited rights over the land, but who undertook the agricultural operations by hiring in labour to complement their own family labour. Outside the pale of the settlement, as it were, but central to the production of the agricultural outputs that bolstered land revenue were a plethora of landless agricultural laborers, who toiled on the land with no rights whatsoever over it. Thus, although landlordsheld the tenure of the estate, they rarely involved themselves in agricultural operations. The Permanent Settlement allowed them to extract agricultural surplus without investing in agricultural improvements, thereby stifling agricultural commercialisation. At the close of colonial rule, nearly 475,000 landlords(Januzzi, 1974: 38), representing 5% of the total population of the State (Frankel, 1989: 91) owned some 90% of the State’s area (Januzzi, 1974: 10, n.1).

The tenurial arrangement of the Permanent Settlement mirrored the patterns of social stratification in Bihar (Frankel, 1989: 61-62). Estate owners tended to be ‘high caste’ Savarna Hindus and Ashraf Muslims (Bhumihars, Rajputs, Kayasths, and Pathan). A significant minority of their under-tenures were also ‘high caste’, while the majority belonged to ‘low- caste’ Shudra communities (such as Yadavs, Kurmis and Koeris). The ‘high caste’ landlords were careful to manipulate caste differences among their tenants, thereby cementing caste hierarchy and dissolving class solidarity. Tenants of different castes were granted unequal terms of tenure, received differential exemptions from unpaid labour, and paid different rates of arbitrary tributes. Subordinate holders of tenurial rights typically belonged to ‘low castes’ communities. Landlords often entered into sharecropping arrangements with such subordinate tenants who owned no land and compelled them through beatings, rape, and killings to share up to two-thirds of the harvest. The actual labourers on the land were recruited from Dalit communities stigmatised as ‘untouchable’, who were incorporated into the Permanent Settlement through a combination of coercion and persuasion, mostly the former (Chakravarti 1986; Prakash 1990).

Caste identities were thus buttressed by the colonial land tenure. ‘High caste’ Savarna communities quickly appropriated the limited educational facilities introduced by the colonial state. Unaided colleges were often founded by Savarna landlords. At the turn of the twentieth century, a mere 800 students (out of a population of 20 million) were enrolled in colleges, an overwhelming majority of whom were drawn exclusively from the Savarna communities (Datta, 1976: 417). They went on to corner administrative positions in the colonial state and used their position to buttress their control over the countryside. Their dominance over the judicial services was even more total, since candidates were nominated by the Calcutta High Court and required to be law graduates, again a privilege cornered by the State’s Savarna communities. They were also quick to organise their interests under various caste associations that acted as pressure groups on the colonial government. The ‘low caste’ Shudras were slower to organise, given their social exclusion from educational institutions, the social heterogeneity within them, and administrative discrimination forced upon them by the colonial state: for example, members of the ‘low caste’ Kurmi community were declared a “criminal caste”, an appellation which prevented their recruitment into the police and the army.

Although ‘lower caste’ Shudra communities comprised a majority of Bihar’s population (Bihar, 1931), they were internally differentiated, and constituted- as they do even now- an amorphous amalgam of hundreds of different communities that were socially and ritually distinct from one from another as well as the ‘untouchables’ and the ‘high castes’. Notwithstanding the large numbers, their representation in administrative and educational institutions remained dismal. In 1943, students from among the ‘low caste’ Shudra and ‘untouchable’ Dalit communities made up less than 12% of college enrolment, despite comprising over 60% of the State’s population. Public sector jobs, which offered the bulk of employment in the State, continued to be overwhelmingly cornered by the Savarna ‘high castes’ throughout the high noon of colonialism. Their social dominance was cemented through two centuries of colonial rule.

Three decades of postcolonial rule under the Congress Party, which inherited the mantle of governance, did little to shake up the caste-class dominance of the ‘high caste’ Savarna communities. Although their dominance was subject to continuous contention by a plethora of anti-caste and class-based policies and movements, starting from the Triveni Sangh (Mukherjee and Yadav, 1980), the Naxalite movements (Kunnath, 2012), socialist mobilisation under Ram Manohar Lohia (Jaffrelot, 2003) and the affirmative action programs introduced by Karpoori Thakur during his brief tenure as Chief Minister in 1977-79 (Rao and Frankel, 1989), Savarna caste-class dominance remained unshaken. The land reforms initiated by Congress governments at the Federal and State levels were poorly implemented. Although Shudra and Dalit communities made some gains in improving their social and economic lives (Prasad, 1975), till as late as 1981, Savarna communities continued to disproportionately occupy the top tiers of Bihar’s class hierarchy (Rodgers et al, 2013). It was such a hierarchical political economy that Yadav inherited when he took office as Chief Minister.

**Identifying with the subaltern**

Yadav took care to embody subaltern imagery. The newly-elected Chief Minister began his term by cycling to office every day, contrasted with the retinue of vehicles that accompanied previous holders of that office. Although this practice was soon discontinued, he remained committed to emphasising his subaltern identity. This commitment reflected in the rural clothing style he adopted and a well-cultivated rustic manner of speech. His wardrobe comprised not the crisp *kurtas* and starched *pyjamas* that adorned the bodies of Congress politicians but jaded and faded clothes with which the rural poor could identify. In many public appearances particularly before the media, the Chief Minister did not hesitate to appear in nothing more than a sleeveless vest, a crumpled *dhoti* and a *gamchha* over his shoulder, characteristic wear among poor people in the sweltering heat of the eastern Gangetic plain.

IMAGE 1: YADAV CYCLING TO WORK

IMAGE 2: YADAV DRESS

As a politician, Yadav appropriated elite caricatures of him as a rustic buffoon, introducing heady doses of humour in India’s usually antagonistic public life. While his political opponents were of course regular targets of his laughter-inducing barbs, uncharacteristically for an Indian politician he did not shy away from being the *subject* of humour by professional comedians. For example, when the professional comedian Raju Srivastav mimicked him at a public event *in his presence*, Yadav was seen in splits of laughter and appeared to be enjoying himself at his own expense[[8]](#footnote-8). On another occasion, he appeared on a popular Indian version of the US game show *Are you smarter than a fifth grader?* and indulgently played along with the show’s young participants. Yadav joked along with the game show’s host, Bollywood superstar Shah Rukh Khan, without the slightest inhibition[[9]](#footnote-9). His appearance on the show, while being a Minister in the Union Cabinet, became emblematic of the way in which Yadav embraced humour as a means of reducing the hiatus between politicians and the people.

Indeed, frequent media portrayals of him as a boorish buffoon appeared to reinforce Yadav’s identification with poor people in the impoverished State. Not only did he avoid the use of English in official and political communications, he also distanced himself from the chaste Sanskritised Hindi that had come to characterise post-colonial Congress politicians. Interviews with mediapersons of both linguistic mediums were always conducted in the rustic eastern Hindi that is associated with the State, enabling the Chief Minister to convert every interaction with the media into an opportunity to communicate with the population in an idiom with which they were familiar. In espousing vernacular versions of Hindi, however, Yadav distanced himself from Hindi supremacists (fellow socialists as well as right-wing Hindu nationalists) who argued from time to time for the imposition of Hindi as India’s national language. Rather, he embraced Bihar’s linguistic diversity, frequently addressing audiences in Bhojpuri and other dialects spoken across the State. On the rare occasions he spoke English[[10]](#footnote-10), as at national and international platforms, Yadav emphasised his Bihari accent as a marker of his humble origins.

Parciak and Schacham (2018) have recently dwelt on the manner in which Yadav’s deliberate use of Bhojpuri speech, his insistence of to taking oath of office on Gandhi Maidan, under the shadow of Jai Prakash Narayan, a well-known opponent of Congress rule and general identification with the masses subverted *dharmic* conceptions of authority that were anchored in the hierarchical order. Instead, they argue convincingly, the iconography associated with Yadav invoked a political theology that drew inspiration from Krishna, the mischievous, subversive folk hero who was born in prison, raised by cow-herds and went on to kill the tyrannical king of the realm. Contrasted with the iconography of the god-king Rama, who was divinely ordained to maintain the hierarchical order and establish Rama Rajya, the political theology of Krishna is resolutely one that resonates with the masses, sharing in their joys and sorrows, an iconography that Yadav happily embraced.

**Subaltern empowerment**

Indeed, as Bihar’s Chief Minister, Yadav crafted political strategies that enhanced the assertion of members of communities historically oppressed as ‘lower caste’. Such assertions challenged the idioms of subordination to which ‘lower castes’ had historically been subjected. They interrogated the notion that ‘lower castes’ ought to know their place as social inferiors who should not speak out of turn, or limit their presence to places and roles that were designated for them by societal elites. For example, ‘lower castes’ tended to be associated with agricultural work especially as landless farm labourers. Their presence in urban areas was confined to such informal employment as pullers of rickshaws, manual scavengers, domestic servants, sweepers of streets, and transportation workers. Politically, they tended to be incorporated into the electoral system as clients of powerful high-caste patrons. Yadav’s political strategies undermined such tendencies and served to incubate feelings of dignity among Bihar’s ‘lower castes’.

For one, under Yadav, the Janata Dal convened massive public rallies of the rural poor in Patna, the capital city (Witsoe, 2013). These rallies were termed “raillas” to indicate their assertiveness. Whereas a “rally” referred to an assembly of people gathered in support of specific politicians or political parties, the more masculine “railla” (which played on the gendered division of nouns in Hindi) referred to an assertion of political presence more broadly. Peasants and the rural poor would be invited by party workers to travel to and demonstrate their collective presence in the heart of Bihar’s capital. Poor rural people from Bihar’s diverse communities were represented, as a critical contemporary account (Bhatia, 1996) suggests. Transportation was arranged by the State Government on public expense and the rally was openly viewed by participants as an all-expense paid trip. Although the rallies were punctuated by political speeches, they bore the resemblances to carnivals at which food and entertainment were liberally dispensed[[11]](#footnote-11). Such rallies, while viewed as a nuisance by contemporary commentators as well as Patna’s elites, provided a rare opportunity for the rural poor to assert their presence in the heart of Bihar’s capital. One rally which particularly riled Patna’s elite saw the Chief Minister play host to Phoolan Devi, the “bandit queen” who gained subaltern popularity for killing her high-caste rapists in retaliation.

IMAGE 2: YADAV’S RALLY WITH PHOOLAN DEVI

Two, Yadav shattered the basis on which Congress politicians had hitherto developed personalised networks with brokers, fixers and other political intermediaries. Ironically for a politician who has been constantly accused of promoting casteism in Indian politics, he forged networks with political mediators, *not* on the basis of their caste but on their ability to deliver him votes (Witsoe, 2013). His cronies included Rajputs and Bhumihars, who might style themselves as ritually superior than Lalu’s Yadav community but nonetheless accepted his political eminence. The anthropologist Jeffrey Witsoe (2011: 77) recalls a meeting with Yadav in the office of his colleague where the Chief Minister pointed out to his ministers by their caste names, implying they now served him. Indeed, Jagannath Mishra, the last Chief Minister supplied by the Congress Party to Bihar, and a Brahmin by community, came widely to be recognised as Yadav’s lackey (Guha Thakurta and Raghuraman, 2007: 285). Images of superior-caste Brahmin, Rajput and Bhumihar politcians supplicating before Lalu Yadav thrilled the Chief Minister’s rural constituency, symbolising to them an inversion of the conventional idioms of paternalism to which they had been subjected during the colonial and Congress regimes. Such inversions served to further the feelings of equality among the rural poor from among the ‘lower castes’.

Three, Yadav’s government asserted its control over the State bureaucracy as well as the police that nevertheless continued to be dominated by the privileged castes (Thakur, 2007; Tripathi, 2007; Mathew and Moore, 2011). Early in his tenure as Chief Minister, Yadav was confronted with Bihar’s intractable land problem, a legacy of nearly two centuries of a colonially-instituted land tenurial system that left much of the State’s cultivable land in the hands of a smattering of ‘high-caste’ landlords while rendering the vast majority of the ‘lower caste’ tenants as sharecropping peasants with the most tenuous rights on land. The overwhelming majority of the State’s ‘untouchable’ population lived on the pale of settlement as it were, as landless agricultural labourers. Postcolonial Congress governments did little to correct these inequities, resulting in the emergence of land liberation movements under the aegis of socialists, communists and far-left organisations. Land redistribution legislations were approved but barely implemented due to the personalised kinship networks that permeated relations between the landlords on the one hand and the executive arms of the state on the other. While the bureaucracy refused to implement land reforms, land liberation movements faced brutal repression by the police and activists quickly labelled criminal by the judiciary. In the face of the intransigence displayed by the judiciary-bureaucracy-police complex with its intimate links to the landlords and farmers cornering the largest plots of land, Yadav resorted to exerting legislative control over the executive. Although he spectacularly failed to ensure that the bureaucrats implement the legislatively mandated land reforms, he successfully reined in the police whenever it was called upon by the landlords and rich farmers to repress land liberation activists. Unlike his predecessors, Yadav did not oppose the occupation of private properties carried out by the State’s poorer and middle peasants (Hauser, 1993). Indeed, as one of my interlocutors reported (Roy, 2016:92) while assessing Yadav’s Chief Ministership: “The man did little to help, but he did not hinder us either. He did not favour us, but he did not demean us either. He allowed us to do what everyone else was doing”.

The sociological impact of Yadav’s inaction has been [recorded](http://www.bihartimes.in/articles/bharatputra/lalooland.html)[[12]](#footnote-12) by a contemporary observer. The observer, who styles themselves as Bharatputra (literally: son of Bharat, the Hindi term for India), reports witnessing an argument between a well-dressed presumably middle-class man and an impoverished rickshaw puller. The argument centres on the fare charged by the rickshaw puller from his client: the rickshaw puller demands more money than what his client is willing to pay, but eventually wins out. The client mutters some abuses but pays up what the rickshaw puller claims to be rightfully his. We do not know the dates of this exchange but can infer that it was during the years that Yadav was Chief Minister. The observer contrasts this episode with another one that occurred about two decades prior to Yadav’s ascendance. Back then, he tells us, the result of a similar argument was that the well-heeled middle class client slapped the rickshaw puller hard and walked away rather than meeting his demands. Anecdotal though this account is, it provides us with a flavour of the changing social relations that came to be associated with Yadav.

A fourth way in which Yadav’s tenure as Bihar’s Chief Minister bolstered feelings of dignity among those at the bottom of the social hierarchy was his frequent and unannounced visits to impoverished rural hamlets where members of the State’s ‘untouchable’ communities were forced to live. These visits were contrasted with trips made by Congress politicians to the privileged quarters of villages or excursions planned by national politicians with much pomp and pageantry[[13]](#footnote-13). During these visits the Chief Minister emphasised the importance of education as a tool that could help the oppressed combat oppression and challenge the hierarchies imposed on them by the privileged. To that end, he is credited in some accounts[[14]](#footnote-14) for having shifted schools in villages from localities populated by the ‘high castes’ to locations that were more easily accessible from the hamlets of the ‘lower castes’ and the ‘untouchables’. However, a large proportion of rural children were often unable to attend schools: their household occupation as marginal and small peasants meant their labour was called upon to help with grazing cattle and tending to livestock. Recognising these practical difficulties, the Janata Dal government inaugurated Charvaha Vidyalayas (literally: schools for shepherds) in 1994 (Mehrotra, 2007). These open-air schools were established on government-owned pasture land, where pupils could attend class while keeping an eye on their livestock as they grazed[[15]](#footnote-15). Furthermore, students were provided with a daily cash stipend, school uniforms and books as well as a free mid-day meal.

Although the innovative scheme died a sudden death due to poor implementation (Priyam, 2011), the girls and boys who were able to attend these schools found the experience life-changing since they had never before been anywhere in the vicinity of a school. A contemporary journalist noted that a typical school day in the Charvaha Vidyalaya began with an atypical hymn[[16]](#footnote-16):

*O! pig grazers, O! goat grazers*

*O! buffalo herders, O! cow herders*

*O! Snail pickers, O! paper pickers, O! glass pickers*

*Learn to read and write*

The hymn exhorted children from the most oppressed backgrounds to attend school, thereby holding out the promise of reducing the social and possibly material hiatus between the State’s high caste populations and those at the base of its socio-economic hierarchy. Charvaha Vidyalayas were targeted towards the hamlets of the ‘untouchables’ and the ‘lowest castes’ among whom literacy rates were the lowest in the State. The result was that children of such oppressed backgrounds were able to attend schools for the first time ever. The feelings of equality that access to educational opportunities provided, even if short-lived, was unprecedented.

Further evidence of subaltern empowerment under Yadav’s government emerges from voter turnouts among Dalits and Muslims in Bihar. As Table 1 shows, the electoral turnouts among Dalits and Muslims during the 1995 and 2000 Vidhan Sabha elections was higher than the State-level turnouts, signalling their greater involvement in electoral politics compared with members of other communities. However, as Table 1 also shows, such electoral participation petered out in and after 2005.

 Table 1: Voter turnouts among select social groups in Bihar, 1995-2010

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Community | 1995 | 2000 | 2005 (Feb) | 2005 (Oct) | 2010 |
| Dalits | 70.2 | 62.9 | Chamar: 45.9Pasi: 38.8Other SC: 75 | Chamar: 45.8Pasi: 44.8Other SC: 41.2 | Chamar: 56.1Pasi: 62.3Other SC: 63.8 |
| Muslims | N.A. | 64.3 | 35 | 43.5 | 51.6 |
| State average | 60.5 | 62.6 | 46 | 45.8 | 52.7 |

Source: CSDS Data Unit

**Protection of minorities**

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Yadav bolstered feelings of dignity among the State’s beleaguered Dalit and Muslim communities. His ascendance emboldened Dalits in their claims for fair wages and respect from their dominant caste landlords. They were also less willing to quietly acquiesce in their own exploitation and discrimination and more willing and able to retaliate against dominant caste mistreatment of their persons and properties. The result was an intensification of Bihar’s infamous caste wars, with Backward Castes and Dalits retaliating against violence perpetrated by militias of the dominant castes. For example, in December 1991, members of a dominant caste outfit that went by the name Savarna Liberation Front were alleged to have gangraped and murdered ten Dalit women. In February 1992, alleged left-wing militants, all either Dalit or Backward Caste, supposedly massacred thirty-five dominant caste landlords in retribution[[17]](#footnote-17). The opposition Congress party immediately blamed the Yadav leaders of the Janata Dal for fuelling antipathy among the subaltern population against the dominant castes: party leaders directly held the Chief Minister’s incendiary speeches on social justice responsible for the massacre (*India Today*, 2013; *The Independent*, 1995[[18]](#footnote-18)). While there is little evidence to support these accusations against Yadav, there is no doubt that the one-sided perpetration of violence on the State’s Dalit communities was no longer possible.

Data assembled by noted human rights activist Prakash Louis (2002) and made publicly available by the South Asia Terrorism Portal suggests as much[[19]](#footnote-19). Louis chronicles massacres perpetrated in the State’s central region, which gained notoriety in the final quarter of the twentieth century as Bihar’s flaming fields. Between 1977 and 1990, there were as many as 31 instances of caste-based massacres that ravaged this region. All but two were perpetrated by the ‘high-caste’ landlords against small and marginal peasants or landless labourers, mostly of ‘lower’ or ‘untouchable’ castes. Between 1990 and 2001, the number of caste-based massacres nearly doubled and conformed to the general pattern of ‘high-caste’ landlords terrorising ‘lower caste’ peasants and ‘untouchable’ labourers. Nevertheless, that the ‘lower castes’ and ‘untouchables’ were willing and able to retaliate is clear from the fact that at least eight of these massacres targeted the ‘high caste’ landlords. Furthermore, the police- widely perceived by Bihar’s subaltern populations as handmaiden of caste oppression- was targeted in one instance. The aftermath of a particularly ghastly massacre in the village of Laxmanpur Bathe perpetrated by the Ranveer Sena, a paramilitary outfit claiming to defend the caste supremacy of the influential Bhumihar community, led to the Janata Dal government constituting the Amir Das commission. Mandated to expose the administrative links enjoyed by members of the outfit, its constitution signalled the government’s commitment to ensuring that the State’s Dalit communities felt they were equal before the law.

Indeed, an important contribution of Yadav’s Janata Dal government was the containment of violence against the State’s Dalit citizens. Although crime rates in general remained high in the State, and significantly higher than the national average, the rate of crime against Dalits, measured by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) appears to be much *below* the national average throughout years in which the Yadav couple governed Bihar. The data presented in Table 1, comparing data on atrocities against Dalits in the early years of Yadav’s government with that of his successor Nitish Kumar, bears this out. The table also situates Bihar in comparative perspective vis-à-vis other northern Indian States with similar social structures. National averages are also provided for further contextualisation. The data[[20]](#footnote-20), compiled by the Union Government’s National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) suggests that, with the exception of his last year in government, crimes against Dalits were effectively contained by Yadav’s government. This was in sharp contrast to other north Indian States possessing similar social structures and indeed the national average.

Table 2: Crimes against Dalits, select States, 1993-1995, 2002-2004 & 2006-2008

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| States | Yadav’s early years (1993-95) | Yadav’s later years (2002-04) | Kumar’s early years (2006-08) |
| Bihar | 0.8 | 0.8 | 0.8 | 1.9 | 2 | 3 | 2.2 | 3 | 3.8 |
| Gujarat | 3.8 | 4.4 | 3.9 | 2.6 | 2.2 | 2.4 | 2.2 | 3 | 3.8 |
| Madhya Pradesh | 5.3 | 5.3 | 5.5 | 11.6 | 8.7 | 7.3 | 6.3 | 6 | 4.3 |
| Rajasthan | 9.3 | 10.2 | 10.8 | 7.8 | 7.3 | 7.2 | 6.2 | 6.5 | 6.6 |
| Uttar Pradesh | 7.1 | 11 | 9.5 | 4 | 1.6 | 2.1 | 2.7 | 3.3 | 4.2 |
| All-India | 2.8 | 3.8 | 3.6 |  | 2.5 | 2.5 | 2.4 | 2.6 | 2.9 |

Source: NCRB, various years: author’s compilation. The figures represent crimes per 100,000 population of Dalits.

Yadav’s efforts at ensuring peace for the State’s Muslim minorities in the wake of a resurgent Hindutva are also notable. Within a few months of taking over the government, the Janata Dal government in Bihar was faced with the unenviable situation of confronting the chariot procession led by the Hindu nationalist LK Advani poised to enter the State. The procession’s impact on Hindu-Muslim relations in other States left the administration worried about the possibility of inter-communal violence and general lawlessness. Muslims, already battered by the riots in Bhagalpur barely a year prior, were particularly fearful of the violence in which they were sure to be targeted on account of their faith. Calming their fears, Yadav rose to the occasion and made a public appeal to Advani to call off the procession[[21]](#footnote-21).

I appeal to Mr Advani to return to Delhi in the nation’s interest.

If human beings die, who will ring the temple bell? If none is alive, who will pray at the mosque?

I’m on a 24-hour alert. From the Government’s side we have given him full security. But we also face the fact that if a political leader’s life is valuable, so is the life of the common man. In this State under my rule, we will never allow communal violence to spread. Wherever there’s the danger of riots, even at the cost of losing political power, we will never compromise.

Yadav’s impassioned appeal to Advani, urging him to call off the *Rath Yatra* fell on deaf ears. Nevertheless, it conveyed to the State’s beleaguered Muslims that the government took its responsibility to protect them seriously in the way few previous governments had done. While the Janata Dal government was careful not to allow the issue to be cast in terms of Hindu-Muslim binaries and insisted, correctly, that Advani’s Rath Yatra violated the law, the narrative woven by Yadav made it clear that Muslims would not face any collective harm under his dispensation. Advani ignored Yadav’s appeal and proceeded with his Rath Yatra into the State, declaring:

*People say: why don’t you respect the court’s verdict? Can courts decide whether Ram was born or not?*

*All I say [to Yadav] is don’t get in the way. For this chariot is the chariot of the people which has embarked from Somnath with a firm resolve to reach Ayodhya on October 30 and begin kar seva at the very spot [that Ram was born].*

*Who can stop this? Which government can?*

Advani was arrested on October 23, 1990. By preventing the Rath Yatra from traversing the State, the Bihar Government averted a potential bloodbath. For all the criticism of ineffectiveness levelled against Yadav’s administration, he was remarkably effective in maintaining peace between Hindus and Muslims at a time much of northern, central and western India was engulfed in rioting. Wilkinson, reporting on the absence on inter-communal violence in a State criticised for its putative lawlessness, interviewed Yadav on the possible reason. “The political will of the state government,” Wilkinson reports Yadav as saying, “was clear.” (Wilkinson, 2006: 86). Yadav’s administration arrested the Hindu militants returning from the failed attempt to destroy the mosque (Advani’s arrest led to chaos among their ranks) before they could reach their towns and villages, and he threatened district magistrates and heads of police stations that they would lose their jobs if even a single riot broke out within their jurisdictions. On the one occasion when a riot did erupt, Yadav trooped down to the affected village, inhabited largely by Muslims, and personally ensured that normalcy was restored as quickly as possible, though not before 37 people were killed (Engineer, 1992; India Today[[22]](#footnote-22), 1992). The impact of such vigilance warmed the State’s Muslims towards the Janata Dal government and convinced them that they were indeed equal members of the political community in Bihar.

Evidence of the Yadav government’s effectiveness at controlling inter-communal strife between Hindus and Muslims is provided by the Varshney-Wilkinson dataset during a critical period in India’s history. A comparison of Bihar with the State of Gujarat, otherwise upheld as a model of good governance, over a fifteen-year period from 1980 to 1995 is instructive. The data presented in Table 2 suggests that while both Bihar and Gujarat witnessed a spike in Hindu-Muslim strife through the 1980s, the government in Bihar was more effective in containing the fires than its counterpart in Gujarat. In the early 1980s, riots in Gujarat outstripped riots in Bihar by a factor of over 2 to 1. In over a decade, the chasm between the States had widened to a factor of 4.5 to 1. In the single month of October 1990, when Advani’s Rath Yatra blazed across India, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake, Uttar Pradesh witnessed 25 riots, Gujarat 24 and Maharashtra six. By contrast, Yadav’s newly-inducted government managed to contain the violence to two incidents. Yadav was considerably less successful in maintaining the social peace in the immediate aftermath of the demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992: even so, Bihar witnessed fewer riots than considerably wealthier States with supposedly better records of governance such as Maharashtra and Gujarat[[23]](#footnote-23).

Table 3: Riots in Bihar and Gujarat, 1980-1995

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Period | Bihar | Gujarat |
| April 1980- March 1985 | 11 | 25 |
| April 1985- March 1990 | 19 | 101 |
| April 1990- March 1995 | 16 | 72 |

Source: Varshney-Wilkinson dataset

Observers have often cast Yadav’s interventions in the aftermath of Advani’s failed foray as an example of vote-bank politics. In such narratives, Yadav merely used the fears among Muslims in the wake of Advani’s Rath Yatra to consolidate Muslims as a vote bank rather than caring about their protection and dignity. Such observations ignore the obvious: why would Yadav, consummate politician that he was, not use the opportunity to consolidate the Hindu vote bank instead. After all, Hindus were 80% of the State’s population and such a move would have assured him their unflinching support both electorally and socially. Instead, Yadav chose to arrest Advani, thereby preventing large-scale communal violence and assuring religious minorities that they would be protected against majoritarian violence.

**A representative government**

A dignified conception of development ensured a more representative government for Bihar. Policies favourable to members of historically oppressed communities were attempted, in some cases successfully. Their political and cultural symbols began to be accorded official recognition at par with observances of the dominant communities. Violence against Dalits and Muslims was contained. The State’s legislature became far more representative of the population than ever before. Thus, the emergence of a political vocabulary of social justice and the incubation of feelings of equality among the State’s subaltern populations were accompanied by concrete changes in policies and institutions.

Among the first actions of Yadav’s Janata Dal government was to increase the quota for the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in public sector employment from 20% to 27%. Sub-quotas for communities termed Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs) were increased from 10% to 14%. Legislations were passed soon thereafter to implement quotas in governing bodies of key universities in the State: 50% of seats in these bodies were now reserved for members of OBCs. Furthermore, the government made it a criminal offence to violate the provisions of affirmative action: if no suitable candidates from OBC backgrounds could be found, the positions were to be kept vacant rather than be filled by candidates from the dominant castes.

Some commentators have derided these arrangements as exemplifying ‘government by state incapacity’. Santosh Matthew and Mick Moore (2011) argue that Yadav’s insistence on applying reservations to public sector positions responsible for delivering development often resulted in such positions remaining vacant since no qualified candidates could be found. Yadav effectively denuded the development bureaucracy of staff, with the result that his government often could not complete the administrative procedures necessary for accessing fiscal transfers from the Central Government that would have allowed access to development resources. State incapacity and underdevelopment were political choices actively pursued by Yadav.

More recent commentators have interpreted these moves as signalling the government’s commitment towards implementing reservations (Jha and Pushpendra, 2012; Chaudhry and Srikant, 2005; Witsoe, 2013; Chaudhury, 1999). Such a commitment may have sometimes resulted in development programs being undermined. But, its significance in interrupting the monopolisation of positions in government and educational institutions by members of dominant castes far outweighed any adverse implications it might have had on economic development.

Yadav’s most enduring legacy lay in enhancing the representativeness of the State’s legislative institutions and loosening the stranglehold of the ‘high castes’ over them. Tables 3 and 4 testifies to the transformation in the social profile of Bihar’s legislative assembly from 1952. During the three decades from 1952 to 1990, the share of the ‘high castes’ in the legislative assembly far outstripped their share of the State’s population. Constituting 17 % of Bihar’s people, they made up nearly half the State’s legislative assembly between 1952 and 1967, their numerical preponderance gradually reducing after 1980. The election results of 1990 marked a significant conjuncture in the State’s legislative history when the proportion of ‘high caste’ representatives in the assembly almost equalled (but still outstripped) that of the OBCs, the largest cluster of communities in the State.

Table 4: Communal composition of the Bihar legislative assembly, 1952-1990.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Population, 1931 | 1952 | 1957 | 1962 | 1967 | 1972 | 1977 | 1980 | 1985 |
| ‘High’ castes | 17.7 | 46.1 | 46.1 | 46.1 | 42 | 42.8 | 40.8 | 36.5 | 38.5 |
| ‘Lower’ castes  | 46.1 | 19.3 | 19.4 | 24.4 | 28.8 | 25.8 | 28.5 | 30.5 | 27 |
| ‘Untouchable’ castes | 18.3 | 13.9 | 14.7 | 13.2 | 14.1 | 13.8 | 13.8 | 14.5 | 14.8 |
| Muslims | 16.8 | 7.6 | 7.8 | 7.2 | 6 | 8.2 | 7.7 | 8.9 | 10.2 |
| Others | <1 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |

Source: (Robin 2009)

The State elections of 1995 marked a decisive shift away from the dominance of the legislative assembly by the ‘high castes’, as borne out by the data presented in Table 4. Their share of the legislators plummeted from 34.6% in 1990 to 21.8% in 1995, bringing them closer to their share of the State’s population than ever before. Even as the proportion of the ‘high caste’ legislators within the assembly continues to outstrip their share of the population, it has remained lower than the presence of the Other Backward Classes. The increased representativeness of Bihar’s legislature outlasted Yadav’s tenure as Chief Minister. Although the ‘high caste’ component of the legislature increased significantly after Yadav’s ouster from power in 2005, legislators from ‘lower caste’ backgrounds were never reduced to the numerical subjugation to which they had been subjected till 1990. Neither Yadav’s bitter rival Nitish Kumar nor his antagonists in the BJP attempted to reinstate the ‘high caste’ dominance of Bihar’s legislative assembly. By contrast the ‘high caste’ share in India’s national parliament the Lok Sabha has witnessed an [upward trend](https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/the-representation-gap-2/?SocialMedia) since 2004 (Jaffrelot and Verniers, 2015), and currently stands at 44.5%. The representation of the Other Backward Classes has stagnated to about 20%.

Table 5: Communal composition of the Bihar legislative assembly, 1990-present.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Population, 1931 | 1990 | 1995 | 2000 | 2005 | 2010 | [2015](https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/bihar-elections-2015/news/Bihar-election-results-2015-1-in-every-4-new-members-a-Yadav/articleshow/49730275.cms) |
| ‘High’ castes | 17.7 | 34.6 | 21.8 | 23.1 | 30 | 32.3 | 20 |
| ‘Lower’ castes | 46.1 | 34.9 | 46.8 | 40.4 | 39.8 | 43.3 | 53.4 |
| ‘Untouchable’ castes | 18.3 | 14.8 | 15.1 | 14.8 | 16.9 | 15.7 | 15.6 |
| Muslims | 16.8 | 6.2 | 7.1 | 9.3 | ?? | ?? | 9.8 |
| Others  | <1 |  |  |  |  |  |  |

Source: Robin, 2009. The source for the 2015 results is: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/bihar-elections-2015/news/Bihar-election-results-2015-1-in-every-4-new-members-a-Yadav/articleshow/49730275.cms>, accessed July 2019.

**III**

**Dignified development and democratic depth**

How does the concept of ‘dignified development’ contribute to an understanding of democratic deepening? Democratic deepening, as we saw above, refers to the process through which claims to equal membership in the political community of socially disadvantaged and historically oppressed people are recognised, endorsed and advanced by political actors. The narratives of, and practices associated with, dignified development compel political actors to take seriously the social demands advanced by members of oppressed social groups. Narratives of dignified development provide social actors with the ideational resources with which to mobilise members against the injustice of the status quo and press for social change. The practices associated with dignified development supplement such ideational resources with mobilisational resources which members of oppressed social groups deploy against political actors who they perceive as upholding the status quo.

Conceptualisations of dignified development direct attention to the complex ways in which democracies deepen. This paper has directed attention to a case from the Indian State of Bihar, where recent scholarship challenges such damning epithets as “illiberal democracy” that have been labelled against it. Building on the insights from this recent scholarship which corrects such a skewed perspective, the paper elaborates the significant ways in which democracy was deepened in Bihar after 1990 under the Chief Ministership of Lalu Prasad Yadav and his Janata Dal. The State’s subaltern citizens felt they could identify with the government as Yadav instituted political measures to enable them to assert their presence in the public sphere. Violence against religious minorities was contained- a significant achievement given the nationwide resurgence of Hindu majoritarianism. Although social minorities continued to face violence from high-caste paramilitaries, everyday crimes against Dalits remained lower than national averages. In what might well be Yadav’s most enduring achievement, the State’s government became more representative of its citizens. His politics incubated feelings of dignity among the State’s subaltern citizens.

As scholars continue to debate the transitions and backsliding of democracy, it becomes ever more important to appreciate the ways in which existing democracies have deepened across the world, often in unpredictable and unanticipated ways. Such deepening may not always synchronise with democratic consolidation and democratic quality. Nevertheless, they do result in the advancement, endorsement and recognition of socially disadvantaged and historically oppressed communities as equal members in the political community. By cautioning us against both triumphalist claims of democratic transitions as well as nihilistic narratives of democratic recession, an account of democratic depth such as the one developed in this paper enables analysts to recognise the ways in which democracy may yet be renewed and invigorated.

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1. A flavour of such accounts are available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/08/opinion/08iht-edsinha.html>; <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/04/29/world/india-s-boom-leaves-one-state-in-dark-ages.html>; <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/04/27/world/india-s-corner-of-mystery-bihar-s-poor-and-lawless.html>; <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/10/03/world/after-rise-from-poverty-to-power-the-luster-fades-for-a-folk-hero-of-india.html>; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2004/apr/26/india.randeepramesh>; <https://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/2006/may/06/weekend7.weekend4>; <http://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/fifth-column-is-bihar-indias-future/>; <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/special-report/story/19950228-abuse-and-politicisation-of-bihar-bureaucracy-become-scandalous-as-polls-draw-near-806954-1995-02-28>; and <https://www.economist.com/node/15393980> among others. These sites were accessed between June 4 2018 to September 13, 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See the accounts presented in World Bank (2005); Saxena (2003); Singh and Stern (2013); and Mathew and Moore (2011) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This was the headline in <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/08/opinion/08iht-edsinha.html> accessed September 2018 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Yadav was Chief Minister of Bihar State from 1990 to 1998. His wife succeeded him to the post when he was embroiled in a series of corruption allegations. See accounts here: <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/lalu-isation-of-politics/227513>; <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/the-curse-of-the-east-india-co/299145>; <https://www.economist.com/node/5220573>; <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/20051205-bihar-votes-lalu-prasad-yadav-out-nitish-kumar-faces-gigantic-task-to-revive-ailing-state-786538-2005-12-05>; <https://www.forbes.com/2011/01/03/forbes-india-person-of-the-year-nitish-kumar.html#431a9f99997c>; and <https://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2010/11/indias_poorest_state>. All these sites were accessed between June 4 2018 to September 13 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The exact slogan in Hindi was: *Bhurabal hatao, Bihar bachao.* The term *Bhurabal* translates into blonde as a reference to fair-skinned high castes. It was also a clever acronym for Bhumihar, Rajput, Bahman and Lala to refer to the four privileged castes in the State. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The exact slogan in Hindi was: *Vikas nahin samman chahiye* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/19950430-laloo-prasad-yadav-second-term-as-bihar-cm-sees-radical-change-806741-1995-04-30>, accessed September 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DVmgJo3UGow>, accessed July 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ibFYAHczZjk>, accessed July 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jokAHYIxJvc>, accessed July 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See account in <https://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl2010/stories/20030523006101000.htm>, accessed July 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <http://www.bihartimes.in/articles/bharatputra/lalooland.html>, accessed July 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For example, Indira Gandhi famously rode an elephant while visiting Dalit victims of “high caste” violence in Belchhi during August 1977. See account presented here: <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/19770915-indira-gandhis-visit-to-belchhi-a-well-calculated-political-move-823882-2014-09-04>, accessed June 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See report here: <http://www.rediff.com/election/2005/feb/09spec5.htm> and <https://bjmirror0311.wordpress.com/>, accessed August 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. See report here: <https://blog.aaobihar.com/charwaha-vidyalaya-interesting-but-failed/>, accessed July 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See report here: <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/states/story/19940215-bihar-govts-scheme-to-educate-children-of-cattle-grazers-meets-with-encouraging-response-808806-1994-02-15#close-overlay>, accessed June 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See account here: <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/07/24/world/qyanjhari-journal-india-s-worst-case-the-war-between-the-castes.html>, accessed May 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See report here: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/caste-war-blights-indias-poorest-state-delhi-worried-1567334.html>, accessed May 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. See the account presented here: <http://www.satp.org/satporgtp/countries/india/terroristoutfits/massacres.htm>, accessed May 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The usual caveats about official statistics are in order of course. Nevertheless, the information supplied in the data is particularly interesting since the data is collected, assembled and disseminated by the NCRB, which is an agency under the charge of India’s Union Government. For the years of which the data is presented, the political party controlling the Union Government was at odds with Yadav’s Janata Dal (Congress Party in 1993-5 and BJP in 2002-04), suggesting that the data is unlikely to be partisan in favour of the Bihar government. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See the excerpt from Anand Patwardhan’s acclaimed documentary *Ram ke naam* (*In the name of God*) here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W7XRvjYQOaI>, accessed March 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. See report here: <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/indiascope/story/19921031-communal-riots-expose-laloos-promises-in-bihar-767078-2012-12-27>, accessed July 2019. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. To contextualise, Bihar’s population at 83 million in 1991 was considerably higher than Gujarat’s 50 million. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)