**Disjunctions of democracy and liberalism:**

**Agonistic imaginations of dignity in Bihar**

**The problem: liberal hegemony of democracy**

To say that democracy is a hotly contested concept[[1]](#footnote-1) is to parrot a cliché. But it is a cliché that merits repetition. Not only is there intense disagreement over form, but also passionate debate over substance (if form and substance can be distinguished). Procedural views of democracy, which conceived democracy in purely institutional terms (Schumpeter, 1947; Huntington, 1968; Dahl, 1971) have increasingly been subjected to critical scrutiny. Critics suggest more associational (Cohen and Arato, 1992), participatory (Pateman, 1970), deliberative (Cohen, 1997), and substantive (Huber et al., 1997; Kaldor and Vejvoda, 1997) conceptions of democracy to include greater involvement of civil society, popular participation, public consultations on policy, and equality of policy outcomes as a means of deepening democracy.

Nevertheless, despite these contests, theorists appear to concur that democracy compacts with liberalism. Terry Lyn Karl (1990: 2) suggests that democracy be conceived of as a “set of institutions that permits the entire adult population to act as citizens by choosing their leading decision-makers in competitive, fair, and regularly scheduled elections which are held in the context of the rule of law, guarantees for political freedom, and limited military prerogatives.” Reiterating this view, Marc Plattner (1998) makes a case for explicitly emphasizing the compact between liberalism and democracy. He observes that “on the whole, countries that hold free elections are overwhelmingly more liberal than those that do not, and countries that protect civil liberties are overwhelmingly more likely to hold free elections than those that do not” (Plattner, 1998, cf. Zakaria).

These perspectives of empirical political scientists resonate with influential views among political theorists that tend towards articulating democracy with liberalism. Thus, political liberalism, as enunciated in the scholarship inspired by John Rawls, pervades much of the contemporary thinking about democracy. Ideas concomitant with liberalism- such as the notion of the free and equal person imbued with the right to own property, the importance of civil liberties and the assumption that all people will eventually assimilate into liberalism’s universal promise- characterise the works of most contemporary thinkers who write about democracy. Even the ‘communitarians’ (Sandel, 1982; MacIntyre, 1999; Walzer, 1994; Taylor, 1999), who valorize particularistic notions of collective life, reaffirm the link between democracy and liberalism. By rejecting both the universality of liberalism and democracy, they paradoxically reaffirmed the link between the two. The compact between liberalism and democracy is further underscored through the model of deliberative democracy proposed by Jürgen Habermas to reconcile the tension between the liberal and the communitarian view. In the deliberative model, people engage in rational discourse to determine the public good, thereby re-emphasizing the necessity of the links between liberalism and democracy. The ubiquity of this compact in the literature has led some observers to infer that Liberal democracy has come to assume the “hegemonic model of democracy” (Santos, 2005: 9).

**Towards an agonistics of democracy**

However, such attempts to couple liberalism with democracy not gone unchallenged in the literature. Accepting the reality of Liberal democracy as the dominant model of democracy in contemporary times, Chantal Mouffe reminds us of the distinctiveness of the two traditions:

*On one side we have the liberal tradition constituted by the rule of law, the defence of human rights and the respect of individual liberty; on the other the democratic tradition whose main ideas are those of equality, identity between governing and governed and popular sovereignty.* Mouffe, 2000: 2

In similar vein, David Beetham suggests that democracy refers at once to “control by citizens over their collective affairs, and equality between citizens in the exercise of that control” (Beetham, 1999: 3).[[2]](#footnote-2) The collapse of the so-called ‘people’s democracies’ and the concomitant ascendance of Liberal democracy during the 1990s not only provided a favorable intellectual climate for the florishing of liberal rights, but also made it susceptible to claims of egalitarianism in thinking about democracy (Schmitter, 1994). Based on these somewhat contradictory insights, we have a fragmentary conceptualization of democracy that include rather disparate characteristics: competitive elections, the guarantee of civil liberties and individual rights, protection of private property and establishment of the rule of law on the one hand, and equal participation of people in the affairs that matter to them on the other.

Another important contribution that Mouffe makes is to urge analysts to recognize the impossibility of eliminating conflict from democratic life. She alerts us that, even in contexts of free and fair elections where robust mechanisms exist to hold elected leaders accountable, the dimension of conflict can neither be wished away nor coopted it within electoral institutions[[3]](#footnote-3). Instead, Mouffe offers us what she calls ‘an agonistic account’ to conceptualise democratic processes as spaces which supply an arena for reconfiguring power relations. Proponents of the agonistic view distinguish themselves from votaries of antagonistic conflict. Antagonism is violent and involves physical liquidation of adversaries. By contrast, the perspective of agonism points us to *negotiations* over the terms on which the political community is constituted. The protagonists of an agonistic relation, even as they are in conflict, see themselves as sharing a common symbolic framework. The protagonists do not seek to liquidate one another. Rather, their politics focusses on the power relations in which they may be embedded.

Because Mouffe insists that any account of democratic politics must take cognizance of power relations, she is suspicious of deliberative accounts of democracy that emphasize the desirability and possibility of disputing parties arriving at a reasoned consensus. Mouffe has little patience for such normative accounts of politics that wish away relations of inequality and power, and ignore the concreteness of conflict in social life. Her realistic account of politics is based on an acceptance of the premise that relations of power cannot be eliminated, but can be contested within an agonistic framework.

In this paper, I draw on Mouffe’s interventions to reflect on democracy in South Asia, with an empirical focus on political changes in the State of Bihar in eastern India since 1990. These changes compel us to appreciate the substantive deepening of democracy in Bihar despite the absence of values commonly associated with liberalism. I first highlight the emergence of the ‘Backward Caste’ assertions in the State, which sought to construct the broadest possible alliance against the so-called ‘Forward Castes’ and culminated in the ascendance of the Janata Dal government of Lalu Prasad Yadav in 1990. I next point to inchoate antagonisms harboured by poor people in the State against the privileged classes who seek to assert their caste supremacy in quotidian social lives. Describing the vocabularies of dignity in which such supremacy is contested, I argue that conflict is entwined with cooperation in poor people’s quotidian engagements with the privileged classes.

In conclusion, I emphasise the resonance of the material presented in this paper with emerging literature from elsewhere in South Asia to argue that an agonistics of democracy allows us to step beyond the limitations of existing approaches to theorising democracy. I focus in particular on two such approaches: the liberalism-inspired approach dominant in many contemporary readings of democracy in India, most cogently expressed in Corbridge et al (2013); as well as the critical alternative sought to be provided in the political society-centred approach advocated by Partha Chatterjee (2004; 2012). The agonistic approach to democracy proposed in this paper enables scholars to leverage the strengths of both these approaches while avoiding their pitfalls.

**Bihar: Democracy against liberalism**

The Congress Party, widely credited for having ushered India’s Independence from colonialism, identified in Bihar with the landlords and a few rich peasants. Such identification resulted in the party’s gradual alienation from not only the poor and the landless but also the middle peasants who were neither affiliated with the privileged castes nor could be stigmatized as ‘untouchable’. Historically stigmatised as Shudra and confronting continued marginalization under Congress dominance, these classes began to organise soon after Independence under such forums as the Bihar Backward Classes Federation, coalescing together under the somewhat inchoate rubric of ‘socially and educationally backward ‘classes’ (Galanter, 1984). An early leader RL Chandapuri had famously declared as early as 1949 that India’s Independence was incomplete as long as the so-called upper castes cornered administrative and material resources. Appropriating their official categorisation as ‘Backward’, they sought to emphasise their *pichada* identity as a political force. The official parlance of Other Backward Classes assumed political salience under the socialist opposition to the Congress Party. Led by the charismatic Ram Manohar Lohia, the socialists endorsed their demands for affirmative action in the realm of public sector employment and education, in addition to massive state intervention in the agrarian economy by way of land redistribution, crop price support system and security of tenancy. The socialist slogan during the electoral campaigns of 1967 ‘*Samajwadi ne bandhi gaanth, pichada pawey sau mein saath*’ called for provisioning 60% affirmative action in public sector employment and education, commensurate with the share of the OBC population in the State. Moreover, near-famine conditions prevailed in the State during the middle of the 1960s, increased the attractiveness of the socialist demands. The Congress suffered a setback in the 1967 elections when, for the first time in Independent India, it lost power in as manay as nine States, including Bihar.

Although the socialist participation in the subsequent State government was tenuous and short-lived, the State’s political arena emerged as a bitter tussle between the privileged caste constituencies of the Congress and the ‘backward caste’ constituencies of the socialists for the next two decades. While attempts by socialist politicians such as BP Mandal and Karpuri Thakur to institute either affirmative action or land reforms through the 1970s were frustrated by the privileged caste supporters of the Congress and the Right-wing Jan Sangh, the vocabularies of ‘social justice’ and ‘equality’ struck roots in the State’s political discourse. Initially agricultural labourers, most of whom were Dalit, had been suspicious of both parties, and some among them appear to have initially gravitated towards armed insurrection (Sinha, 1977). By the 1980s, however, many of the armed groups accepted the possibility that electoral politics could be responsive to poor people’s claims. Their members among the landless labourers and poor peasants extended cautious support to the socialist-oriented Janata Dal or to the more stridently militant (but parliamentary) Communist Party of India (Marxist/ Leninist- Liberation). In 1990, Lalu Prasad Yadav, the charismatic peasant leader of the Yadav community, the largest OBC community in Bihar, was elected as Chief Minister, providing the State with an electoral stability it had not witnessed for nearly three decades. Hereafter, the Congress Party was reduced to a minor player in the State’s politics, often playing second fiddle to Lalu Yadav’s Janata Dal. Yadav ruled the State for fifteen years, eight years directly and seven years with his wife Rabri Devi as proxy.

Yadav’s ascendance to power in the State deepened the political vocabulary of social justice and equality. A key message that Yadav and his Janata Dal government honed in throughout their tenure was the paramountcy of people’s sense of “dignity” (*samman*). In emphasising the importance of dignity- to the extent of undermining other aspects of public life, such as “development”- Yadav provided institutional support to popular struggles for equality in the State. Specific policy interventions (Chaudhury, 1999) included: the elimination of tree and toddy tax; regularisation of slums; and allowing milk suppliers allowed to establish cowsheds freely in towns and cities. Bihar University was renamed as BR Ambedkar University after India’s foremost champion of civil rights. State holidays were declared to mark the birth anniversaries of Ravi Das, a sixteenth century saint who remained a fervent champion of social equality in his lifetime. Yadav’s government extended official support to fairs commemorating the Dalit hero Chuharmal credited with battling dominant caste oppression (Kunnath, 2012). In line with the Janata Dal’s promise of greater representation for the State’s communities in public life, 50% seats were ‘reserved’ for OBCs in university-level decision-making bodies.

Complementing these policy interventions were political strategies aimed at ‘lower’ caste empowerment. One, the Janata Dal politicized the rural poor by convening public rallies through which they developed shared solidarities cutting across caste distinctions. Jeffrey Witsoe (2013) tells us of awareness rallies organised by the State Government during the Yadav years in which peasants and the rural poor would be invited to travel to and demonstrate their collective presence in the heart of Patna, creating moral panic among the city’s gentry. Two, Yadav developed personalized networks with politicians and political mediators, *not* on the basis of their caste but on their ability to deliver him votes. His cronies included Rajputs and Bhumihars, who styled themselves as ritually superior than Lalu’s Yadav community. The image of superior-caste Rajput and Bhumihar leaders supplicating before Lalu Yadav thrilled the Chief Minister’s rural constituency, symbolising to them an inversion of the conventional idioms of the paternalism to which they had been subjected during the colonial and Congress regimes. Three, Yadav’s government systematically emasculated the State bureaucracy as well as the police dominated by the privileged castes (Thakur, 2007; Tripathi, 2007; Matthew and Moore, 2011). He transferred officials arbitrarily, pulling them up for disregarding official orders. His Janata Dal government famously reined in the police when landless labourers sought to occupy agricultural properties illegally held by the landlords, imbuing among the rural poor, especially of historically oppressed Dalit and OBC populations, a sense of popular sovereignty.

Lalu Yadav’s ascendance in Bihar thus signals the growing popularity of a perspective of democracy which took seriously the notions of social justice and equality, identity and representation, and popular sovereignty. To these perspectives of democracy, liberal ideas sanctifying private property, individual liberty and the rule of law were antithetical, given the manner in which these had been deployed by colonial and postcolonial institutions of the State to create and perpetuate caste-based hierarchies. The historic constraints and political mobilisations within which Lalu Yadav’s Janata Dal government were embedded produced the disjunctions between liberalism and democracy that have come to characterise contemporary Bihar.

**Constrained antagonisms: Vocabularies of dignity**

From its inception, Yadav’s Janata Dal government faced accusations of fomenting caste antagonism in the State (India Today, 2013[[4]](#footnote-4); The Independent[[5]](#footnote-5), 1995; Kumar, 2008). The travel writer William Dalrymple recalls one of Yadav’s election speeches during his campaign against the Congress, replete with the imagery of ‘conflict’:

*Our fight is against the wearers of the sacred thread. For centuries, the priests have made fortunes looting peasants. Now I tell them they should learn to milk cattle and graze them, otherwise they will starve[[6]](#footnote-6).*

*Antagonistic beginnings*

Commentators[[7]](#footnote-7) appear to be particularly struck by the fact that, under Lalu Yadav’s tenure, ‘lower caste’ and ‘untouchable’ agricultural labourers became emboldened 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. They were 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. 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).

Chronicling his travels in rural Bihar at the turn of the millennium, the writer William Dalrymple narrates his exchange with a dominant caste landowner who survived the massacre. Describing his travails, Darlymple’s interlocutor confidently declares that this massacre was the handiwork of the Bihar Government, especially Lalu Prasad Yadav. After all, he says, they were on the side of the Dalits.

*“The government will not protect us. It is on their side. This is the Kali Yug, the epoch of disintegration. The lower castes are rising up. Everything is falling apart.”*

(Dalrymple, 1998: 9)

As far as Bihar’s landowning dominant castes could see, the advent of Lalu Yadav was nothing short of a disaster. These perspectives were somewhat mirrored by subaltern populations, including Dalits who otherwise had little love lost for either Lalu Yadav or the Yadav community, with which their Chief Minister was affiliated. In the north Bihar regions where I conducted fieldwork[[8]](#footnote-8) during 2009 and 2010, a few years after Lalu Yadav was routed in the elections, my interlocutors from the Musahar community- historically stigmatised as ‘rat-eaters’ recalled his early years with a glimmer in their eyes.

“Lalu helped us find our voice”, they said. Some among them told me of the lands they occupied under the aegis of the Janata Dal’s earliest years. “The man did little to help. But, unlike the Congressmen, he did not come in the way when we fought for our dignity.[[9]](#footnote-9)”

Indeed, my fieldwork notes are replete with references to *ijjat* and *samman*[[10]](#footnote-10). Accounts of labourers not giving *ijjat* to farmers, of people stigmatised as ‘low castes’ demanding to be treated with *ijjat* by self-styled ‘high castes’, of people wanting to lead lives with *ijjat* were strewn across my field notes. *Ijjat* is of course a notoriously slippery term: it could mean dignity in an emancipatory sense, to refer to the shared dignity of all human beings. But it could also refer to honour, which could assume supremacist undertones, such as intimated by honour killings. The *ijjat* to which my interlocutors were referring, appears to possess an ethical quality. Unlike the concept of honour, which has to be earned, the ways in which the term *ijjat* was invoked suggests that dignity belongs to all, but is only recognised by some. It is the lack of recognition by some which claims of dignity challenge: *ijjat* is about recognition as equal members of society by other members of society. Even as ‘caste’ remains a feature of community life, the deployment of *ijjat* has contributed to definitively challenging the supremacist assumptions held by members of the Savarna castes. The vocabularies of dignity on which my interlocutors draw are enmeshed in idioms of conflict.

*From antagonism to agonism*

When I asked about the most important issue facing the people of his Gram Panchayat to the Mukhya of Sargana Gram Panchayat during our interview (January 2010), he was unequivocal. According to the Mukhya, a modest farmer of the Kevat (enumerated as Extremely Backward Class in Bihar) community, the conflict, or *ladaai*, between the ‘Forwards’ and ‘Backwards’ over the management of the Chandisthan loomed large over social relations in the Panchayat. He explicated that the ‘Forwards’ were the oppressors (*dabang*) and the ‘Backwards’ were the oppressed (*shoshit*). The Mukhya’s presentation of what at first glance appears to be a legal wrangle in such dichotomous terms was intriguing, as was his use of the term *ladaai* to describe it. The closest English equivalent of the word *ladaai* is ‘fight’ that indicates a more substantive conflict that a legal wrangle. The word is often used to discuss brawls among people, but could also refer to deeper disagreements. In referring to the conflict between ‘Forwards’ and ‘Backwards’ which worries him, the Mukhya appeared to refer to both senses of the conflict.

The Mukhya’s use of the terms ‘Forwards’ and ‘Backwards’ to describe the parties to the conflict appears to be derived from the governmental use of the terms to refer to the material and ritual disparities between the castes labelled by the Indian Government as Forward Castes and the Other Backward Classes. But during the course of the interview, it became clear to me that his espousal of the term draws on a political category rather than a governmental category. The political category provided the idiom for activists through the twentieth century to challenge the appropriation of institutional, social and material resources by the members of the Savarna communities. Indeed, the terms *Forwards* and *Backwards* have entered the popular lexicon. In this vein, the Mukhya situated the conflict over the temple alongside the activism of political leaders such as RL Chandapuri, Ram Manohar Lohia and Lalu Prasad Yadav[[11]](#footnote-11). Furthermore, when I probed further, the Mukhya included within the rubric of the category ‘Backward’ not only members of the castes enumerated as OBC but also members of Sargana’s Dalit and Adivasi communities.

From the Mukhya’s point of view, the oppression (*shoshan*) by the Rajput trustees of the temple precipitated the issue. The trustees refused to acknowledge the temple as a public space, as mandated under the terms of the legislation. Instead, they were intent on maintaining their domination (*varchasv*) over the temple. A particular bone of contention was their appropriation for personal use the offerings made by devotees, most of whom were impoverished men and women from the locality and its environs. Instead of utilising these offerings for the maintenance of facilities for devotees, the trustees invested them on personal use, such as the purchase of expensive jewellery, acquisition of real estate and provision of higher education of their children. This situation was no longer acceptable to the laboring *Backwards*. In the Mukhya’s words:

*“As the government has empowered the poor, they find such behavior among the oppressor castes (dabang jatis) unacceptable... People keep saying the government is not doing this, the government is not doing that. But you have to understand, the government today is not the government of 25 years ago. The government has changed.”*

The idea that the government had empowered poor people is unmistakable from the Mukhya’s account. I realised that this idea resonated with the palpable excitement over the conflict among my Rajput interlocutors in Sargana, some of whom were involved in the management of the temple as trustees. They resented the perceived interference of the government in their religious traditions. By way of example, they narrated the provisions of the Bihar Hindu Religious Trust Act, 1950 which brought under the purview of the state all trusts recognized by “Hindu Law to be religious, pious and charitable...except... a private endowment created for the worship of a family idol in which the public are not interested.” (Bihar, 1951: Chapter 1, Section 2(l)). For my interlocutors, this clause in the Act represented a blatant attempt by the government to subvert their traditional ways of life. “For centuries, we have upheld the social order. We have ensured stability and decency in society. How dare the government come in the way of that?” one of them asked me passionately. Hunny Singh, the predecessor of the present Mukhya, was quick to identify the root of the problem. After verifying that I was not ‘Backward’, he told me:

*The Backwards control the Government. In return, the Government pampers the Backwards (Sar pe chadha kar rakha hai). Not only that, they talk about empowering the harijans. They have both ruined the State. To top it all, they say they will protect the Pakistanis (an epithet to describe Muslims).... People raise unnecessary issues. Look at what they have done to the temple. They have raised all kinds of issues over it, threatening the peace in this village.. Arre bhai, it’s a religious place, they must respect the religiosity of the place. They must, not bring politics into it.*

The Mukhya and his predecessor, arch opponents, share the view that the conflict over the temple threatens the peace in the village, although they offer diametrically opposing interpretations. For the Mukhya, the issue reflects the growing assertiveness of the Panchayat’s oppressed masses against the entrenched classes, an assertiveness that results from their being ‘empowered’ by the Government. What he sees as ‘empowerment’, his predecessor derides as ‘pampering’. Nonetheless, they both emphasize the role of the Government in eroding the traditions of the village and threatening the domination of the privileged classes. Where the former exults in the perceived emancipatory role of the government, the latter derides it and interprets the government’s role as interfering with traditional ways of life.

The conflict between ‘Forwards’ and ‘Backwards’ continues to resonate with people in Bihar in a wider context. This conflict was a key theme during the campaign for the 2015 Vidhan Sabha elections in the State. Yadav, at the helm of the Grand Alliance comprising the rival Janata Dal parties and the Congress Party, declared at the outset that the elections was a *ladai* between the ‘Backwards’ and ‘Forwards’. He famously dared the chief of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, the ideological fount of the Bharatiya Janata Party, to scrap the provisions for ‘reservations’ of jobs for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes as the latter had suggested[[12]](#footnote-12). Yadav toured the State throughout the campaign period with a copy of the *Bunch of Thoughts*, a book written by RSS ideologue Ms Golwalkar and regularly read out passages to highlight his caste supremacist views and the need to frontally assault such views.

While the vocabularies of dignity are embedded in idioms of conflict, they are rarely invoked as a call to armed violence. Accusations that Yadav sympathised with armed guerrillas in the State were met early on in his tenure with counter-accusations that he, in fact, was focused only on them (Outlook, 1997[[13]](#footnote-13)). Although caste violence remained a feature of public life in Bihar till the very end of the Janata Dal’s tenure in 2004, and the militias are unlikely to have been able to sustain themselves without political patronage from the State’s various political parties (Kunnath, 2012; Louis, 2002; Human Rights Watch, 1999), Yadav carefully refrained from either calling for or condoning violence against the privileged classes or dominant castes.

My own ethnographic fieldwork bears out these inchoate antagonisms. In speaking of their poverty, my interlocutors in north Bihar invoke metaphors of injustice (*anyay*) and exploitation (*shoshan*) as causal factors. They do not interpret their being poor to results of past deed (*karma*) and bad fortune (*kismet*). They remark freely that government officials pander to the propertied rather than caring for the poor. A notion of inchoate antagonism against the wealthy and the propertied is discernible.

Such inchoate antagonism is particularly evident when households are to be selected for social assistance. It is not uncommon for poor people, particularly of Dalit backgrounds, to be excluded from such assistance. I observed the discontent expressed by such households excluded from the ‘Below-poverty-line’ (BPL) lists drawn up by the Panchayats. I noted in particular that discontent, when it was expressed, is not usually directed against other households of similar socio-economic backgrounds who are listed as BPL. From their point of view, households excluded from the BPL list lose out due to the prejudice of the elected representative or other political mediators. Many blame the manipulation of their wealthier neighbors who procure the BPL cards by edging out those who were more ‘deserving’ for the cards. For instance, in Sargana Ward 1, Maturi Rishi and his brother Shanichar Rishi, both agricultural labourers of the Musahar community, found that their names had been excluded from the list of BPL households. However, the names of their neighbors, Hansram Bhagat and Narendra Yadav, both of whom were OBCs, who were only slightly better off, were included. However, neither brother complained against either of these individuals for having their name included in the BPL list. But they, and almost all my interlocutors from the Musahar tola in Sargana Ward 1 (east), reviled their moneylender, Shalimar Singh, who succeeded in having his name included in the BPL list. Shalimar Singh was Rajput and owned several large pieces of agricultural property. He had reported himself as being landless, without any assets of his own (“even the clothes I wear are not my own,” he shamelessly told me) and had reported to the surveyors that he preferred state assistance in the form of wage labor.

Nevertheless, neither they nor anyone else from the community express any thoughts about a revolutionary overthrow of the existing order or the annihilation of the propertied groups. Many among them labour on the fields and farms of wealthier peasants and farmers. They resign to the repression of wages, practice of social discrimination and nurturing of social hierarchy that their wealthier neighbours engage in. Others are in the debt of moneylenders or farmers, a situation about which they worry. But they do not identify a singular class enemy against whom they direct their antagonism. Sentiments of antagonism are not channelled towards expressions of annihilation.

**Agonistic imaginations of dignity: beyond liberal and postcolonial frameworks**

How do we interpret these examples of political change in Bihar since the 1990s? Commentators of a Liberal persuasion would argue that these processes represent India’s ineluctable democratisation. Corbridge et al (2005) argue that poor people draw their ideas of membership in the political community from the universal terms offered by the state. Stuart Corbridge et al (2013) argue that poor people are often engaged in civil society and emphasise the need for analysts to move beyond strict European definitions of civil society in thinking about their political practices. They aver that India’s poor increasingly imagine themselves as citizens capable of critiquing the state. Much of poor people’s mobilisation, they go on to suggest, occurs through legal channels, referencing the abstract vocabulary of rights. The material presented in this chapter only partially resonates with such claims.

A conceptual requirement to be a member of civil society is to be able to exercise autonomy vis-à-vis one’s class position and ascribed identities. Association is voluntary. Charles Taylor (1990) explains the dual meaning of the term. On the one hand, civil society indicates a self-regulating economy, a public space organised autonomous of the state and a notion of civilization that encompasses the virtues of peaceful production, accumulation of private property, the development of the arts and sciences, and polished mores that eschew warrior ethics and country lifestyles as rustic. On the other hand, civil society refers to a society intimately engaged with the political structures, despite being autonomous from it.

In the classic formulation, individuals ‘enter’ this space by virtue of their ‘status’ as tax-paying, property-owning citizens, rather than as members of this or that community. In more contemporary formulations (Kaldor, 2003), the language of rights, especially economic, social, and cultural rights has permeated the space of civil society, rendering many of the older ‘disqualifications’ redundant: the vocabulary of human rights, for example, provides an important justification for the inclusion of all members of a political community, irrespective of their being tax-payers, property-owners or consumers, into the domain of civil society. Nevertheless, those included into the domain of civil society are admitted as individual members of society shorn of their social group identities.

Such perspectives on civil society are plainly inapplicable in a context where caste identities are the basis of egalitarian claims. The vocabularies of juridical rights are barely invoked in popular claims. The notions of dignity, to which Yadav and others point our attention, is anchored in communal rather than individual claims.

Postcolonial theorists such as Partha Chatterjee (1990) suggest that civil society is a provincial concept whose application should properly be restricted to western Europe and its settler regions. Indeed, Chatterjee (1998: 234) goes on to define civil society as

Those characteristic institutions of modern associational life originating in Western societies that are based on equality, autonomy, freedom of entry and exit, contract [and] deliberative procedures of decision making.

Chatterjee (2004) offers an alternative concept to help us understand political change in contemporary India. He argues that popular claims are advanced not so much on the basis of abstract rights but by deploying politicised idioms of caste, religion and kinship. Occupants of political society, Chatterjee (1998: 234) tells us,

[m]ake their claims on government, and in turn, are governed, not within the framework of stable, constitutionally defined rights and laws, but rather through temporary, contextual and unstable arrangements arrived at through direct political negotiations.

Chatterjee’s (2012) proposals advance a normative idea of differentiated citizenship, whereby poor people sometimes request to be exempted from rules and laws that are likely to marginalize and exclude them further. In doing so, they invoke the moral obligations of the state toward its poor as well as idioms of care and kinship. However, Chatterjee’s formulation of political society paradoxically renders it devoid of any political content. The sole purpose of actors in political society appears to be to represent their claims to the government, to get those claims accepted as legitimate if only for themselves, and to seek exceptions to the law as may be appropriate to their interests. Indeed, from this empirical point to make the theoretical claim, as he does, that popular politics is a politics of differentiated membership in the political community is to ignore the egalitarian expectations that accompany their political claim-making. The material presented in the present paper clearly does not resonate with the normative claims of differentiated citizenship.

Neither the liberals approach nor the postcolonialist method helps us to appreciate the generative role of conflict in the pursuit of democratic claims in contemporary Bihar. The vocabularies of dignity to which our interlocutors direct attention are entwined with idioms of conflict which remain unpalatable to both approaches. If the former approach takes for granted the liberal hegemony of democracy, the latter approach highlights the normative significance of differentiated membership in the political community. An agonistic approach, by contrast, recognises the disjunctions between liberalism and democracy without, at the same time, reducing the practice of democracy to seeking entitlements and/ or exceptions from the government.

1. The idea of ‘essentially contested concepts’ was formulated by WB Gallie (1956): see Williams (2003) for a discussion drawing from African cases. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Huber et al. (1997) suggest equal participation in public affairs as one of the characteristics of substantive democracy. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This advice follows from the distinction Mouffe (2005: 9) draws between what she defines as the realm of ‘politics’ and the realm of the ‘political’. She defines ‘politics’ as the ensemble of practices and institutions through which an order is created and human coexistence is organized. The ‘political’ on the other hand, refers to an arena of antagonistic struggle where social actors attempt to eliminate collective enemies. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/indiascope/story/19920315-caste-wars-acquire-new-dimension-in-bihar-with-massacre-of-37-bhumihars-765976-2013-06-24> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/caste-war-blights-indias-poorest-state-delhi-worried-1567334.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dalrymple, W. (1998: 10) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. A perusal of volumes of the *Economic and Political Weekly* during the period 1990-92 provides a useful glimpse into the surprise that greeted observers as they described what came to be called Bihar’s “caste wars”. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. See Roy (2018) for a full description of the research and ethnographic methods deployed. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Hanging out, 5 April 2010, Sargana Ward 6, *machan* under the banyan tree, outside the Chandithan. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Among my earliest brushes with popular references to *ijjat* occurred on the overnight bus from Patna to Araria in the winter of 2009. As I settled down to my designated seat and the bus was about to leave, a big burly man wearing a white shirt and a pair of black jeans, several rings adorning his fingers entered the bus. He took off his dark glasses (it was past 7 p.m. by the way) and demanded of the conductor that the bus be delayed by half an hour. His family members were on their way: they had got delayed because they were shopping. The conductor of the bus calmly replied that would not be possible, and that the gentleman and his family was better off taking the next bus. Without provocation, the intruder flared up and raised his voice: “*Tu pehchaan nahin raha hai mujhe?* Do you not know my identity?” And shoved the conductor into his seat.

    “Keep your identity at home”, snapped the conductor. “*Apni pehchaan apne ghar me rakh ke aaiye*. *Insaan ho, insan ko ijjat dena sikhiye.* (You are a human being. Learn to offer dignity to others).”

    The driver of the bus came to the conductor’s rescue. Together, they pushed the man off the bus, and took off, visibly annoyed but also clearly amused at the man’s pretensions. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. This was particularly interesting since the Mukhya was a committed supporter of Yadav’s rival Nitish Kumar. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-others/bihar-elections-forward-backward-caste-war-lalu-prasad-yadav/> [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. <https://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/quotlaloo-only-hunts-naxalsquot/203327> [↑](#footnote-ref-13)