

POLICIES AND  
PRACTICES

48

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Managing Conflicts  
Bihar, 1990-2011**

March 2012



Policies and Practices 48

March 2012

Published by:  
Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group  
GC-45, Sector-III, First Floor  
Salt Lake City  
Kolkata-700106  
India  
Web: <http://www.mcrg.ac.in>

Printed by:  
Graphic Image  
New Market, New Complex, West Block  
2nd Floor, Room No. 115, Kolkata-700 087

*This article is based on research carried out for a project entitled “ The role of Governance in the Resolution of Socioeconomic and Political Conflict in India and Europe ” (CORE). It is funded by the Socio-economic and Humanities in the European Community’s Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2007-2013) under grant agreement no. 266931.*

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**Manish K. Jha and Pushpendra**

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# Governing Caste and Managing Conflict - Bihar, 1990-2011

Manish K. Jha and Pushpendra \*

## Introduction

For the past one century, Bihar has been the scene of massive peasant movements, violent mobilisations, suppression of popular solidarities, and continuous restlessness in society. It is also the ultimate instance of mis-governance. At times it has appeared that the state is going to crumble, and only through authority or authoritarian rule the state can become governable. Bihar has been held also as a classic case of a 'failed state' much in the same way in which the phrase is used in international politics literature. It is considered again as an example of why liberal democracy cannot institutionalise itself in India. One of the factors related to this supposed state of affairs is considered to be the salience of caste in politics. Caste prevents the modernisation and democratisation of politics. It prevents resolution of social conflicts. To be sure, it makes it impossible to govern Bihar. This has now become part of the common sense of the Indian political class and the elite theorists of democracy.

Is there any ground for propounding a different view, namely that it is caste that makes it possible to govern Bihar? Can we say that governance of caste is the clue to governing Bihar well – much in the way democracy theorists would like to connect the word governance with democracy and popular sovereignty? Can we say that in the history of caste governance we have the key to the governance in Bihar, and the management of conflicts that are bound to arise in the wake of the introduction of electoral democracy?

Caste as we know has refused to vanish from the society and politics of Bihar. Its capacity to impact politics and democracy in a dynamic manner speaks of its resilience as a category and as an institution. The history of the state is replete with innumerable instances of caste alliances, networks and mobilisations. Caste is the form in which claim as a significant interest group takes shape. The state and the government try to manage and administer caste in a manner whereby the ruling elite can gain legitimacy of its rule and enjoy the support of majority sections of the society. From the formation of the Kisan Sabha<sup>1</sup> and the emergence of Triveni Sangh<sup>2</sup> in the colonial era to the rainbow coalition of castes by the Congress in the postcolonial era, from Karpoori Thakur's reservation formula to the more substantive backward-caste politics of Lalu Prasad Yadav and Nitish Kumar in more recent periods, caste management has been a fascinating and fundamental preoccupation for political governance in Bihar. Bihar's electoral politics was by and large dominated by four upper castes (Brahmin, Bhumihar, Rajput, and Kayastha) till 1980s in the post-independence republic era (See Appendix I). Political mobilisation of the dominated and 'governed' castes and gradual economic progress of a section amongst the backward castes saw the rise of backward

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politics in the state which finally has come to stay in power since 1990 and thus by now is in place for more than two decades.

This paper will try to demonstrate how against the background of the changing contours of caste in Bihar, tactful management and administration of caste and community have proved to be one of the defining markers of success in representational democracy. Drawing from facts relating to the processes of political agenda setting, configurations and reconfigurations of caste alliances, uses of slogans and symbols, policies and programmes, and allocation of politico-administrative patronage, it attempts to analyse strategies and the craft of caste management and administration by two different political regimes in the last 22 years. Divided in three sections, the paper analyses in the first section how the conceptualisation of caste as a political category has changed over the decades and how it has impacted the democratic polity. In the second section, the paper investigates the strategies of governing castes and caste relations during 15-year rule by the government of Lalu Prasad. The third section analyses the shift in the strategies and tactics of the government under the new ruling coalition led by Nitish Kumar.

## **Positioning Caste in Politics in Bihar**

### **‘Caste Social’ to ‘Caste Political’**

In a democracy, governed by the apparatuses of the modern juridical-administrative-political state machinery, caste has paradoxically come to occupy the centre stage as a means of claiming a share in socio-political and economic resources, particularly by the underprivileged and the marginalised. In the Nehruvian vision of modern India, caste in democratic politics symbolises defeat of ‘liberal’ democracy that should have dealt a decisive blow to any ‘pre-modern’ ascription like caste. So tumultuous and rapid have been the trajectories of different castes in the realm of both economy and politics that it has become necessary to distinguish between the ‘caste social’ and ‘caste political’. Caste social is closer to the scriptural foundations of hierarchy that evolved in ancient and medieval periods. It sought to bring social, economic and political hierarchy and community relations in a vertical order so much so that at the beginning of the previous century, in many instances, it was difficult to distinguish between caste and class. ‘Caste social’ signified various practices that ritualised the low status of certain castes, institutionalised humiliation and contempt, such as the practice of untouchability, and tied them tightly to economic bondage to make escape difficult, if not impossible. It spilled over into the politics of the freedom struggle, led by the Congress, which ensured that hardly a few leaders from the marginalised groups could find place in the upper echelons of the party. The vast toiling masses, belonging to the lower castes, remained under their tight control whether in their paddy fields or in the street fights against the British rule. ‘Caste social’ had its own forms and expressions of dissent and defiance, frequently expressed through efforts towards Sanskritisation, imitating and emulating the rituals and practices of the upper castes. Their movements against landlords for land and wages and against social oppressions would hardly bring any change in the configuration of ‘caste social’ and would focus on improving material conditions of their existence. Local institutions of power remained in the firm grip of the upper-caste landlords. In this situation, most of the organisational efforts of the Left tried to transform the ‘caste social’ into ‘class political’.

What changed during the 1990s was the transformation of caste *social* into caste *political*. Before explaining this great transformation, we would like to explain what is different as far as caste political is concerned. Historically, the process began with reservations of seats in the provincial

assemblies in the colonial era for the socially and economically backward sections of the society, and continued in the form of identification and reservation of Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) in the postcolonial era. In little less than four decades since the adoption of the Constitution, establishment of democracy, electoral representation, and the first general elections in the country, caste transformed into a political category. Ambedkar's prophecy in 1950 that Indians would live with the dichotomy of political equality exercised through the 'one person-one vote' principle on the one hand, and gross inequality in social and economic sphere, in turn compromising the political equality in the long run, on the other, stands contradicted in the light of the empirical data on the democratic experience of India. Social castes and political groupings of castes discovered the strength of numbers in a representational system. For the first time backward castes in late 1960s exhibited their potential to control the government, though it was another two decades before Bihar saw them stabilising their power.

In the representational game they were also able to forge internal solidarity and convert it into numerical superiority. A disjunction between economic power and political power seemed possible for the first time when economic dominance no longer guaranteed dominance in politics. 'Caste political' created opportunity for domination in politics without commensurate domination in social and economic sphere. The number of MLAs and MPs belonging to the OBCs, particularly the upper OBCs like Yadavs, Kurmis and Koeris went up dramatically, and surpassed the number of upper caste elected representatives with a big margin (see Appendix I). Caste appeared in a new avatar, 'caste political', which has increasingly been used as an instrument of political assertion. Assertion in politics brought returns in other spheres too. Class was a difficult route, caste was handy. 'Caste political' magnifies caste within the class and actively pursues caste-conflict to challenge the dominance of upper castes in electoral politics. This was impressively articulated by the idiom of *ijjat* (dignity). It pursues the path of conflict by keeping caste at the centre of contention. Caste political is not so much about ascription, but more about aspiration, dominance, aggression and reaping the resources of governance. Scriptural caste has less relevance here as it now tends to reside more in the hurt pride and lost game of the upper castes. Political caste does not allow the same practice of derogation, contempt, humiliation and subjugation. It uplifts the social caste (of lower castes) by celebrating it rather than being ashamed of it. This is what Michelluti<sup>3</sup> calls "vernacularisation of democracy" in India in relation to caste.

### **End of the Congress Era and the Decline of Upper Caste Dominance**

The Congress party ruled over Bihar continuously until the 1990, except for brief periods in the late 1960s and late 1970s. It was the rule of the upper sections of the society,<sup>4</sup> both caste wise and class-wise, notwithstanding the fact that some of its chief ministers belonged to the OBC, SC and Muslim communities. Though socialist parties exercised considerable influence in Bihar in the initial phase after independence, backward-caste politics gained and lost grounds in the political spectrum of the state intermittently until the 1980s. In the economy, the emergence of a section of 'kulaks' from among the backward castes was perceptible by the early 1980s, and the political parties which tried to disregard and undermine its political potential were fated to get a 'raw' deal for this political oversight in the democratic game. This was precisely the case with the Congress. Its four-decade-old political management collapsed like a house of cards.

There are three important reasons as to why the Congress party could never build a social coalition in Bihar that included backward castes in its fold. First, until 1990 their social coalition, which included the landed gentry cutting across castes, the upper castes, the SCs and Muslims, hardly

faced any formidable challenge. This social coalition was enough to ensure electoral victories. Second, in the first three general elections it had virtually no opposition. The legacy of the freedom struggle under the leadership of the Congress was strongly on its side. Its dislike for the upper backward castes was no secret. These upper backward castes were their tenants and stood to be the main beneficiary of zamindari abolition because of their status as superior tenants. The antagonism zamindari abolition created between the upper-caste landed gentry and the OBCs, particularly the Kurmis and Koeris, could never be overcome. As far as the Yadavs, a caste mostly involved in cattle-raising and milk-selling, is concerned, the upper castes always looked down on them with greater contempt. The Yadavs sat on the back of their cattle, milked them, believed to shrewdly mix water in the milk, cleaned cattle's dung, and would communicate with their cattle in a peculiar language by creating peculiar sounds, so went the prejudices of the upper castes. However, in the absence of a modern dairy industry, day-to-day contact with milkmen was unavoidable. The Yadavs also worked as *charvahas* (cattle grazers) for the upper castes. The Yadavs also benefited from zamindari abolition, but not to the extent that other upper OBCs did. The folkish joke that Yadavs attain intelligence not before the age of 60 years depicts them as the most rustic and stupid people. It is no exaggeration that Yadavs have suffered maximum humiliation among the three upper OBCs. Third, and the most important of all, is the fact that OBCs found refuge under the politico-ideological banner of the Socialists. Ram Manohar Lohia, their important leader, raised the slogan – *Sansopa ki yeh hai maang, picbhare paiye sau mein satth* (Samyukta Socialist Party demands that backwards should get sixty per cent share), which resonated well with the aspiration of the backward castes. Socialists tried to voice the politics of Sudras (that included the backward castes), women, Harijan, Muslims and Adivasis, but succeeded in mobilising the backward castes only. This mobilisation heralded an era of aspiration and anticipation for the backward castes to occupy political space in the country in general and in Bihar in particular.

Since the first general elections, the Congress continued its sway over the Dalits (SCs) and the Muslims and enjoyed their unyielding electoral support. The SCs remained a dependable vote bank of the Congress as their leadership was astutely co-opted by the Congress. The SCs predominantly worked as agricultural labour in the fields of upper-caste landowners with whom they were locked in interlinked land-labour-credit relations. Their dependence on the upper castes was too high to be risked. Left political parties had some support base among the SCs but their mobilisation was limited and along class line only, neglecting the caste aspect of subordination. The Kisan Sabha mobilised tenants and agricultural labourers in the central parts of Bihar in 1930s. In the post-independence period, the Communist Party of India (CPI) successfully mobilised both labourers and tenants in certain pockets of central and northern Bihar. In the late 1960s, while the CPI launched a militant land grab movement, the echoes of Naxalbari movement could be heard in some parts of central and northern Bihar. Later, CPI(ML)-Liberation could successfully mobilise the Dalits in central Bihar on the issues of land, wages and dignity and got considerable amount of their vote in their strongholds when they entered electoral politics. However, their influence was not extensive and in other parts of the state SCs continued to vote for the Congress.

Muslims were another strong vote bank for the Congress until communal politics around Babri Masjid-Ram Janmbhoomi spread all over the country. The Congress seemed to be oscillating, at times passive, and proved to be clearly ineffective in protecting the interests and lives of the Muslim minorities. The inability of the Congress to decisively deal with the Ram Mandir agitation alienated Muslims *en bloc* from the Congress. Above all, the communal riot in Bhagalpur in late 1989 during the Congress regime, in which many Muslims lost their lives, proved to be the proverbial last nail in the Congress's coffin in Bihar.

The defeat of the Congress in 1990 marked the end of an era in Bihar's politics which can be best described as "feudal democracy".<sup>5</sup> It failed to deliver the promises of independence – land reforms, poverty alleviation, welfare, individual rights, fair treatment, plus freedom from indignity, humiliation, and discrimination. By and large, its leadership in Bihar tried hard to maintain the status quo in the society, politics and economy, and could hardly be credited with any social engineering for the population groups living on the margins. Massacres, like Chandwa Rupaspur where 14 persons belonging to the Dalit communities were killed in a pogrom and their village completely wiped out for raising their heads against the landlords, had happened as early as in 1971. In the 1980s, private caste armies like Bhumi Sena, Lorik Sena, Sunlight Sena, Brahmarshi Sena, Kunwar Sena, etc. were formed to counter the Naxalite groups and the mobilisation of agricultural labourers and poor peasants belonging to the SCs and lower castes. They let loose a reign of terror against the latter in active connivance with the state machinery. Unstable governments, high level of nepotism and corruption, the Bhagalpur blinding, the Bhagalpur riots, elite capture of public resources such as fishing *ghats*, *diara* lands, government lands, etc., and the rise of mafia around educational institutions further alienated Congress governments from the masses.

With the formation of Janta Dal government in 1990, under the leadership of Lalu Prasad, a new era of the rise and consolidation of backward castes was ushered in. A powerful social equation of OBCs-Muslims emerged in the electoral algebra with partial support from a section of Rajputs<sup>6</sup> and Dalits. But more fundamental changes were to come. These concerned the ways in which institutions and various apparatuses of the government, procedures, rules, tactics, symbols, slogans and, language were re-written in relation to caste. In the following pages, we would like to highlight some dimensions of this process of social engineering of Lalu's regime of 15 years. This was to be a new chapter in the unfolding of governmental reason in the conflict-ridden land of Bihar, where violence would often occur around contentions among caste groups.

## **Rewriting the Grammar of Bihar Politics: Lalu Prasad's Regime**

### **De-Elitisation of the Government**

Government and state are inherently elitist. Once elected to the Assembly or selected for the higher bureaucracy, the incumbent of a position is elevated above the common man. S/he gets exclusive entry to the institutions of power. A system known as 'proper channel', strongly protected by the force of security and a veil of secrecy, works to make the interface between politico-administrative elites and the society thin and sparse. Population groups are to be governed. Rules and elaborate bureaucratic procedures help the ruling elite govern. The ruling elite is supposed to consist of learned men and women, speaking in chaste language, maintaining decency and decorum, attired in particular ways (e.g., the elected appears in white *khadi kurta pajama* or *dboti/lungi kurta* while the selected officer appears in suit, prince coat or at least shirt-pant). The state apparatus, which includes these high officials, obeys and shows enormous loyalty to them. The politics of governance is supposed to maintain rule of law with regard to safety of property, life and dignity, best done through a mix of threat of punishment and actual penalties as strong disincentive for breaking the rule of law. The juridico-political system serves the dominant along with those with either land or/ and educational endowments. A good accord between the political and administrative executive ensures that the system functions well.

Lalu Prasad greatly undermined the selected, rational, elite apparatus of the administrative machinery. One can say that it was rendered immobile and ineffective. Political leaders presided over

power. These political leaders, unlike the senior officialdom, were approachable, closer to the common person, amenable to influence and somewhat vulnerable to mass politics. For the first time, social and economic status was no longer the sole criterion for approachability and influencing state institutions. A poor cadre coming from a lower caste, inferior economic stratum, even in a situation of conflict with law could approach the leader and seek the latter's patronage to deal with the administration. This de-elitisation project did away with the principles of bureaucratic rationality. Laws, rules and procedures had to be bent, stretched, overlooked or even defied. The decision had to be taken on a political terrain. This was thus a curious case of governance by dismantling, or partially immobilising, the government. Its intelligibility inhered only in the rationale of popular politics.

The rationale for this de-elitisation is not difficult to understand. While the number of MLAs belonging to the lower castes rapidly increased and dominated the Bihar Assembly<sup>7</sup> (See Appendix 1), bureaucracy remained upper-caste dominated and there were no ways of altering its composition. Lalu Prasad could even not find enough IAS officers from the SC, ST, OBC and Muslim background to be posted as collectors in all the districts. The state secretariat was presided over almost cent per cent by upper caste IAS officers. In Bihar, in 2002, 133 out of 224 identified IAS officers (i.e., 59.4 per cent) were from four upper-caste groups: Brahmins, Kayasths, Rajputs, and Bhumihars. Only seven officers belonged to the Koeri, Kurmi and Yadav castes. Out of these seven, four officers were from the Yadav caste and all of them had entered the IAS through promotion from Bihar Administrative Service.<sup>8</sup>

To make the bureaucracy defunct, ineffective and vulnerable to demands and whims of the elected leaders of backward castes, it was necessary to centralise power, humiliate the bureaucracy in public gaze, punish it by frequent transfer and postings, and frequently overrule its decisions. For the first time, in post-Independence Bihar, the fear of the administration and police started waning from the minds of the lower-caste people. All sorts of symbolism were used. One powerful symbol used to be pictures of Lalu Prasad often in newspapers where he would keep his feet on the centre table on the lawn of his residence and bureaucrats would either stand or sit in front facing his feet. Stories abound about how he would speak in rustic language with his officers that would amount to hurt and humiliation in any 'civilised' parliamentary culture. He would visit poor people and introduce himself as 'Raja' (king) of the state and would advise people to be fearless of their 'sevaks' (servants) – the bureaucrats. The 15 years of Lalu-Rabri regime witnessed the lowest number of police firings and *lathi*-charges on the masses. He would prevail over rules as well as rationality to ensure support to his caste members and other OBCs even when they acted against the law. Ultimately, the administration lost the power to resist and bowed to the will of politicians.

Governing through de-elitisation required a different lingo, symbolism and a different sense of pride in the 'being'. Lalu spoke the way his constituency would speak – rustic, jocular and with heavy overtone of his mother tongue (Bhojpuri), and compared well with the spirit of Renu's *anchalic* Hindi (liberally using words from regional dialects). His choice of words, examples and stories would identify with a milkman's daily life. He would speak English like a Karpoori division matriculate.<sup>9</sup> He never hesitated to celebrate his 'being' – the fact that he belonged to a poor *gwala* (milkman) family, grazed cattle, milked cows, was hit by their *latari* (back feet), and sang *gawaru* (rustic) songs. No attempts were made, on his part, to become a gentleman or to copy the erstwhile ruling elites. Lalu used to participate in Holi celebrations by himself playing dhol and dancing to the tune of *jogira*,<sup>10</sup> drank *bhang* on such occasions, would organise performances of *launda* (a person, usually a eunuch, acting as a woman) troupes and sit through it – all of these seen as *bhadesb* (rustic culture, something considered vulgar), irritating the middle-class sensibilities. He motivated his political constituency too to take pride in their 'being'. These were for him ways of raising the morale of his people.

His election symbol was the lantern (electricity used to be rare in rural Bihar) and his processions were called *raillas* (muscular rallies) and *maharailas* (mega rallies). The message was amply clear that his political gatherings could not be captured within the idea of a rally; *railla* gave his constituency a term to boast of. Everyone participating in his *maharaila* was supposed to carry a *lathi*. The *lathi* was a symbol of power and masculinity. Through these *raillas*, Lalu wanted to prove a point that his political affiliates control authority, with *lathis* (symbol of personal political power) on the hands of each and everyone in the gathering. The *lathi* was a multi-purpose, everyday equipment of a milkman who used it to control his cattle while grazing, to gauge water level in a pond where he took his cattle for washing, to keep dogs at bay, etc. but it was also as a symbol of strength of someone who consumed milk and was physically well-built and brave, could defend himself and attack others, if need be, with this easily available, self-produced weapon.

Another way of de-elitisation of politics was making politics a lucrative vocation and that too at mass level. A political culture where government and politics were means of attaining benefits rather than serving people, a large number of youth became active in politics in a variety of ways. Though Lalu Prasad never tried to build a cadre structure at local levels, the youth, particularly of his caste, took keen interest in the local politics as well as in the developments at the state and national levels. With state jobs hard to come by and the existing avenues mostly monopolised by the upper castes, the youth from the OBC groups, particularly the Yadavs, found vocations bordering between legal and illegal as easily available options in the context of accessibility to political patronage. Howsoever scandalous this may sound, this is what followed. The youth were left on their own to imaginatively invent jobs for themselves.

The culture of cultivating association with local administration and the police through a political 'broker' to maintain class dominance by upper caste was present earlier also. This continued in the changed regime, only the caste character of the 'broker' now changed. The change made backward castes' access to public institutions greater, concomitant to democratisation and expansion of corruption. In a way, a good number of backward caste RJD workers benefited from the breakdown of institutions. Visiting the block office and getting work done (such as getting a birth certificate, income certificate or caste certificate, etc.) for the needy proved to be a good vocation for some. It, in addition to brokerage fee, also guaranteed the respect of the people and held out the promise of a ticket to local-level politics. Some found working as agents at the bus stops with a stick in hand, managing passengers and the timing of the buses, jeeps, matadors, etc. as another vocation. Roadside barricades for *chanda* (donation) were common too. All notary offices found a spurt in the number of intermediary agents. The more enterprising ones made links at *thanas* (police stations) and courts and started 'helping' people in return for a 'fee'. There were even more enterprising ones who would get involved in petty crimes, smuggling, liquor business, etc., while closely maintaining links with the political leaders. Leaders would any way employ 'volunteers', musclemen, drivers, etc. All these were part of informal politics, intertwined with informal livelihoods/ vocations and enhanced approachability of the people to institutions of power. Politics became mass politics in non-election times too. At the same time, in absence of a party structure, this did not create any liability for Lalu Prasad's party, RJD.

### **The Space of Illegality within Governance**

Both accessibility to power apparatuses and recognition of the 'illegal' as 'justified' and 'egalitarian' had important effects on participation of people from lower castes, particularly Yadavs, in political processes. In elections, voting percentage of OBCs and SCs went up remarkably. In fact, a large

number of SCs could indeed overcome the fear of the upper castes and their landowners and for the first time cast their votes in the 1995 general elections. Yadavs in particular found urban spaces (illegally) available to them for their *kbatalas* (place where Yadavs kept their cattle, generally very untidy and stinking) without any fear of eviction and backlash of the upper castes and the middle class. 'Illegal' occupation of land on a large scale by the urban poor for their small tenement and livelihoods gave them a foothold to live and survive. City and towns wore a poor, slum-like look. No area remained posh. Undoubtedly, this 'passive egalitarianism' was strategic, regime-specific and contextual.

Yadavs in particular were able to challenge upper castes in the realm of crime, particularly high-value crimes which were earlier the preserve of the upper castes. Crimes like kidnapping, cutting down of trees, snatching of vehicles, smuggling, contract killing, forcibly getting contract of public works, etc. were introduced in Bihar by the upper-caste criminals, many of whom also became politicians and entered the state Assembly. Yadav and *Bind* (a fishing community) criminals, and in certain areas Muslim criminals, could build their own numerous, small crime capitals even though they could not fully replace upper-caste criminals. One scholar wrote,

From Mohammed Suleiman's territory in Kishanganj through Pappu Yadav's domain in Purnea-Madhepura, one can cross Bihar by passing through Anand Mohan Singh's area and then into the realm of Raghunath Pandey and 'Samrat' Ashok and further into the Gopalganj belt of Salaluddin and the Wild West of Champaran. Alternatively, one can go through Makhi Paswan's Khagaria, Kailu Yadav's region, into the Dularchand *tal* and then through Dilip Singh's land and on to the lawless Kaimur ranges crossing the realm of Surendra Yadav.<sup>11</sup>

In due course, some areas, particularly in the north-eastern parts of Bihar, were completely 'liberated' by this politician-criminal nexus. Sahabuddin, a Member of Parliament from Lalu's party, established complete hold over Siwan district. Tales of his gory crimes and terror often filled the pages of newspapers. Similar was the case of Bhagar Yadav who established his crime capital in the *diara* areas of West Champaran and was later successful in sending his younger brother to the state Assembly as an elected member. Another backward-caste RJD leader, Brij Bihari Prasad, known for his muscle power, ended the crime empire of the Congress leader Devendra Dube that spread from East Champaran to Muzaffarpur districts. Yadav criminals operating in Nalanda, Nawada and Patna districts regularly made it to the newspapers headlines by their unrelenting spate of kidnappings in the capital town of Patna. While the opposition, Left and Right, along with the middle class and upper castes called it 'jungle raj', for Lalu Prasad it was part of a process of freedom from fear of traditional dominant groups. In some sense these areas also constituted the 'ungoverned territories' of the land, which the traditional power of the state wanted to get back into the realm of orderly parliamentary democracy. Hence one could notice the growing noise in the newspapers, Parliament and Assembly, and in other elite forums. One can also see here a kind of dialectic at play: change in governing styles was creating these ungoverned spaces, which as we shall see, would in due time again facilitate mutation in governing forms and strategies.

Illegality, strategic use of violence and open patronage to criminals, popularly termed as criminalisation of politics, definitely weakened upper-caste dominance not only in electoral politics but in day-to-day life experiences of lower castes. While the middle class, the upper castes and the 'sensible' intelligentsia of the country mourned the death of liberal democracy and the rise of the illiberal, the masses of Yadavs and other OBCs would vehemently react the other way as their experience of four decades of living with liberal and constitutional democracy did not promise freedom and dignity.

It is important to understand the crisis of constitutionalism when it comes to the empowerment of the downtrodden. The dilemma that a government, riding on the slogan of social

justice and dignity, would face is, to put it in Partha Chatterjee's words, "How can the particular claims of marginalised population groups, often grounded in violations of law, be made consistent with the pursuit of equal citizenship and civic virtue?"<sup>12</sup> The claims to governmental care by the hitherto subaltern groups like the Yadavs, often embedded in violence and criminality, received empathetic response from Lalu Prasad's regime, heralding a new governmental approach to the subaltern subject, to the utter dislike of the liberals.

### **Coping with the Flaming Fields through Strategic Deployment of Caste Political**

The 'spring thunder' of Naxalbari in 1967 had found echoes in parts of Bihar, around the same time when non-Congress forces were also articulating their disenchantment against the Congress through electoral politics. After initial successes in mobilising the peasantry in a few areas in Muzaffarpur, Bhojpur, Patna and Purnea districts, the movement was silenced by para-military and police operations by 1971-72 until resurrected at the end of 1970s. Around that time a large number of leaders and cadres had been released from jails following the post-Emergency Janta Party rule. The beginning of the 1980s witnessed strong mass mobilisation of landless agricultural labourers and poor peasants in the fields of Bihar. The popular concerns of land redistribution, access to public commons, wage increase and anger against sexual oppression of Dalit women by dominant castes were the rallying point around which the Naxalite groups mobilised the masses. Alarmed by the issues raised and strategies adopted by these Naxalite groups, the landowners started augmenting the strength of their 'caste militias'.<sup>13</sup> Thirteen such militias were formed and supported, both by the backward and upper castes such as the Kurmis, Yadavs, Bhumihars and Rajputs. Their aim was to promote intra-caste, vertical caste solidarity at the expense of horizontal, inter-caste class solidarity which was promoted by the Naxalites.<sup>14</sup> Between 1976 and 2001, there were some 90 recorded incidents of local massacres resulting in the death of 860 people.<sup>15</sup> Ranvir Sena, the most dreaded caste-based militia formed in 1994 and claiming to represent Bhumihar land owners' interest, perpetrated 27 massacres between 1995 and 2000 that left a total of 263 dead, mainly in the district of Bhojpur and Jehananbad.<sup>16</sup>

In this context we have to note further that the rise of the 'caste political' in Bihar's politics since 1990 did not leave the Naxalite movement unaffected. The movement had already taken curious turns in 1980s. Post-Emergency, the strongest section of the movement, reorganised under the banner of CPI(ML)-Liberation, had taken the route to mass movements but had supported it with armed activities. Peasants, essentially belonging to SCs, were the backbone of the movement. Their day-to-day struggles on the ground for land, wages, and dignity had to confront not just the upper castes but the emerging landowning upper backward castes too. The CPI(ML)-Liberation had to fight not only the Brahmarshi Sena and Kunwar Sena of the upper-caste landowners but also the Bhumi Sena of the Kurmis and the Lorik Sena of the Yadavs. After a prolonged war of attrition, finally it succeeded in liquidating these caste armies. The armed squads of the Liberation enjoyed popular support of the poor as their saviours. The so-called combination of underground armed struggle with mass movement seemed to be a successful experiment.

However, the growing complication of maintaining two parties — the underground CPI(ML) and the over-ground Indian People's Front (IPF), which was conceived as a united front of democratic forces, including non-party political formations — led to eventual demise of IPF while the CPI(ML)-Liberation became the over-ground organisation. The IPF failed to attract the 'intermediate', non-party democratic forces in large numbers. Some who could be won over gradually joined the party. Riding on the crest of rapid, massive, aggressive and at times spontaneous

movements of peasants, the party could win seven Assembly seats in the 1990 elections. However, the parliamentary path had its own imperatives and the predominant over-ground (legal and exposed) structure rendered maintenance of regular armed squads unfeasible. Combining parliamentary and non-parliamentary paths increasingly became rhetoric, and eventually a memorabilia, in the archaeology of revolution. In the great debate of the mid-1980s within the Naxalite movement, the CPI(ML)-Liberation, on the one hand, held that the democratic system could be used strategically in order to build a mass movement. On the other hand, the advocates of the non-parliamentary path stressed the risk of getting absorbed into parliamentarianism; therefore, they advocated the boycott of the “bourgeois institutions” since they merely represented an instrument of domination and legitimation of the ruling class.<sup>17</sup> Two other strong sections of the Naxalite movement – Central Organising Committee (Party Unity) and Maoist Coordination Centre (MCC) – continued with their non-parliamentary movement and considered the success of CPI(ML)-Liberation as the repeat of the revisionist path taken by the CPI after 1948. The Party Unity group which later merged with People’s War also tried to build mass peasant movement in association with the Mazdoor Kisan Sangram Samiti (MKSS), led by an ex-JP follower, Dr. Vinayan. But following heavy police repression and later dissociation with Dr. Vinayan, it returned to its path of isolated armed activities and selective annihilation. The MCC too experimented, in a very limited way, with working through open fronts but soon withdrew when persons working openly were targeted by the police.

What is more relevant for this study is, however, not the division of the Naxalite movement in the 1980s and 1990s between the parliamentary and non-parliamentary paths in Bihar, but the interface between the Naxalite movement and castes during this period. The SCs and the Extremely Backward Classes, or EBCs, constituted the mass base of the CPI(ML)-Liberation, which had limited success in winning over peasants belonging to the upper backward castes. Its main success in mobilising upper backward castes was among Koeris in Patna, Bhojpur, Aurangabad and Rohtas districts. As later experience was to show, whatever limited mass base it had among the upper backwards, proved to be unstable. The following quote from the *Flaming Field of Bihar* summarises reflections by the CPI(ML)-Liberation on its troubled relationship with the backward castes:

The question of building solid unity with middle peasants who make up nearly 20 per cent of the rural population is a question of decisive importance in tilting the balance in favour of agrarian revolution. Recent changes in the agrarian scene and caste-based rigid social divisions in the countryside of Bihar have rendered the task much more complicated.

Solid unity with middle and even rich peasants belonging to the Koeris and other backward castes down the social ladder develops rather easily due to the peculiar position of these castes. Hardworking by nature and oppressed by upper caste landlords and harassed by widespread theft and dacoity, they quickly come over to the fold of revolutionary organisations. The most complicated is the question of unity with the Yadav middle peasantry, as they often obstruct the rural poor’s struggle against the zamindars by coming in between the two conflicting sides. For instance, often when a wage or land struggle against a zamindar reaches the verge of victory, he suddenly switches over from cultivation through hired labour to that through tenants, and in effecting this switch he finds readymade takers in the Yadavs. Thus, the zamindar retreats into the background while the Yadavs come to the fore and the struggle naturally loses its edge. Then there are the questions of use of communal land, tanks, etc. and struggle against theft and dacoity. All this leads to the contradiction with them taking a serious and sharp turn. But fortunately enough, such frictions prevail only in certain pockets and are not widespread. In fact, in many other cases, they are quite good allies. Regarding relations with middle peasants belonging to the Awadhia Kurmis as well as various upper castes, the main questions are those of wages, vested land and social oppression.<sup>18</sup>

As the struggles for land and wages progressively weakened and struggle against social oppression gradually occupied the main agenda of the CPI(ML)-Liberation, both Lalu Prasad and the

Liberation found themselves fighting the same political battle but in fundamentally different ways. The mass base of the two differed – landless agricultural labourers belonging to the SCs and EBCs strongly sided with the Liberation in its strongholds whereas OBCs, particularly upper OBCs, went with Lalu's party. Importantly, their articulation of the struggle against social oppression also differed. For ideological reasons, the Liberation laboured to construct articulation of its struggle in class terms in a complicated class-caste scenario. It had to sustain its articulation through painstakingly organised class movements mostly of SC and EBC labourers, invariably hitting out at a section of the upper OBCs too in a post-zamindari abolition era. Lalu Prasad's task was relatively simple. He used the readymade 'caste political' to magnify the politics of social justice. Thus, while their politics intersected, both the parties fought against each other.

In the 1990 Assembly election, Liberation won seven Assembly seats out of which four MLAs belonged to the backward castes. Lalu Prasad's first approach was to cause defection in the team of elected representatives of Liberation and he succeeded. Four out of the seven Liberation MLAs resigned from the party and supported Lalu Prasad's government.<sup>19</sup> He also caused defection in district level influential cadres and leaders with some success. Even if the numbers were not large, for a small party with its influence concentrated in certain pockets of Bihar, it was a big blow. The main loss of Liberation, however, was in terms of perceptible cracks in credibility. Plump posts (in the form of chairpersonship or vice-chairpersonship of various boards) were offered to those defecting from the Liberation. The Yadav and Koeri support base of the Liberation increasingly switched its loyalty to RJD. This considerably weakened the party in Nalanda and Aurangabad districts. What still saved the party from complete ruin was the fact that the top leadership had a long history of association with the Naxalite movement, was ideologically committed, and majority of them came from the upper castes or backward castes other than Yadavs. Local activists were mainly from the SCs who had also fought against landowners, tenants, criminals, etc. belonging to the backward castes in the districts of Patna, Gaya, Nalanda and Aurangabad.

The other two parties, viz., People's War and MCC had different composition of cadres and mass base. A report of Asian Development Research Institute (ADRI) suggests a Kurmi advantage in People's War state committee as well as a clear majority of Yadavs in that of the MCC, which may help account for their complicity with the party in power, RJD, from 1990 to 2005, which was also strongly dominated by the Yadavs.<sup>20</sup> MCC's cadre and mass base predominantly came from the Yadav caste. Lalu Prasad clandestinely developed relations with these parties to counter the electoral influence of the Liberation. In short, the inter-Naxalite conflict seemed to have a caste dimension. The increased armed activities of these two groups, People's War and MCC, also succeeded in attracting a section of disgruntled activists of the Liberation who felt that the party had left the people unarmed in face of armed attacks by the landowners. This feeling was particularly shared by the erstwhile members of the armed squads (which had been dismantled by then), who got increasingly marginalised in the mass politics of the Liberation within a parliamentary democratic framework.

The calls of election boycott given by the People's War and MCC may have actually helped Lalu Prasad. The call would terrorise the opponent voters but would be ineffective (perhaps deliberately) as far as casting of votes by his Yadav supporters were concerned. Lalu Prasad tried to reap dividends even from the numerous barbaric massacres perpetrated against the landless agricultural labourers, mostly SCs, by the Ranvir Sena, and retaliatory killings by the Liberation and the MCC. As records show, the Ranvir Sena killed more than 250 people in villages supposed to be sympathisers of the Naxal groups. The victims of these gruesome killings included women, children and aged men. The government often remained a passive observer; this passivity in itself was a tactic.

It served several purposes. It exposed the brutality of the upper castes creating further distances between them and the SCs. It particularly weakened the Liberation whose supporters wanted revenge but were dismayed that it had given up the option of armed retaliation. This also exposed the newly formed Samata Party, a Janata Dal break away under the leadership of Nitish Kumar, which openly sided with the Ranvir Sena and went to the extent of demanding removal of ban on it. Lalu showed through all these that SCs had no option but to remain under the umbrella of his party and the Yadav leadership if they wanted to survive.

In other words, Lalu dealt with the Naxalite movement on a political terrain and not as a law-and-order problem like his Congress predecessors. Anyway, Lalu had scant respect for law and order. He tactfully employed caste-coated social justice as the main weapon. The same is true for his approach to Ranvir Sena. Chaos, cooption, indifference and inaction were his profound tactics even when the Dalits bled in the central plains of Bihar.

### **Social Justice as Politics**

The tone and tenor of slogans, political speeches, and administrative acts of leaders like Lalu Prasad were cautiously crafted to undermine the hegemony of the erstwhile ruling elite of the state. Conscious of the fact that caste-based political practice excluded many backward castes from the political process, Lalu's omission and commission became a reaction against these structural preferences and exclusion. To facilitate the upsurge of excluded castes, Lalu Prasad mindfully brushed aside development related issues and concerns. His slogans like '*Vikas nahi, samman chahiye*' (we need dignity, not development) proclaimed the language of claim-making. These marginalised groups speaking in the local dialects, lacking human capital or physical assets, and separated by a wide social distance from the landed, well-off sections of the OBCs as well as the upper castes, found a credible notion in the assertion that social justice was more important than development.<sup>21</sup> In response to occasional demands for better roads and infrastructure, Lalu Prasad always questioned the efficacy of roads for the marginalised. He would tend to question whether roads were really of much benefit to ordinary villagers, and suggest that real beneficiaries would be contractors, businessmen and other wealthy persons belonging to upper castes.

During his visits to villages in rural Bihar, Lalu always made it a point to visit the areas inhabited by backward castes and he stayed away from visits in the hamlets inhabited by upper castes. This was in sharp contrast to what upper-caste leaders of Congress regime were doing during their visits to villages. Such gestures and symbolism were meticulously planned by Lalu to consolidate his caste engineering. One might discount this political emancipation of lower castes and Dalits as 'tokenism' or 'symbolism' but it is difficult to deny that once they became able to cast their votes against the will of their masters, they were free from several chains of constraints and were able to assert their self-respect and dignity. Lalu Prasad was the symbol of *izzat* (self-respect).<sup>22</sup> The political craft of Lalu was styled on putting the concerns of honour, dignity, and voice much above the 'empty' concerns of development, and this craft was practised aggressively and unambiguously. He was never tired of proclaiming '*Humne garibon aur pichhon ko swarg nahi swar diya*' (I might not have given heaven but I have provided voice to the poor and backward). These practices transformed to a certain extent the structure of dominance and subordination through an expansion of popular politics and representative democracy, which Witsoe refers to as 'territorial democracy'.<sup>23</sup>

To illustrate the point, we would like to refer to a field experience in Jitwarpur village of Araria district in Bihar in the year 2011. In this village, Brahmins were the single largest caste constituting 31 per cent of the total households. However, OBC-I<sup>24</sup> taken together constituted 46 per

cent and OBC-II about 5 per cent of total households. But the landholding remained firmly in the hands of Brahmins who possessed about 56 per cent of total holdings in the village. Almost all orchards, which were the most important source of cooking fuel, were owned by Brahmins. Traditionally, most of the OBC I & II, SCs and Muslims had been agricultural labourers in the fields of Brahmins. Prior to 1990, Brahmins dominated politics as well as the socio-cultural life of the village. Since the villagers were too dependent on them for land, work, credit, firewood, even land for easing themselves, they would tolerate their foul language, physical intimidation and abuse. Though there had hardly been any changes in the landholding pattern in the village, the dominance of Brahmins in politics has declined drastically. No Brahmin could now think of winning even a *Mukhia*<sup>25</sup> election under normal circumstances. At the time of fieldwork, the *Mukhia* and *Sarpanch*<sup>26</sup>, both women, belonged to OBC-I category. The husband of the *Mukhia*, a *Mallah* (fishing caste), told the authors that the role of Brahmins was confined to a kingmaker without ever dreaming to become a king. Initially the Brahmins felt perturbed that a *Mallah Mukhia* would unfurl the national flag at the Panchayat Bhawan on Independence and Republic Days and would organise parallel unfurling of the flag at the same venue after the official function. One major change, which the researchers were told about and which they could easily observe, was the way OBCs and SCs were now able to freely relate with the Brahmin landowners. Though Brahmin landowners always grumbled that the labourers were lazy and greedy, they did not dare to use any foul or derogatory language on their face. Unfree and unpaid labour was negligible in comparison to the past. Public humiliation of the labourer, which once was their favourite pastime, has become a thing of the past. As a SC labourer told the researchers, “Lalu gave us the voice even though he did not give us job or land.” People recalled that once Lalu visited that village and went to OBC and SC hamlets. He told the gathering, “Migrate to any part of the country wherever you find work, earn money, and when you come back dress well (*jeet-jat se rabo*) and live with your head held high.” The visit of a chief minister to a SC hamlet was a lifetime event for them, but more important was that Lalu Prasad spoke of dignity, echoing the most cherished desire deep down their heart. Electoral processes, growing freedom of labour (mostly due to migration) and newly gained fearlessness owing to change in the strategies of governance by Lalu regime altered the pattern of territorial dominance.

Lalu Prasad’s oft-quoted electoral slogan, “*BHU-RA-BAA-L saaf karo*” (wipe out Bhumihars, Rajputs, Brahmins and Lals/Kayasthas, the four upper castes) was an open challenge to the dominance of upper castes. In an interview conducted in 2003, Lalu described what he believed to be his historical role, “The forward castes used to rule Bihar. I have finished them off.” He then pointed to various forward-caste leaders in the room and named them by caste, “Brahmin, Bhumihar, Rajput”.<sup>27</sup> The implication was clear; they served him and not the other way round. During his first term in government, he would himself show up at government offices and police station to punish corrupt officials. He coined a colloquial term ‘*auchak nirikshan*’ (unannounced, surprise inspection visits) for his sudden visits to the government offices and took summary action against errant officials. The idea was plain and straight – to expose the vulnerability of upper-caste officials with the change of political regime. Lalu presented himself as a man of the people who would right the historic injustices perpetrated by the upper castes.<sup>28</sup>

Being able to participate in the electoral process was like ‘sacred expressions of citizenship’. It provided opportunities to the backward castes to express their support or opposition through votes, and was indeed an empowering feel even when there were no tangible benefits in sight. The process of claim-making could electrify the backward castes and SCs; and their resentment against the upper castes was appropriately utilised by Lalu Prasad for political gains.

## The Instrumentality of Differential Capacity

Immediately after coming to power and forming government in 1990, Lalu Prasad increased the quota for OBCs from 20 per cent to 27 per cent; the law in this regard came in force in 1992. He increased quotas for EBCs (Annexure I caste as per Mungeri Lal Commission report) in government jobs from 10 per cent to 14 per cent. After the bifurcation of Bihar (creating a separate state, Jharkhand), it was further increased to 18 per cent. He provided political space and position to several leaders belonging to EBCs. Besides, the 3 per cent quota for the economically depressed, which is irrespective of caste, was abolished. In August 1993, the Patna University and Bihar University Amendment Bill was passed which reserved 50 per cent seats for the OBCs in the senate and syndicate of these universities.<sup>29</sup> Most of the vice-chancellors and directors of educational institutions were chosen from OBCs. These decisions had a lasting impact in transforming the nature and character of educational institutions, till then monopolised by the upper-caste elites. The government passed a piece of legislation making violation of rules regarding caste-based employment quotas a punishable offence.<sup>30</sup> In the absence of availability of qualified backward-caste candidates to compete for these jobs, the government opted for keeping it vacant rather than appointing upper-caste candidates in order to send a clear signal that the government was serious about implementing reservations. However, Mathew and Moore term this style of governance as 'politics of state incapacity'.<sup>31</sup>

However, within this strategy of creating deliberate state incapacity, there were clear exceptions. Lalu Prasad's government restored state capacity when selective benefit and protection had to be provided to the core constituents of his electoral base. The case in point is the cooperative sector in Bihar. The cooperatives in Bihar were overwhelmingly dominated by landed class, the minority upper caste. "The new government set about systematically dismantling them, first by suspending cooperative statutes and elections and putting the organizations under the direct control of appointed public servants. However, one section of the cooperative movement not only bucked the trend, but flourished: the dairy cooperatives".<sup>32</sup> The Bihar State Cooperative Milk Producers Federation (Comfed) offered a clear contrast to the otherwise gloomy tale of cooperative banks in Bihar, but one which underscored the overt political role of caste. "The primary members of Comfed are village dairy producers, which also happens to be the traditional occupation of Yadav caste – traditionally cowherds – for its membership....By any measure the cooperative has become a success: its membership has grown from 66,000 households in 1987-88 to 213,000 households in 2002-03".<sup>33</sup> State's capacity was strongly demonstrated in the protection of religious minorities, what was throughout the rule of Lalu Prasad a crucial political agenda. In a politically charged communal environment of the early 1990s, where Muslims were finding themselves more and more insecure and vulnerable, Lalu Prasad emphasised on the M-Y (Muslim-Yadav) alliance and, thereby, broadened and consolidated his electoral base. This yielded an electoral advantage with which almost single-handedly he kept the Hindu nationalist BJP at bay for 15 years, and the state remained free of Hindu-Muslim violence.

At a time when the entire 'Hindi-belt' witnessed right-wing dominance in parliamentary politics, Lalu Prasad's uncanny caste-and-community management prevented the BJP from electoral triumph in Bihar. His personal intervention and vigilant monitoring during the years of communal tension between the Hindus and Muslims guaranteed protection and security for the minority community. His threat of dire consequences to the police and administrative wing in case of failure to protect the minorities worked well in suppressing communal violence. When asked why Bihar had been so quiet despite its awful record of past riots, he explained how his government had arrested

returning militants from Uttar Pradesh (the site of Ayodhya) before they could reach their towns and villages, and how he had threatened all district magistrates and station-house officers with the loss of their jobs if they allowed any riot to break out in their respective towns. “The political will of the state government”, he said, “was clear.”<sup>34</sup> The electoral indispensability of the Muslim community besides the logic of rights and constitutional protection enabled the success of RJD government in preventing Hindu-Muslim riots.<sup>35</sup> Whichever manner one may analyse the RJD regime’s response during communal turmoil, the fact is clear that he provided Muslims a sense of security and protection.

His government also abolished state tax (though nominal) on toddy (an alcoholic beverage tapped from a toddy tree) to the benefit of Pasi caste belonging to SCs. He ordered that fishermen would have the right to fish from rivers. Besides, he announced opening up what were called *charvaha* schools so that children engaged in grazing cattle could also study. The idea generated huge controversy – hailed by some as an innovative idea and opposed by others as a mockery of elementary education on the grounds of promoting child labour and third-rate education.

In the latter half of the 1990s, when Lalu Prasad was facing trials due to charges of corruption in the fodder scam, he became much more ferocious against the administrative class, mostly belonging to upper castes. He was able to put across a conspiratorial theory among his backward caste and minority electoral base. He claimed that charges in the fodder scam, stringent actions by Chief Election Commissioner in 1995 assembly elections and threat by the BJP to impose president’s rule in the state were well planned and orchestrated strategies by the Hindu upper castes to reclaim power in the state. Lalu Prasad explained it this way, “The system is controlled by people from the upper castes. They are there in the media, they are the system. They will try and finish Lalu Yadav. You have been doing it – all of you from the media. They call me a joker, a man of inferior intelligence. But do you think I care? The people of Bihar will see through this conspiracy”.<sup>36</sup> Not surprisingly, the conspiracy theory had many takers in the core constituency of Lalu Prasad.

### **Disorderly Transformation**

Lalu Prasad’s governing style was the triumph of the ‘caste political’. It aimed at encouraging the OBCs, particularly the Yadavs, to assert themselves – in politics, in local community relations, in specific contexts of vocation often tied to violence and illegality, and even in crime. It undermined the institutions of democracy based on rules, adjudication, and legislative action. It weakened the administration so that the political could manoeuvre the state affairs with least checks and balances. It blocked the formal channels of negotiations and interest representations and preferred these to happen in informal and often fiercely contested political sites. Paradoxically, it stoked a new enthusiasm among the backward castes for the political, including the electoral. Democracy thrived but governance collapsed, to quote Walter Hauser.<sup>37</sup> In a sense, Bihar had “democratically endorsed non-governance”.<sup>38</sup> Caste relations had been governed in such a way that it resulted in a great social churning process. The existing political hierarchy had been turned upside down. The term ‘identity politics’ fails to capture this process which sought far more fundamental changes in the distribution of power, functioning of state institutions, and economic relations in the countryside.<sup>39</sup> Lalu Prasad we may then say seems to have consciously adopted a ‘conflict approach’. It made noise, created mayhem, and let the djinns out of the bottle without knowing how to put it back. It was chaotic and disorderly.

This ‘loud revolution’ had its own victims, not necessarily the rich and the upper castes in all cases. Women were the worst victim of this chaos. Mahila Samakhya,<sup>40</sup> All India Progressive

Women's Association (AIPWA)<sup>41</sup> and other women organisations kept alive the flame of women's right to security and progress in perhaps one of the most difficult times for women's rights. The SCs of the state were no less victim of the rise of the backward-caste power, particularly wherever they tried to raise their voice and assert. They paid a heavy price, sometimes with their lives. The government did not stand in solidarity with the SCs who were increasingly subjected to massacres by the upper-caste armed gangs committed in name to fighting Naxalites. The promises of land and tenancy reforms were hurriedly withdrawn in the very first term of this regime for the fear of losing broader backward alliance. For SCs, the adverse nature of basic property relations remained the same. The degeneration of educational and health services made them more vulnerable. The labouring masses belonging to SCs, EBCs and other castes continued to toil not only in the fields of Bihar, but in Punjab and Haryana and in the inhospitable enclaves of Delhi and other metros. The number of direct trains from Bihar to labour destinations in all corners of the country increased as the number of such desperate labourers increased. The SCs and the poor villagers belonging to other castes had legitimate rights with reference to the state's obligation to ensure them basic productive resources like land, welfare, and security, but they lacked negotiation capacity. The Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) of Ram Vilas Paswan had no vision and political acumen to lead the SCs in the fiercely contested political domain. Caste politics progressively weakened the CPI(ML)-Liberation and other Naxalite groups in the plains of central Bihar.

One could only wish in those years that the churning process of Bihar's politics during Lalu Prasad's rule of 15 years was orderly and combined social transformation with entitlements of the poor and the marginalised. But Lalu Prasad was no visionary. He had gone around trying to dismantle the symbols of the old order with an unforeseen enthusiasm but he did not replace them with anything.<sup>42</sup> The forces that were unleashed by his social engineering could not find positive avenues to channel themselves. Lumpen-isation of a large number of youth happened side-by-side while the majority of the people, including the Yadavs, toiled hard to survive if not thrive. Here, by disorder we mean not just collapse of law and order, but the fact also that a large majority of the population in the state suffered from extreme misery and deprivation with the breakdown of all welfare services. Lalu Prasad's regime increasingly became narrow. It was clearly a case of 'Yadavisation' within the backward politics marred by patronage, nepotism, and gradual alienation from the masses. It thrived on the chaos of its own creation and finally perished when Yadavisation of the ruling coalition proved to be too inflexible and non-accommodative.

## **Continuity and Change: Emergence of a New Ruling Coalition**

### **Politics of *Panchpania*<sup>43</sup> and *Pasmanda*<sup>44</sup>: Development as Politics**

The 'unruly' rule of RJD reached a crescendo by the dawn of 21st century and an atmosphere of despair, lawlessness and general gloom all around became palpable. The protection provided to the unruly political class by the governing regime resulted in widespread insecurity and helplessness of the people. The RJD rule was reeling under the contradictions of its own politics whereby keeping its caste coalition intact became impossible. It was apparent from the very beginning that among the heterogeneous OBC category, Yadavs had garnered a disproportionate advantage during Lalu's regime. Another dominant backward caste, the Kurmis, though numerically far less (3.5 per cent) than Yadavs (11.7 per cent), started showing signs of discomfort and disenchantment.

History repeated itself in Bihar. An effort to unite three dominant backward castes, Yadav-Kurmi-Koeri, through the formation of Triveni Sangh in 1934 could not succeed due to internal

contradictions, also because of poor-caste management strategies of the Congress, which had formed the Backward Castes Federation in 1935 to counter what they viewed as the dangerous class features of the Triveni Sangh and the Kisan Sabha movement. The historical experience of failure to achieve unity along with a sense of graded inequity and differential perception of status and strength among these castes had made backward-caste coalition a suspect project from the beginning of Lalu rule. Though, Yadav leaders claimed to be the vanguard of backward-caste political movement and emancipation, the extremely backward caste groups gradually realised the dominant role and behaviour of the 'Yadav Raj'. "With more than 57 per cent OBC MLAs in 1995, the Janata Dal may well claim to represent the lower caste. However, the Yadav's got the lion's share – 38 per cent – and no other castes, not even the Koeris with 8.4 per cent could rival them. These figures suggest that the rise of Janata Dal in Bihar may be the rise of the Yadavs."<sup>45</sup>

The group which was feeling left out was a heterogeneous caste group of EBCs who make up 32 per cent of the population and they had less than 5 per cent representation in the Bihar assembly. This heterogeneous category of EBC castes now called for rallying together under another dominant backward-caste leader and flag. It was this call that provided political space for Nitish Kumar, a Kurmi caste leader and Lalu's old comrade-in-arm. In 1994, Nitish Kumar defected from Lalu, and together with George Fernandes, formed Samata Party. The timing of this move and use of certain caste platform was reminiscent of the past. Exactly 100 years after the first Kurmi caste association was founded in 1894, Nitish used the Kurmi Chetna rally in 1994 to start projecting himself as a leader of the Kurmis. "Kurmis resented against Lalu Prasad for his bias against the Kurmis when he appointed Yadavs as heads of important boards such as the Bihar Public Service Commission, the Bihar Secondary Education Service Commission, the Bihar State Electricity Board and the Bihar State Development Corporation."<sup>46</sup> OBC coalition forged during Mandal agitation and in the elections thereafter could not be maintained for long and internal contradictions along with rival political aspirations started showing signs of fissures in the unity. The limits of 'popular sovereignty' of Lalu's regime were obvious and political mobilisation of other-than-Yadav-OBCs started taking shape.

The rallying point of this mobilisation became the EBC caste group who are often referred by the upper castes and even by OBCs as *pachpania* (an assortment of various lower castes). Due to their geographical dispersal, lack of numerical strength of their individual castes and heterogeneity, they were never in a position to make claim on government and politics of the state. Nitish Kumar had assiduously worked to bring together a coalition of Kurmis, Koeris, EBCs, lower Muslims (Pasmanda) and Mahadalits<sup>47</sup> and the upper-caste and business-community support-base of his party's coalition partner, BJP. Finally, in November 2005 assembly elections, EBCs consolidated their votes in alliance with lower caste Muslims and upper castes and RJD regime was replaced by the JD(U)-BJP coalition. Widening of caste representation in the Assembly initiated by Lalu in this way further deepened with Nitish Kumar's governing strategy to include the lowest among the backward castes and community.

The re-entry of upper caste in ruling coalition of 2005 now made the project of caste management by a backward-caste leader intriguing yet exciting, though complicated. An old student of backward-caste identity politics, Nitish Kumar was sharp enough to realise that OBC politics had run its course and it needed to be reinvented and couched in a different language of politics. A perceptive social engineer who had refined the craft of caste and community management in his favour projected a developmental orientation of governance and claimed to provide *sushasan* (good governance) by replacing *kushasan* (bad governance) of the Lalu Prasad regime. In order to win over masses in the context of rising frustration with the RJD regime and to capture popular expectation,

slogans and symbols were modified by Nitish Kumar accordingly. His most popular slogan was *Nyaya ke saath vikas ka wada* (promise of justice with development).

Revival and strengthening of state institutions, improving the law and order situation, road and other infrastructure development and improving accountability comprised the idiom which was used to demonstrate the idea of *sushasan*. However, behind these ideas of *sushasan*, Nitish Kumar was absolutely convinced that the success of his politics was dependent on consolidation and sustenance of new caste coalitions. During 2005 election, Nitish candidly remarked “If the EBCs have voted for us, then we will form the government; if they voted for RJD, Lalu will ... The EBCs were divided even last time. In places where they were directly against Yadavs, they came to us. And where the forwards were their main exploiters, they went to RJD. But this time, they have decisively voted for change.”<sup>48</sup> In his first government, Nitish Kumar inducted four members from EBCs (15 per cent of the cabinet strength) which was considerably higher than their 2.1 per cent representation in Rabri Devi government. Besides, the core of JD(U) electorate, the Kurmi and Koeri castes now benefited most as they reached their highest percentage in Bihar assembly in 2005.

Another prominent feature of Nitish Kumar’s skilful caste management has been to enhance upper-caste (37 per cent) representation in government, a move towards ensuring their continued support. In this revival of upper castes in government, the biggest share was appropriated by Bhumihars, a caste that had been dominant all through during Congress regime, despite being numerically minuscule, so much so that within the first month of Nitish’s rule, people of Bihar began to joke about his *sushasan* (good governance) slogans. It was not ‘*sushasan*’, they said, it was *bhushasan*, governance by Bhumihars.<sup>49</sup> Nitish Kumar was well aware that he owed his victory to the upper castes, the political base of the BJP, who were trying to invent an OBC leader who could counter Lalu and his politics. “Rather than empowerment of the OBCs in the political sense, the end-game (in the chess board) of social engineering is to rework the socio-political agenda to ensure the continuance of upper caste hold over the political establishment by co-opting individual leaders from among the backward castes and even accord them positions of prime importance. The BJP had put this strategy in place in Uttar Pradesh (through Kalyan Singh) and in Madhya Pradesh (through Uma Bharati) and in Bihar, it is Nitish Kumar.”<sup>50</sup> Besides the organisation base of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) helped BJP-JD(U) facilitate grassroots mobilisation and micro-manage voters. Accepting the importance of the BJP as a coalition partner, JD(U)’s outspoken leader, Sharad Yadav, candidly remarked, “We had the masses with us but I am not sure we would have won such a landslide without the BJP. Although some JD(U) members wanted to break from BJP, we realised that it was the BJP which had the support system – the upper-caste dominated press, bureaucracy and judiciary. Though Nitish led from the front, the BJP played its part in this win.”<sup>51</sup>

The upper castes who had backed Nitish Kumar and helped him replace Lalu regime obviously wanted their share of the pie through political decisions that suited their interest. The first important decision they forced Nitish to take was disbanding the Amir Das Commission that had been constituted to examine the political links and role of the Ranvir Sena in perpetuating caste violence in the plains of central Bihar plains. The Amir Das Commission was set up in the wake of the brutal massacre of more than 60 men, women and children belonging to socially and economically oppressed groups in Laxmanpur-Bathe village, Jehanabad, in December 1997, allegedly by the Ranvir Sena, a Bhumihar caste militia. Due to sustained pressure by movements and campaigns by Left and human rights groups, the then government of Bihar had been forced to set up this commission to identify the political forces patronising the killers of the Dalit and rural poor of Bihar. By refusing to give extension to the commission which was close to completion of its tasks and submission of its report, Nitish Kumar tried to assure the upper castes that he was committed to

safeguarding their interests. In another move, clearly a political gesture aimed at upper-caste appeasement, the Nitish government constituted Bihar Rajya Savarna Aayog (a commission for the upper castes) to identify the underprivileged and deprived communities from among the upper castes.

Moreover, the contradiction between the political compulsions of social engineering and the need to maintain status quo became apparent when the Nitish government took a decision not to implement the recommendations of Bihar Land Reforms Commission. In June 2006, the Nitish government set up the Bihar Land Reforms Commission under the chairmanship of D. Bandyopadhyay, formerly land reforms commissioner of West Bengal. The commission submitted its report in 2008. One of its recommendations argues for legal recognition of *bataidars* or tillers: "...the Bihar Tenancy Act did not recognise the vast mass of cultivators commonly known as bataidars through whom 30 to 40 per cent of arable land in Bihar is getting cultivated. Hence it is immediately necessary to recognise this category as a legal entity and give them protection regarding fixity of tenure, fairness of sharing of crop, prevention of legal ejections and other economic oppressions from which they suffer." The fear that the *bataidari* law would eventually give land to the tiller brought together influential political leaders from landed upper castes cutting across party line. The dissent in his political coalition and the looming threat to his government was manifest in the by-elections for 18 assembly seats in 2009 when Nitish's political coalition had to face defeat in 13 constituencies. In the absence of political will to implement land reforms along with the spectre of backlash from landed gentry, Nitish Kumar relented and this most fundamental issue for Dalits and extremely backward castes was thrown out of the political agenda.

One cannot deny that despite intermittent setbacks in his first five years in power, with targeted transfers, reservations and special schemes, Nitish successfully wooed a 'coalition of extremes' – upper castes at one end and the EBCs and the Mahadalits at the other, apart from women and pasmanda (backward) Muslims.<sup>52</sup> Nitish Kumar was conscious of the reality that a lasting social engineering for a sustained electoral base necessitated the fragmentation of the Muslim electoral base of Lalu Prasad and therefore serious attempt was made to win over a section of Muslims by addressing the issues and concerns of the lower rung of the Muslim community. The Muslims of Bihar constitute 16.5 per cent of the state's total population and they rank among the poorest communities in the state, approximately 80 per cent being descendent of middle- and lower-caste converts. Twenty- Eight Muslim castes were already included in the central list of OBCs as recommended by the Mandal Commission report. Though the political trajectory of Bihar witnessed a shift from upper-caste dominance to backward-caste ascendancy, the hegemony of forward-caste Muslims continued in the politics of Bihar. In the 1995 Bihar Assembly, 17 out of 23 MLAs were upper-caste Muslims and only six belonged to the middle and lower castes. In the 2000 Assembly elections, only 22.5 per cent backward Muslims got elected. Unlike Hindu OBCs' long history of struggle against upper-caste dominance, the Pasmanda Muslims resistance against the Ashrafs of the community is a 1990s phenomenon. Although these lower and middle castes got enlisted by the state government in the Most Backward Caste/OBC lists, first in 1951 and then in 1978 for preferential treatment<sup>53</sup>, only after the implementation of Mandal Commission the backward-caste Muslims began to organise themselves in real sense.<sup>54</sup> In Bihar, to raise the consciousness of the backward Muslim and unite them to fight for their rights, many organisations came into existence. The All India Backward Muslim Morcha (AIBMM) was set up by Ajaz Ali in 1994 in Patna, Bihar.<sup>55</sup> AIBMM coined the term 'Dalit Muslims' for the descendents of the converted population belonging to lower castes and demanded that they be recognised as Scheduled Castes at par with other religious groups.

Another organisation, the Pasmada Muslim Mahaz led by Ali Anwar, was instrumental in making the concerns and demands of Pasmada and Dalit Muslims vigorous in the social and political arena of Bihar. In due course, the mobilisation became strong and a force to reckon with. Slogans like *Jo Pasmada ki baat karega, wahi Bihar pe raaj karenga* (those who will acknowledge the demands of Pasmada will rule Bihar) and *vote hamara fatwa tumhara, nabi chalega* (your command on our vote will not continue any more) reflected the mood of the people and tenor of the struggle. This mood was tapped by Nitish Kumar. Aware that old allegiance of Muslim voters to Lalu Prasad continues and the BJP-JD(U) alliance would not allow Nitish Kumar to muster Muslim votes, he appropriated the opportunity of promising reservation for Dalit Muslims and tried to make a dent in the support base of Lalu Prasad. On October 8, 2005, in a joint statement by the representatives of the Bihar Momin Welfare Society (Danapur), All India Momin Welfare Organisation (Hajipur), Momin Ekta Munch (Momin Unity Forum, Aara), Bihar Pradesh Momin Youth Majlis (Patna), A.Q. Ansari Memorial Committee (Patna), and All India Pasmada Muslim Mahaz (Bihar unit), it was mentioned that during the 15 years of rule, Lalu Prasad Yadav had done nothing for the poor Muslims, and thus announced the need to defeat the RJD in the upcoming election.<sup>56</sup> Though it is very difficult to analyse the electoral implication of such calls and mobilisation, it certainly put pasmanda politics on the centre stage of discussion and deliberations. Arguing against the allegation of joining hands with a Hindutva force (the coalition with BJP), Ali Anwar stated that Nitish Kumar is not communal and tried to cover the apparently disturbing images emanating out of association with BJP under the cloak of much needed Pasmada politics. He further argued, “There is no BJP government at the centre. So the BJP or its associate cannot do in Bihar what they did in Gujarat.”<sup>57</sup>

After coming to power in 2005, JD(U) government identified backward Muslims such as weavers and *dhobis* and devised a policy of reservation for them in local bodies. The government also devised the scheme of providing educational scholarship to the Pasmada Muslims. Besides, the chief minister announced a rehabilitation scheme and started a monthly pension of Rs 2,500 for affected families of the victims of the 1989 Bhagalpur riots, many of whom belonged to the lower strata of Muslims. Following this, cracks appeared in the support base of RJD among Muslim community alliance.

Besides this, the growing clamour for a broader social base and his own political shrewdness made Nitish Kumar take his politics of caste engineering further by winning over support from the Dalit community as well. In order to fragment the strong Dalit caste base of LJP leader Ram Vilas Paswan, the Nitish Kumar government made a perceptive endeavour to emphasize upon the heterogeneity of the category called ‘Dalit’ and highlighted how certain Dalit castes benefited at the cost of others, due to their caste affiliation and proximity to leaders like Ramvilas Paswan. Nitish Kumar government came out with various welfare schemes for those belonging to what he referred to as “Mahadalit”, which included Dalits other than the Dusadh, Chamar, Pasi and Dhobi who amongst the Dalits wielded considerable economic and political influence in the state, in terms of taking advantage of the reservation policy. Further, Nitish constituted Bihar Mahadalit Vikas Mission to enlist Dalit caste groups on the basis of their relative socio-economic conditions. In the first report, the commission recommended some measures for development and to include 18 castes as the extremely weaker castes amongst the list of Scheduled Castes. In the second recommendation, the commission recommended two more castes as the extremely weaker castes amongst the list of Scheduled Castes. Recently, the State Mahadalit Commission has recommended ‘Chamar’ caste to be included in the Mahadalit category after studying the different aspects of their social, educational, and economical condition in its third recommendation.<sup>58</sup> The idea behind this move was clear and precise; he wanted to isolate the Dusadh support base of Paswan by organising other Dalit castes and

this was done by making them conscious about their neglect and relative marginalisation. At the outset, Nitish Kumar tried to couch his Mahadalit strategy in the language of inclusiveness and justice for the most deprived; however, the strategies that followed made it obvious that it was nothing but a ploy to win greater political dividends.

### **Deepening of Social Engineering through PRIs**

Caste-based social engineering had great potential at the grassroots. However, the political leaders representing backward caste interests had differential approaches and strategies for nurturing their political constituencies through decentralisation process. In the absence of adequate political support at state level, Karpoori Thakur, the pioneer of backward caste politics in Bihar, opted for decentralisation of polity and held Panchayat elections in the year 1978. It showed the sign of backward caste resurgence in politics and influenced the socio-political discourse in Bihar. Against the backdrop of the implementation of Mungeri Lal Commission's recommendations by the Karpoori Thakur government, an initial shift in political centre of gravity could be observed in 1978 Panchayat elections. The decision of introducing reservation and holding Panchayat elections kept the ball rolling for social engineering, even when political regime refused to hold Panchayat elections subsequently. Lalu Prasad's preoccupation with dismantling upper-caste dominance at the state level through assembly elections did not allow him to realise the potential of decentralised governance. Besides, "it was feared that the backward coalition which was built so assiduously over the years will be fractured at the grassroots level, especially in the absence of an organised and disciplined party structure.....It was probably in the mind of RJD leaders that a strategic and stable coalition was likely to collapse, if Yadavs, the pre-eminent caste of the social justice group, jockeys for power with the Muslims at the local centre."<sup>59</sup> The Panchayat election of 2001 was held in Bihar after a gap of 23 years. Though the 73rd amendment came into operation in 1993, Bihar Panchayats had to wait another eight years for the Panchayat elections to take place after judicial intervention. The election results showed that though there had been changes in the structure of power at grassroots in favour of the upper backward castes, the traditional rural elites still dominated in several places. Admittedly the upper backwards had extended their political support base in the Panchayat elections – cornering 45 per cent of chairmanship, 42 per cent of the membership of Zila Parishads, and same percentage of *Mukbias*. But the upper castes still held substantial power base. Their shares in different elected posts were – chairmanship (35 per cent), membership of Zila Parishad (25 per cent) and *Mukbias* (34 per cent).<sup>60</sup> However, at the same time, there had been small gains even for the lower backwards and Dalits as compared to their previous representation in Panchayat election.

In view of the strongly competitive politics of social justice in Bihar, Nitish Kumar had the challenge of walking on a double-edged sword. On the one hand, he had to keep his coalition with the upper castes going; on the other, his own politics rested on ensuring that his main social base of EBCs-Koeris and Kurmis further consolidated itself in the power structure at the grassroots level. He realised that he could attain the prospect of further social engineering through the PRIs if he wanted to counter the supremacy of dominant castes. Through an amendment in the Act, 50 per cent seats at every level including single posts like *Mukbias*, and heads of panchyat samitis and zila parishads were reserved for women. The ambit of caste-based reservation was also expanded by reserving 20 per cent seats for EBCs at every tier of PRIs. After the 2006 Panchayat elections, the state had more than 2,60,000 elected representatives in these PRIs comprising *Mukbias* (chairpersons of GPs) and ward members; *Sarpanches* (elected heads of Gram Katchahries at GPs) and panches; *Pramukhs* (chairpersons of Panchayat Samitis) and Panchayat Samiti members;

Adhyakhas (chairpersons of ZPs) and ZP members. From amongst the EBC category, 1,464 were elected as *Mukhijyas*, 18,901 as Gram Panchayat Members and 1,464 as *Sarpanchs* and 18,900 as panchas.<sup>61</sup> Expansion of EBCs and women representation through panchayat was too evident to be discounted for political analysis and subsequent assembly election in 2010 saw a large-scale consolidation and assertion by OBCs in favour of the JD(U) coalition. This deepening of representational politics further reorganised power equation at village and municipal ward levels; and has perhaps initiated far-reaching consequences for assertion by another stratum of backward castes in the politics of the state.

## Concluding Reflections

In much of the post-colonial developing world, including India, social and economic conditions have connived to limit the capacity of subordinate groups to effectively exercise their rights and to secure substantive gains. With ritualised exclusions and deeply embedded hierarchical relations, the caste system had reinforced political marginalisation and socio-economic inequalities for a fairly long time even when affirmative action was executed by post-colonial national and state governments. However, the changed trajectory of caste dominance through the gains of backward-caste politics in Bihar has revealed the emancipatory potential of hitherto backward sections of society. Innovation in the art of political strategisation that brought shift in the caste and class profile of political and administrative elite along with government policies and programmes facilitated the process of giving voice to silent population. Through adroit application of the logic of popular sovereignty, backward-caste leaders have altered the discourse of politics and political rule in Bihar. Caste alliances that had hitherto been managed in a nuanced manner from colonial to post-colonial Bihar to suit the interest of ruling elite, coming from a numerically weak upper-caste background, has been turned upside down by a more incisive and shrewd caste management by backward-caste political leaders like Lalu Prasad and Nitish Kumar.

The discriminatory processes and practices by upper caste-controlled institutions that limited the associational autonomy of backward castes were severely undermined by the emerging political society led by backward-caste political leaders in the last two decades. The reach and authority of the juridical and democratic polity have been partially transformed with the writ and power of upper-caste strongmen being replaced by that of the backward castes. The domination of upper castes over state, district, block and village level institutions, cooperatives, petty contract work, and other spheres of government activity have effectively been checked by backward-caste politics. Competitive democracy has undermined the legitimacy of traditional social authority, spawned a whole new generation of political entrepreneurs, and created spaces in which new groups have been successfully mobilised. Interestingly, the political forces that have emerged are rooted more than ever in social cleavages.<sup>62</sup> The emergence of new political forces concomitant with better political articulation by the marginalised castes has introduced the idea of vigorous claim-making. These claims are largely made to the government for better representation in government and administration through more reservation in government jobs, more seats in parliamentary and legislative elections, etc. The surfacing of these claims and demands has triggered a frantic scramble for preferential treatment that Bardhan aptly describes as “equal-opportunity plundering by all interest groups”.<sup>63</sup> In fact ‘illiberal’ or ‘uncivil’ character of democratic practices in places like Bihar results from the same dynamics that made possible democracy’s radicalization. What many argue to be the limitation of post-colonial democracy turns out to be an enabling factor for new forms of resistance and empowerment to be possible, outlining the potential for a specifically post-colonial radical democratic politics.<sup>64</sup> The

potential of this politics can be gauged through a perceived improvement in ensuring honour, dignity and respect for backward castes by facilitating their access to public institutions and representation in government and politics of the state.

The political technique and changed governing style of Nitish Kumar once again augmented the influence of elite-dominated bureaucracy over mass-represented political society. Political society of Bihar, over the years, acted itself out in an unruly and unpredictable manner and this unruliness was consolidated and endorsed during RJD regime. In contrast, JD(U) government led by Nitish Kumar has reposed greater faith in elite-dominated bureaucracy even if it meant consciously and craftily undermining the authority and reach of the people's representatives. A core political agenda that suits coalition politics of the Nitish regime has deftly been put in the garb of development and the state administration is now assigned the task to realize it or at least be seen as working towards its realization. Through a detailed analysis of political regimes in the last 22 years, we have tried to understand how disposition, manoeuvre, tactics, techniques and other strategies are utilised for sustaining control over power as also for reworking the pattern of social and political domination in Bihar.

In all these histories of caste management for governing society and making state possible, we also have the unfolding history of a distinct type of socialist governmentality in the post-colonial context. By socialist we mean the origin of the idea of governing society – by expanding caste coalition on the basis of the power of the backward castes – in Indian socialist (as distinct from communist) thought. Indian socialist thought had taken caste seriously – in other words, as a critical element of the grammar of rule. And we would do well to remember that this too had historical lineages. Building up caste coalitions is nothing new in the Indian history of rule. In early modern period princes ruled on the basis of effective caste coalitions. What is remarkable in Bihar history is that this governmental rationality and intelligibility around the idea of caste management was possible in a modern democratic era. With caste you do not only create conflicts, you also manage and perhaps at times resolve conflicts.

Yet we must ask: Where does all this leave the question of justice for the Dalits and agrarian labour in Bihar? Here the limits of the transformative politics of backward-caste leaders are exposed because of their inability to deal with the structural and fundamental issues like land reforms. Both political regimes, with varied scales, entangled itself in a network of accommodation and patronage and thus under-achieved their potential to pursue much needed transformative projects. While in the regime of Lalu, the core issues of land to the tiller, distribution of surplus land, wage increase, containing distress migration, ensuring law and order, and facilitating economic development, were relegated to the background; Nitish Kumar led political establishment can only claim to attend to only a very limited number of these issues. Although obsessed with social engineering, Nitish Kumar presents an impression of relating with population through the governmental concern of welfare and development, while Lalu Prasad's *modus operandi* was to relate to population squarely by way of the agenda of justice, dignity, and distribution of governmental resources. As we have seen, his politics of 'backward assertion' and the policy of 'fairness as increased ownership of governmental and other political resources' could not integrate the agenda of social development within the ambit of the 'social justice' plank. The experiences of the last seven years of Nitish Kumar's politics also seem to be obsessed with caste management and social engineering in a functional manner rather than attending complex and contentious issues of fundamental nature. The political symbolism and overplay of caste-based politics, for which Lalu Prasad was held responsible *ad nauseam*, still holds sway over political discourse and remain the primary preoccupation of the government. However, the shift of power in 2005 from one backward caste-dominated political party to another coalition led

by another backward-caste leader has revealed that the socio-political churning in the caste-community groups increases aspiration, forms new coalitions and brings forth new leadership. It confirms that caste/community alliances and social-engineering processes are dynamic and itinerant rather than stagnant. It also confirms that for an emancipative politics of the Dalits this history holds a clue as to how to advance. This is also a history of passive revolution in Bihar; yet within this history Bihar is fated to search out the clues to further social transformation – be it the passive or the active way.

**Appendix 1: Caste and Community of the MLAs in Bihar (%)**

	1952	1957	1962	1967	1969	1972	1977	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005	2010
<b>Upper castes</b>	46.0	45.9	46.2	44.8	42.0	42.8	40.8	36.5	38.5	34.5	21.8	23.1	30.0	32.28
Brahmin	12.1	10.0	13.8	11.0	9.4	11.0	7.1	12.3	10.8	8.3	3.1	3.1	4.9	6.58
Bhumihar	10.0	12.5	8.8	11.6	10.3	10.4	10.2	9.8	10.5	11.1	5.8	7.1	9.5	10.6
Bengali	1.5	0.6	0.9	1.9	2.5	2.5	2.2	1.2	1.2	1.2	1.2	0.3	-	-
Rajput	14.2	17.2	19.1	17.2	17.6	17.6	18.5	11.4	14.5	12.7	9.5	11.4	14.0	13.9
Kayastha	8.2	5.6	3.4	3.1	2.2	1.3	2.8	1.8	1.5	1.2	2.2	1.2	1.6	1.2
<b>Backward Castes</b>	19.3	18.8	23.6	26.0	27.9	24.9	27.7	29.0	25.3	34.2	43.6	35.2	34.5	36.3
Yadav	7.9	6.6	9.4	11.6	15.0	11.0	15.4	13.8	14.5	19.1	25.8	20.7	22.6	16.4
Kurmi	3.6	3.8	4.4	4.1	3.8	6.0	3.7	6.2	5.2	4.9	5.8	4.6	4.5	7.4
Koeri	4.5	5.3	6.0	4.7	2.8	4.1	4.6	2.8	2.8	4.0	6.8	5.9	4.9	7.6
Baniya	3.3	3.1	3.8	5.6	6.3	3.8	4.0	6.2	2.8	6.2	5.2	4.0	2.5	4.9
<b>Extremely Backward Castes</b>	1.2	0.6	0.9	0.6	0.9	0.9	0.6	1.5	1.8	0.8	3.1	5.2	5.3	7.0
<b>Scheduled Castes</b>	13.9	14.7	13.2	13.5	14.1	13.8	13.8	14.5	14.8	14.8	15.1	14.8	16.9	15.67
<b>Scheduled Tribes</b>	10.9	11.2	9.0	9.2	8.8	8.9	8.5	8.6	8.9	9.0	8.2	8.9	-----	0.82
Santhal	2.7	2.2	0.6	1.3	0.9	1.3	1.2	1.5	0.9	0.6	0.9	0.9	-	
Munda	1.2	0.9	0.6	1.3	0.6	1.3	0.6	0.3	1.2	0.9	0.9	1.2	-	
Oraon	0.6	0.9	0.6	0.3	1.3	0.6	1.2	0.6	0.6	0.9	0.6	0.9	-	
<b>Others</b>	6.4	7.2	7.2	6.3	6.0	5.7	5.5	6.2	6.2	6.5	5.8			7.8 (Musli ms)

Source: 1) Cyril Robin. 2009. Bihar: The New Stronghold of OBC Politics in Christopher Jaffrelot and Sanjay kumar (eds.) "Rise of the Plebeians? The Changing Face of Indian Legislative Assemblies", New Delhi: Routledge 2) Srikant. 2011. Raj aur Samaj. Vani Prakashan. New Delhi

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Kisan Sabha movement was started in Bihar in 1920s under the charismatic leadership of Swami Sahjanand Saraswati. Through Kisan Sabha, peasants were organized against Zamindars and demands for occupancy

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rights got momentum. Under Swami Sahjanand, the Bihar Pradesh Kisan Sabha sought to organize sharecroppers and tenants from all castes.

<sup>2</sup> Triveni Sangh was founded in 1933 and it claimed to represent the socio-political interest of Yadav, Koeri and Kurmi caste. The stated objective of this formation was to promote the welfare of the oppressed and suppressed class of the state of Bihar. Within two years of its formation, the Sangh had a membership of ten lakh backward caste people. It contested the provincial election in Bihar in 1937. By 1939, it started demanding reservation for backward castes and Dalits.

<sup>3</sup> Michelutti, Lucia. 2007. "The Vernacularization of Democracy: Political Participation and Popular Politics in North India", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute (N.S.)* 13, p. 641

<sup>4</sup> According to 1931 Census, the upper caste constituted only 13.7 per cent of total state population (5 Per cent Brahmins, 3 per cent Bhumihars, 4.4. per cent Rajputs and 1.2 per cent Kayasthas). The Other Backward Caste can broadly be distinguished as Upper OBC and Extremely Backward Castes (EBCs).<sup>4</sup> The upper OBC constituted 20.3 per cent of Bihar population (11.7 per cent Yadavs, 4.4. per cent Koeris, 3.5 per cent Kurmis and 0.6 per cent Baniyas. The EBCs constituted 18.2 per cent of the state population; there were 15 caste groups under this category.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Witsoe. 2011. "Corruption as Power: Caste and the Political Imagination of the Postcolonial State", *American Ethnologist*, vol. 38 no. 1, pp 73-85

<sup>6</sup> Due to the influence of V.P. Singh, a section of Rajputs gave vote to Janta Dal in 1990 elections.

<sup>7</sup> A cursory glance at the figures of representation in electoral politics of the state clearly reveals a trend towards decline of upper castes hold in the electoral politics of Bihar and the rise of Other Backward Castes (OBCs). 1990 marks the watershed in terms of electoral transformation of the state. For the first time, the numbers of OBC MLAs were more than upper caste MLAs in Bihar (34.9 against 34.6 per cent). The upper castes represented only 25.6 per cent of Janta Dal MLAs, whereas the backward castes constituted 43.8 per cent of the party MLAs including 29.8 per cent of Yadavs. As a consequence, the Yadavs represented the largest caste group in the Legislative assembly (19.1 per cent). By 1995, the OBCs represented 46.8 per cent of all MLAs in Bihar that included 25.8 per cent of Yadavs (36.4 per cent of Yadavs of the JD constituted 75 per cent of all Yadav MLAs). From 1985 to 1995, the number of OBC MLAs doubled to 50 per cent while the number of upper-caste candidates more than halved to 17 per cent, marking a profound alteration in the process of political claim-making. In 1995 assembly elections, only 61 forward caste candidates returned to Bihar Vidhan Sabha as against 165 backward caste members.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Witsoe. 2006. "Social Justice and Stalled Development: Caste Empowerment and the Breakdown of Governance in Bihar" in Francine Frankel (ed.), *Indian in Transition: Economics and Politics of Change*. Philadelphia, Centre for Advanced Study of India, p. 23 [Accessed at [www.sas.upenn.edu/csi](http://www.sas.upenn.edu/csi)]

<sup>9</sup> Karpoori Thakur introduced a special category of "without English" matriculation during his regime in 1977. This was in line with Lohia's anti-English tirade. The authors consider this a farsighted, revolutionary measure. However, this special category was withdrawn when the congress came back to power.

<sup>10</sup> A local form of song sung during holi

<sup>11</sup> Arvind N. Das. 1992. *The Republic of Bihar*. New Delhi, Penguin Books, p. 136

<sup>12</sup> Partha Chatterjee. 2004. *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections of Popular Politics in Most of the World*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 64

<sup>13</sup> Informal armed gangs formed by some castes to defend interests of landowners through the might of force.

<sup>14</sup> Nicolas Jaoul. 2009. "Naxalism in Bihar: From Bullet to Ballot", in Laurent Gayer and Christopher Jaffrelot (eds.), *Armed Militias of South Asia: Fundamentalists, Maoists and Separatists*. New Delhi: Foundation Books, p. 46.

<sup>15</sup> Prakash Louis. 2002. *People Power: The Naxlite Movement in Central Bihar*. Delhi: Wordsmiths, pp. 241-46.

<sup>16</sup> Jaoul. 2009. "Naxalism in Bihar", p. 31

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 21

<sup>18</sup> CPI(ML)-Liberation. 1986. "Reports from the Flaming Fields of Bihar". Calcutta, pp. 48-49

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- <sup>19</sup> Four MLAs of CPI(ML)-Liberation that defected from Party were Bhagwan Singh Kushwaha, Umesh Singh, K.D.Yadav and Suryadev Singh as mentioned in Srikant. 2011. *Raj Aur Samaj*. New Delhi: Vani Prakashan, P. 71
- <sup>20</sup> ADRI report cited in Jaoul, “Naxalism in Bihar”, p. 34
- <sup>21</sup> Witsoe. 2006. “Social Justice and Stalled Development”, p. 2
- <sup>22</sup> Sanjay Kumar, Mohammad Sanjeer Alam and Dhananjai Joshi. 2008. “Caste Dynamics and Political Process in Bihar”, *Journal of Indian School of Political Economy*, vol. 20 no. 1 &2, Jan- June, p. 14
- <sup>23</sup> Jeffrey Witsoe. 2009. “Territorial Democracy: Caste, Dominance and Electoral Practices in Postcolonial India”, *PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review*, vol. 32, no. 1, p. 65
- <sup>24</sup> Other backward castes are divided into two groups – OBC-I and OBC-II. OBC-I, also referred to as Extremely Backward Castes (EBCs). In 1978, Karpoori Thakur, OBC leader and Chief Minister of a non-Congress government in Bihar, implemented 1971 Bihar Backward Classes Commission Report (known as Mungeri Lal Commission) which recommended affirmative action quota for OBC groups in the state civil services, other state government jobs and in universities. The term Upper OBC corresponds to the Backward Classes listed in Annexure II of the Mungerilal Commission Report on Backward classes in Bihar. The term lower OBC correspond to the Extremely Backward castes listed in Annexure I of the Mungeril Lal Commission report. These division is popularly known as Karpoori formula as it has been implemented by the then Chief Minister of Bihar, Shri Karpoori Thakur.
- <sup>25</sup> *Mukhiya*: head of gram panchayat is called *Mukhiya* in Bihar
- <sup>26</sup> *Sarpanch*: head of the gram katchary (Village court) is called *Sarpanch* in Bihar.
- <sup>27</sup> Witsoe. 2006. “Social Justice and Stalled Development”, p. 13
- <sup>28</sup> Paul Clements. 2005 (winter). “A Rawlsian Analysis of the Plight of Bihar”, *Studies in Comparative International Development*, vol. 39, no. 4, p. 20
- <sup>29</sup> Chaudhary, Prasanna Kumar and Srikant. 2005. *Swarg par Dhava: Bihar Mein Dalit Andolan (1912-2000)*. New Delhi: Vani Prakshan, p. 379
- <sup>30</sup> Witsoe, 2006. “Social Justice and Stalled Development”, p. 15
- <sup>31</sup> Santosh Mathew and Mick Moore. 2011. *State Incapacity by Design: Understanding the Bihar Story*. IDS Working Paper 366. University of Sussex: Institute of Development Studies,
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, p. 21
- <sup>33</sup> Saxena cited in Witsoe, 2006. “Social Justice and Stalled Development”, p. 26
- <sup>34</sup> S.I. Wilkinson. 2006. *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India*. New York: Cambridge University Press, p. 86
- <sup>35</sup> Witsoe. 2011. “Rethinking Postcolonial Democracy: An Examination of the Politics of Lower-Caste Empowerment in North India”, *American Anthropologist*, vol. 113, no. 4, p. 624
- <sup>36</sup> Poornima Joshi. 2005. “Fatal Gaffe Arms Laloo in EC war”, *The Telegraph*, October 27
- <sup>37</sup> Walter Hauser. 2004. “From Peasant Soldiering to Peasant Activism: Reflections on the Transition of a Martial Tradition in the Flaming Field of Bihar”, *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient*, vol. 47, no. 3, p. 426
- <sup>38</sup> Subrata K. Mitra. 2006. *The Puzzle of India's Governance: Culture, context and comparative theory*. London: Routledge, p. 103
- <sup>39</sup> Witsoe. 2011. “Caste and Democratisation in Postcolonial India: An ethnographic Examination of Lower Caste Politics in Bihar”, Democratisation, DOI:10.1080/13510347.2011.593327, p. 7
- <sup>40</sup> A registered body nation-wide facilitated by the state under the District Primary Education Programme. It aimed at organising women for their social and economic upliftment.
- <sup>41</sup> A women's organisation of CPI (ML) Liberation
- <sup>42</sup> Sankersan Thakur. 2000. *The Making of Laloo Yadav: The Unmaking of Bihar*. New Delhi: HarperCollins, p. 77
- <sup>43</sup> Panchpania: Assortments of extremely backward caste are colloquially called *panchpania*. Scattered across the state and lacking a coherent agenda or articulate leadership, they have been largely subsumed in the

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undifferentiated category of the OBCs. However, they have become an important electoral category after reserving seats for them in panchayat raj institutions.

<sup>44</sup> Pasmada: Pasmada is a Persian word that means 'backward'.

<sup>45</sup> Christophe Jaffrelot. 2003. *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Low Castes in North Indian Politics*. Delhi: Permanent Black, pp. 380-81.

<sup>46</sup> S.N. Chaudhary. 1999. *Power-Dependence Relations: Struggle for Hegemony in Rural Bihar*. Delhi: Har-Anand, p. 242

<sup>47</sup> Mahadalit: the poorest and most marginalized among Dalits are termed as Mahadalit by Bihar government.

<sup>48</sup> Manini Chatterjee. 2005. "Extreme Backward to Take me Forward," *The Indian Express*, November 19

<sup>49</sup> Sankarshan Thakur. 2007. "Departure and Arrival," *Seminar*, Symposium on The Paradox That is Bihar, no. 580, December, at <http://www.india-seminar.com/semsearch.htm>, page no. not mentioned [Accessed at on 27 February 2012]

<sup>50</sup> V. Krishna Ananth. 2005. "Bihar: Dawn of New Caste Battle", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 40 no. 49, p. 5142

<sup>51</sup> Saba Naqvi Bhaumik. 2005. "Easier Said," *Outlook*, December 5.

<sup>52</sup> Vandita Mishra. 2011. "The Long Road to Nootan Bihar," *Seminar*, Symposium on States in Transition, no. 620, April at <http://www.india-seminar.com/semframe.html>, page no. not mentioned [Accessed on February 27, 2012]

<sup>53</sup> In the year 1951, through an order, the government gave some facilities and seats in educational institutions to some 79 Most Backward Castes and 30 Backward Castes, which included lower and middle Muslim castes. With the coming of Karpoori Thakur – a backward – as state CM through a G.O. in November 1978, he implemented the Mungeri Lal Commission recommendations. For the purpose of recruitment to jobs, 8 per cent and 12 per cent seats were reserved for the OBCs and MBC, respectively.

<sup>54</sup> Manjur Ali. 2010. "Politics of 'Pasmada' Muslims: A Case Study of Bihar" *History and Sociology of South Asia*, vol. 4, no. 2, p. 137

<sup>55</sup> Ibid, p. 138

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, p. 140

<sup>57</sup> Purnima Tripathi. 2005. "Bihar on the edge", *Frontline*, October 21

<sup>58</sup> <http://www.Mahadalitmission.org/BMVM-Introduction.php> [accessed on 27 February 2012]

<sup>59</sup> Shaibal Gupta. 2002. "Subaltern Resurgence: A Reconnaissance of Panchayat Election in Bihar", Working Paper No. 8, Crisis States Programme (Working Paper Series No. 1), Development Research Centre, DESTIN, LSE, p. 3

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 5

<sup>61</sup> Srikant. 2011. *Raj Aur Samaj*. New Delhi: Vani Prakashan, pp. 25-26

<sup>62</sup> Pradeep Chhibber cited in Patrick Heller. 2000. "Degrees of Democracy: Some Comparative Lessons from India," *World Politics*, vol. 52, no. 4 (July), p. 493

<sup>63</sup> Pranab Bardhan cited in Heller. 2000. "Degrees of Democracy". p. 494

<sup>64</sup> Witsoe. 2009. "Territorial Democracy," p. 78.

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