
BOOK REVIEW

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***Democracy against Development:
Lower-Caste Politics and Political Modernity in Postcolonial India***

Jeffrey Witsoe (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013)

Jeffrey Witsoe's *Democracy against Development* brings ethnographic and theoretical attention to the dynamics of postcolonial democracy in India. The book gives voice to a "silent revolution," an upsurge of lower-caste politics in Bihar, India's poorest state (p. 9). Witsoe's ethnography is multi-sited, moving from political rallies to District Magistrate offices to villages to polling booths. While much has been written about how democratic institutions have shaped caste, Witsoe argues that the opposite is also the case. Caste-based mobilizations shape contemporary Indian democracy. In doing so, Witsoe calls into question the utility of liberal democratic theory for analyzing Indian politics.

Bihar is often described as a place where democracy has supposedly failed. It is known for corruption, persistent poverty, and oppositional caste politics. Witsoe uses history and ethnography to problematize this simplified narrative of failure. Certainly, Bihar has long been a place where social justice is elusive. Until the 1990s, most lower-caste Biharis had neither seen the inside of a polling booth nor enjoyed rights to freedom of speech and assembly, even though these were enshrined in the Indian constitution.

As Witsoe explains, in India two parallel but distinct strategies for promoting social justice have emerged. The first is "top-down" state intervention initiated by "enlightened," upper-caste leaders (pp. 14–15). The second is "bottom up" movements "to translate the electoral force of numbers into structures of governance that represent the lower-caste majority" (p. 15). An exploration of this second form of social justice, what Witsoe terms "popular sovereignty," is at the heart of the book (p. 15).

Witsoe recounts the 15-year career (1990-2005) of Lalu Yadav, the lower-caste leader and charismatic president of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD). Lalu and the RJD gained support by situating the empowerment of lower-caste groups in opposition to state-led development projects. Witsoe describes the RJD's efforts to build a network rooted in local power that explicitly

destabilized state and bureaucratic institutions emblematic of top-down development intervention and upper-caste hegemony.

One way to view RJD rule would be as corrupt or even anarchistic. As Witsoe argues, however, the notion that lower-caste democratic action was simply *against* development is misleading (though he even admits that his title could be read in this way). Rather the “populist politics of caste-based democratic empowerment” exists in tension with state-driven development (p. 20). This tension is part of a generative process of postcolonial democratization.

The book’s chapters work progressively from larger to smaller scales of democratic practice. In chapter 1, Witsoe reviews the historical linkages between caste and postcolonial democracy, moving from the colonial era politicization of caste to a post-independence “superimposing” of developmentalist ideas and democratic electoral politics onto colonial forms (p. 38). Development and its logics aided the rise of capitalism in India, but they did not result in “the progressive extension of electoral democracy” (p. 44). Witsoe closes the chapter with a review of “backward-caste” and socialist efforts beginning in the 1950s to counter the hegemony of higher-caste groups across India (p. 43-47). The chapter offers an especially clear description of the intersections of caste and class struggle in the post-independence era.

Chapter 2 tracks the rise of Lalu Yadav and his RJD political network out of the “backward-caste” movement. Lalu’s opposition to development projects such as primary education did not emerge from a clear policy agenda. Instead, caste empowerment – however murkily defined – was an end in itself. The result, as shown in chapter 3, was a weakening of upper-caste dominated state institutions, or what Lalu referred to as “the system” (p. 76). In Bihar, lower-caste empowerment came with a weakening of the bureaucracy, but one did not supplant the other (p. 108). Lalu’s revolution remained, as chapter 3’s title suggests, local and ultimately “incomplete.” (p. 108)

Chapters 4 and 5 offer an analysis of how territoriality puts local power in tension with state institutions. In chapter 4’s ethnographic account of local elections, Witsoe describes the phenomena of “booth management” (p. 137) and “booth capture,” (pp. 138–139) whereby local political bosses – whose power was distributed according to a patchwork geography of local caste groups – seized polling locations, often by violent means. Witsoe’s careful attention to these dynamics reveals a paradox: the proliferation of democracy at the village level is predicated on highly *un*-democratic practices. The violence surrounding elections begs the question of whether electoral politics were any less democratic before the 1990s, when lower-caste groups had little to no access to polling booths (p. 139). Chapter 5 analyzes territorial tensions between upper- and lower-caste groups within the village of Rajnagar. Under RJD rule, the retreat of upper-caste (Rajput) control of agriculture, in particular, opened new space for lower-caste (Yadav) participation in village commerce and political life.

Chapter 6 analyzes intra-caste divisions within Rajnagar's Yadav community. By returning to the themes of chapter 1, Witsoe highlights the class dimensions of caste empowerment, this time focusing on a single caste group. While Yadavs represented themselves as homogenous during elections, between elections, their community was territorially divided along class lines. Many Yadav villagers *did* benefit from lower-caste mobilization, the breakdown of state institutions, and the marginalization of development in Bihar under RJD rule, but, as a result of historic social divisions within the Yadav community, those benefits were not evenly distributed.

In chapter 7, Witsoe describes how, after 2005, Lalu and the RJD were replaced by a putatively pro-development regime. Despite this, Lalu's reign remains significant in the longer process of democratization in Bihar. Lalu's methods were decidedly un-democratic and even corrupt, yet readers can see in his movement for lower-caste empowerment a transformation of structures of state power shaped in the colonial era and reified after independence (p. 189).

Lalu's rule was one phase in a single process, whereby appeals to local popular sovereignty have tensely articulated with appeals to state-led development (p. 203). This book will provide a useful case study for anthropologists interested in finding ways beyond liberal frameworks to discuss democracy and social justice. Witsoe challenges scholars of contemporary north India to confront lingering tensions: between development and democracy, past and future, caste and class, and, perhaps most importantly of all, state and local power.