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Can Democracy Overcome Violence?  
An Experiment of Bihar, India

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# **Can Democracy Overcome Violence?**

## **An Experiment of Bihar, India\***

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### **1 . The Question**

How can we understand violent conflicts in a stable democracy? India, the mother land of non-violence movement, has been experiencing numerous violent conflicts since independence. Starting from tremendous violence at the time of partition, religious riots occur even after entering into 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is still fresh for us to remember Gujarat riots in 2002 which is the worst scale of riots since independence.

Apart from religious riots, India experiences various kinds of violent conflicts such as caste and class related conflicts. For example, caste riots ended up as temporally phenomena following the implementation of Mandal Commission report in 1990 and the extent of violence was relatively small, however, the confrontation between governments and Maoists is intensifying recently. “Naxalite problem” is one of the most serious agenda for present governments.

On the other hand, India is one of the rare countries which have been maintaining democratic institutions among developing countries. According to Dahl [1971: 248], India was listed up as “Fully inclusive polyarchies” with other 25 countries in 1969. Following Dahl’s framework, there are only three countries which have not experienced authoritarian rule up to present among developing countries. Those are Costa Rica, Jamaica, and India (except brief emergency period). It is understandable

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that India has pride of being “The world’s largest democracy”.

Then, how can we interpret above mentioned violent conflicts in Indian democracy? One of the important functions of democracy is to solve conflict under the framework of institution without violence. Considering numerous violent conflicts in India, it seems that Indian democracy has failed to meet the requirement of democracy despite the proclaimed title of “The world’s largest democracy”.

At the same time, we have to pay attention to the effects of violence. In India, violent conflicts haven’t occurred seamlessly. For example, after 2002 Gujarat riots, we haven’t seen major religious riots for 8 years. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which owes responsibility for not containing Gujarat riots, was defeated twice in 2004 and 2009 Lok Sabha elections. It is too simple to say that Gujarat riots have decisive effect on the defeats of BJP, however, it is sure that it becomes quite difficult for the government to instigate riots like Gujarat at this present moment. How can we understand on-and-off of violent conflicts in Indian democracy?

To consider these difficult questions, I choose the state of Bihar. Bihar is known for one of the “BIMARU” (ill) states of India, especially infamous for violence. Before independence, in a chain of communal holocaust starting from Calcutta in 1946, Bihar was one of the scenes of terrible communal riots which resulted in at least 7,000 deaths. Looking at most of the victims were Muslims, Nehru reported as follows, “The real picture that I now find is quite as bad, and even worse than anything that they (the League leaders) had suggested” (quoted in Sarkar [1983: 433-434]). After independence, large scale religious riots occurred up to 1990, such as Ranch riots of 1967, Jamshedpur riots of 1979, and Bhagalpur riots of 1989-1990.

Apart from religious riots, Bihar has experienced caste and class related violent conflicts. For example, Bihar was one of the centers of “Mandal riots” which followed the announcement of the implementation of Mandal commission report in 1990. Regarding class conflicts, Left extremists have been very active in Bihar, and as a reaction to it, landlord’s private armies massacred many low castes poor peasants since the 1970s. The most brutal private army of upper castes landlord, that is, Ranvir Sena emerged in 1994 and killed 300 low castes poor peasants till 2005 (Kumar [2008: 188, Table 8]). Observing the activities of private armies in the 1980s, Kohli mentioned as

follows; “If Bihar were an independent country, such conditions of breakdown would by now have precipitated a military coup or external intervention, or some combination of the two” (Kohli [1992: 225]). The activities of private armies in the 1990s were much worse than those of the 1980s.

Interestingly, however, Ranvir Sena did not commit major massacre after 2000. Caste riots were temporary phenomena in 1990. Major religious riots have been successfully contained after 1990 in Bihar. Though critiques of the then state government emphasize “Law and Order problems” in Bihar, the extent of violence has decreased. Why this change happened? What is the important factor to explain this change? Examining the extreme case of Bihar, I would like to consider the relationship between democracy and violence in India. Let’s analyze the political process of violent conflicts in next section.

## **2 . Process of Violent Conflicts**

In this section, I would like to examine three types of violent conflicts; religious riots, Left extremists’ movements (Naxalite movements), and massacres by private armies. Those conflicts are not specific to Bihar only, but also we can observe them all over India. Those are suitable cases for considering the relationship between democracy and violence in India. Let’s start from religious riots.

### **2 . 1 Religious Riots**

#### **( 1 ) Bhagalpur riots**

As already mentioned, Bihar has experienced numerous religious riots since independence. However, major religious riots have not occurred since 1990. The watershed is 1989-1990 Bhagalpur riots in which more than 1000 Muslims were massacred. Bhagalpur riots are the worst scale of religious riots in the history of Bihar since independence. Why Bhagalpur riots occurred in 1989-1990 and why became watershed? Let’s examine the process of Bhagalpur riots.

There are many causes for religious riots and Bhagalpur riots are not exception. Various factors, like political, economical and social factors are desperately intermingled in general, however, in the case of Bhagalpur riots, it is clear that

political factors played decisive role in the process of the riots. Let me develop this point briefly.

Bhagalpur riots was triggered by the Ram Shila procession which Sangh Parivar, the combined group of Hindu nationalist, organized in the middle of 1989 Lok Sabha election campaign<sup>1</sup>. It was the election campaign for BJP despite they denied the connection between Ram Shila procession and 1989 election.

Why BJP accelerated Ayodhya mobilization before 1989 election? To understand the strategies of BJP, we need to follow the development of BJP (Jaffrelot [1996]).

BJP was formed in 1980 as a successor of Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS) which was formed in 1951. Both BJS and BJP are the political wing of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) which aims to build “Hindu Rashtra”. After long period of “untouchable” in Indian politics for assassination of Mahatma Gandhi by RSS member, BJS joined national government as a constituent of Janata Party in 1977 for the first time.

Though Janata Party government collapsed following Jamshedpur riots in which RSS played decisive role in 1979, former BJS fought 1980 Lok Sabha election as the self-proclaimed successor of Janata Party. After the defeat of 1980 election, former BJS formed a new party, that is, BJP.

The experiment of joining central government made it clear the collision between two strategies within BJP. One is liberal strategy in which moderates represented by Atal Bihari Vajpayee took initiative. Aiming to construct another catch-all party like Indian National Congress (Congress), moderates insisted that BJP should downplay Hindu nationalist cause and pay more attention to socio-economic problems to gain wider

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<sup>1</sup> To understand the Bhagalpur riots, the following reports and articles informed this study adding to the fieldwork that was conducted in 2004. See, People’s Union for Democratic Rights [1990], People’s Union for Civil Unity, State Unit, Bihar [n. d.], Bhagalpur Riot Inquiry Commission [1995], Bharti [1989], Dogra [1990], Engineer [1990, 1995], Jha [1991]. I have conducted field work in Bhagalpur from 2004 August to September. I would like to thank my all interviewees, especially Prof. Farul Ali of Bhagalpur University, Mr. Md. Zahid, Mr. Md. Mazhar Akhar Shakir, Mr. Soroor Ahmed and Mr. Yakub Ashrafi for very useful information and kind help.

supports (Jaffrelot [1996: 314-320]).

Another line is hard line strategy in which BJP should pursue Hindu nationalist cause more vigorously to consolidate and expand support base (Jaffrelot [1996: 338-368]). Initially, the moderates took initiative of BJP, however, “liberal approach” lost credibility by very serious defeat of 1984 Lok Sabha election. BJP could secure only 2 seats in 543 member parliament in that election.

BJP was on the brink. Replacing moderates, hard liner, represented by L. K. Advani, took initiative of BJP after 1985 to survive in Indian politics. Sangh Parivar accelerated religious mobilization by highlighting Ayodhya dispute. Ram Shila procession, in which Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) activists collected bricks inscribed with the name of Ram (Ram Shila) from all over Indian villages and carried them to Ayodhya for construction of Ram temple, was an important ceremony of Ayodhya mobilization. Bhagalpur riots were instigated by this Ram Shila procession on 24<sup>th</sup> October, 1989, just a month before the 1989 Lok Sabha election (Jaffrelot [1996: 369-403]).

Here we are not going into the detailed process of Bhagalpur riots, but I would like to emphasize one important point. Bhagalpur riots were not only creation of BJP’s Ayodhya mobilization, but also products of the then Congress government’s appeasement policy. Let me develop this point.

Firstly, I would like to confirm the role of BJP. One of the characteristics of the Bhagalpur riot is that it was not confined just to the city area, as it spread beyond the city into the vast surrounding rural areas. Without VHP’s Ram Shila Procession, the Bhagalpur riot would not have happened on such a large scale. As already mentioned, the Ram Shila procession mobilized the rural area in a substantial way and stimulated communal feelings by offering puja and collecting “sacred bricks”.

Secondly, the Congress governments, especially the Rajiv Gandhi-led federal government, hesitated to stop the Ram Shila Procession, fearing the loss of the “Hindu vote” in the upcoming 1989 election. Even after the outbreak of Bhagalpur riots, Rajiv

Gandhi refused to prohibit the procession<sup>2</sup>. It was not until one week after Rajiv's decision that the Bihar Congress government decided to prohibit it, forced by the deteriorating situation<sup>3</sup>. The Congress government's hesitant and half-hearted response uncovered its appeasement policy which betrayed its long cherished tradition of secularism.

Lastly, Rajiv Gandhi's "Himalayan blunder" had a decisive impact on the development of the riot. The S. N. Sinha-led Bihar Congress government had replaced the then SP who were responsible for the outbreak of the riot<sup>4</sup>. But the then SP and his men were strongly offended by this decision. When Rajiv visited Bhagalpur to take stock of the situation, they made a strong demand to repeal the state government's decision, masquerading as an ordinary citizen's petition. Surprisingly, Rajiv accepted their demand and canceled the replacement of the then SP who hadn't paid enough attention to the serious need to contain the riot<sup>5</sup>. It is said that this decision by the Prime Minister had the effect of instigating the vandalism of police. The Logain massacre which had the largest number of victims and the Chanderi massacre which had the second largest number of victims both happened after the Rajiv visit, with the active involvement of the local police force<sup>6</sup>. One local Muslim said, "Rajiv Gandhi gave the order to kill Muslims"<sup>7</sup>. At least in the perception of the Muslims, Rajiv's decision to cancel the transfer of the problematic SP is directly connected with these massive massacres. This perception has played a decisive role in alienating the Muslim voter

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<sup>2</sup> See, *The Hindustan Times* (New Delhi), 1989/10/27, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> See, *The Hindustan Times* (New Delhi), 1989/11/4, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> See, *The Hindustan Times* (New Delhi), 1989/10/25, p. 1, *India Today*, 1989/11/15, p. 77, Bhagalpur Riot Inquiry Commission [1995: 94].

<sup>5</sup> Many reports and news reports mention this incident. See, People's Union for Democratic Rights [1990], *Engineer* [1990: 306], *Frontline*, 1989/11/11-24, pp. 25-26. I also confirmed this through interviews with Mr. Ali Anwar (a famous journalist, presently a member of Rajya Sabha from Janata Dal (U): 2004/8/15), a resident of Parbatti (2004/9/17), and Muslim professor (2004/8/22). Buta Singh, the then Home Minister, however denied this incident. See, *The Hindustan Times* (New Delhi), 1989/10/28, p. 24.

<sup>6</sup> See, People's Union for Democratic Rights [1990: 59-60, 63-65], *Engineer* [1995: 1731], *India Today*, 1990/3/15, p. 63. I confirmed this through interviews with the Muslim survivors of the Logain (2004/9/9, 2004/9/20) and Chanderi massacres (2004/8/20, 2004/9/17).

<sup>7</sup> Interview with local villagers near Logain village (2004/9/20).



from the Congress in the 1989 election.

## ( 2 ) Impacts of Bhagalpur riots

Impacts of Bhagalpur riots were grave. Until 1990 state assembly election, Congress had been dominant party in Bihar since independence except the periods from 1967 to 1972 and 1977-1980. After 1990 election, however, Congress lost the dominant position completely. In 2005 November election, Congress got only 9 seats in total 243 members. Why Congress declined so drastically in Bihar? How the decline of Congress gave impact on the development of Bihar politics after Congress?

Though there are many reasons for the decline of Congress, the response of the government to riots, that is, “How to respond to riots” has decisive effect on the political change in Bihar<sup>8</sup>. Congress lost credibility of Muslims which had been traditionally important support base of Congress by failing to contain Bhagalpur riots, which led to the decline of Congress. I would like to prove this hypothesis by using data.

It is said that the Bhagalpur riots had a substantial influence all over North India beyond Bihar<sup>9</sup>. In the case of Bihar, the opinion poll of *India Today* reveals that Muslim’s support for the Congress dropped 12% and they suppose that it was the impact of Bhagalpur riots behind this<sup>10</sup>. Let’s examine the Muslim voter’s behavior by using proportional relationship analysis.

Table 1 shows the proportional relationship between the percentage of Muslims in

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<sup>8</sup> I develop this hypothesis in detail in my Ph.D thesis. See, Nakamizo [2008].

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Dr. Ram Jatan Sinha (the then President of Bihar Pradesh Congress Committee: 2005/3/6, 9). Dr. Sinha told me that it was the Bhagalpur riots which alienated Muslims from Congress in North India.

<sup>10</sup> However, the percentage of concrete support is not clear. According to *India Today*, “In Bihar, the drop in Muslim support for the Congress (I) was a massive 12 percent: from a normally strong support of above the average it dropped to 5.5 percent below the average”, in this case we need to know “the average”. Suppose we specify the average of each election as “average”, the percentage of Muslim support in the 1984 election was 58.3% and that of the 1989 election was 22.6%, which shows a 35.7% drop. Actually, the percentage of Muslim support in the 1984 election was 63%. See, “The Rajiv Whirlwind”, *India Today*, 1984/12/31, pp. 26-29, “The Voters’ Profile”, *India Today*, 1989/12/15, pp. 52-53.

each constituency and the percentages of the vote of the various parties in Bihar.

Table 1: Number and percentage of seats won and valid vote percentage by party by Muslim population proportion (1989 Parliamentary election in Bihar)

Muslim Population Proportion	INC:89 – 84	INC	JD +	BJP
0 – 9%(13 constituencies)	-22.1	2 (28.6/15.4)	8 (43.6/61.5)	1 (20.9/14.3)
10 - 19%(32)	-24.5	1 (28.2/3.1)	23 (54.0/74.2)	7 (32.4/46.7)
20 - 29%(7)	-28.8	0 (24.8/0)	7 (59.2/100)	0 (22.0/0)
30% - (2)	-11.8	1 (35.3/50.0)	1 (40.1/50.0)	--
Total number and mean %	-24.0	4 (28.1)	39 (51.7)	8 (28.2)

(Source) Calculated by the Author based on the Election Commission Report and Singh [1998: 60-88].

(note) The first column: “INC:89 – 84” shows the figure after subtracting the mean vote of Congress in 1984 from the mean vote of Congress in 1989. The remaining columns show the number of seats won, the valid vote percentage, and the percentage of seats won (from left to right) of the various parties.

(abbreviation) INC = Indian National Congress, JD+ = JD (Janata Dal) + CPI (Communist party of India) + CPM (Communist Party of India (Marxist)) + JMM (Soren) (Jharkhand Mukti Morcha), BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party.

Let’s start from Congress. Regarding the change of mean party vote between the 1984 election and the 1989 election, the Muslim population proportion is in direct proportion to the gap between the two elections except in the two constituencies of over 30%. And concerning the number and percentage of seats won and valid vote percentage, the proportion of the Muslim population is inverse proportion to them, as these two constituencies can be classified as deviation cases<sup>11</sup>. The data shows

<sup>11</sup> These two constituencies are Kishanganj and Khatihar. In Kishanganj, the most powerful candidate Syed Shahabuddin couldn’t file nomination papers due to the procedural error. Additionally the Congress candidate was a well-known journalist M. J. Akbar. Mr. Akbar could get Hindu support because the BJP didn’t put forward its own candidate, and he thus finally won in 1989. If Syed Shahabuddin ran from Kishanganj, he would almost certainly have won, as he won in the 1991 election. In the constituency of Khatihar, the Congress candidate was Taliq Anwar who was experienced as the president of BPCC and was a rising Muslim leader. He has his own personal support base as the 1999 election showed. He ran for election for the Nationalist Congress Party, not Congress, however, he could only secure second position. In the 1989 election, the reason for his high valid vote percentage can attributed to his own personal popularity,

that Muslims had the tendency to feel alienated from Congress, which ultimately caused the defeat of the Congress.

Let's examine the Janata Dal (JD) next. The proportion of the Muslim population is in direct proportion to the percentage of valid vote and seats won, except in two exceptional constituencies (over 30%). This shows that Muslims had a tendency to support the JD, which contributed to the JD coalition's victory.

This shows that the issue of "How to respond to the riots" had the strongest impact on the Muslim vote. If we interpret "How to respond to the riots" in a broad sense, the Janata Dal made a lot of efforts to win the confidence of Muslims. For example, V. P. Singh started his election campaign from Bhagalpur<sup>12</sup>, which was in sharp contrast to Rajiv Gandhi who started his campaign from Faizabad, close to Ayodhya. V. P. Singh clearly opposed the founding stone ceremony of the Ram temple in Ayodhya and rejected the campaign with the BJP candidate though National Front had seat adjustment with BJP. This attitude is quite different from that of Rajiv Gandhi who permitted the holding of the ceremony. Shahi Imam of Jama Masjid of Delhi declared support for the JD, and also called for backing of the JD or secular forces, considering the JD's sincere effort to protect secularism<sup>13</sup>.

Majority of Muslims shifted their support from Congress to Janata Dal in 1989 Lok Sabha election in Bihar. At state level also, many Muslims supported Janata Dal in 1990 Bihar state assembly election, which led to formation of Laloo Prasad Yadav-led Janata Dal government. It was Laloo government that consolidated Muslim support by preventing and containing religious riots. Let me develop in a bit detail.

### ( 3 ) Bihar after Bhagalpur riots

Contrary to the previous Congress governments, Laloo government took firm actions against religious riots. Immediately after the formation of the government, Laloo

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not that of his party. See, *The Hindustan Times* (New Delhi), 1989/11/1, p.1, 11/9, p.7, 11/11, p.12, *India Today*, 1989/11/15, p.21, Election Commission Report (1999 election).

<sup>12</sup> See, *India Today*, 1989/11/30, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> See, *The Hindustan Times* (New Delhi), 1989/11/12, p. 1.

rushed to the sites of the riots and took stern actions in order to contain them at their source. He made it clear that the DM and SP were responsible for the riots, and when the riots happened, he immediately transferred the DM and SP of that district. Laloo never allowed religious processions in an area where riots were likely to happen, contrary to the former decision of the Rajiv-led Congress government<sup>14</sup>. As a result, the riots were prevented from spreading, which made clear the contrast in its response with that of the Congress government which had hesitated to prohibit the procession, ultimately leading to the large scale riots (Bharti [1990: 1373]).

It is the arrest of the BJP chief L. K. Advani in 1990 that makes Laloo famous nationwide as the guardian of secularism. Though the riots happened in many other states after the arrest of Advani, Laloo succeeded in containing the riots in Bihar<sup>15</sup>. In his 15 years of rule from 1990 to 2005, the Sitamarhi riots posed the most serious trial to Laloo's credentials as a custodian of secularism<sup>16</sup>.

The Sitamarhi riot was triggered by a traditional Hindu festival in October 1992, just two months before the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya (People's Union For Civil Liberties [1992], Engineer [1992]). There are two important points to note in this riot. Firstly, the Hindus perceived that the government had a bias against Hindus, not Muslims. In the clash between Hindus and Muslims before the outbreak of the riot, more Hindus were arrested than Muslims, which contributed to such a perception. Additionally, the Laloo government's firm commitment to secularism may also have affected this perception. This is contrary to the case of the Bhagalpur riot, in which local police, especially the SP, was considered as anti-Muslim.

Secondly, the Laloo government tried its best to contain the riot. Although the number of victims of this riot was around 50, which was the worst case under the 15 years of the Laloo regime, Laloo succeeded in keeping the loss of confidence to a minimum level. When Laloo rushed to Sitamarhi to contain the riot, he slapped a police officer who seemed to be non-committal and he himself took the lead in suppressing the riot

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<sup>14</sup> Regarding the Nawada riots, *The Hindustan Times* praises the Laloo government's rapid action. See, *The Hindustan Times* (New Delhi), 1990/3/17, p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> See, *Frontline*, 1990/11/10-23, pp. 26-27, *India Today*, 1990/11/30, p. 62, Bharti [1991: 91-92].

<sup>16</sup> Regarding the Sitamarhi Riots, See, People's Union For Civil Liberties [1992], Engineer [1992].

(Wilkinson [2004: 202]). This act was really at contrast with that of Rajiv Gandhi who didn't ask responsibility of the problematic SP. In this Sitamarhi riot, Laloo's stern action contributed to keeping the Muslim vote intact for his party. And when the Sangh Parivar demolished the Babri Masjid in December 1992, the Laloo government also succeeded in containing religious riots in the wake of the nation-wide riots that occurred, which thus further consolidated the firm support base for his government and enabled 15 years rule despite of the nationwide trend of anti-incumbency rule.

In 2005 November election, Laloo led-Rashtriya Janata Dal government was defeated by Janata Dal (United)-BJP coalition. Nitish Kumar led new government is very careful not to invite religious riots, though BJP is coalition partner. For example, he declined the offer of Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi for attending oath ceremony. There must be consideration for Muslim votes and his arch rival Laloo Prasad Yadav who never allowed VHP leader Togadiya to land in Bihar. Though BJP is in power as important constituent, it becomes quite difficult to allow religious riots to break out in present Bihar.

## 2 . 2 Left Extremist (Naxalite)

### ( 1 ) The development of Naxalite movement

Bihar has been one of the centers of Left extremism. At present, Maoists are very active in Bihar and Jharkhand which separated from Bihar in 2000. Naxalite movement, which is named after starting location of Naxalbari in West Bengal, spread to Bihar around 1970. Many revolutionaries devoted their lives for the cause of socio-economic liberation up to present time<sup>17</sup>.

Considering relationship between democracy and violence, it is very interesting to examine the development of Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation

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<sup>17</sup> For understanding the development of Naxalite movements in Bihar, I conducted many interviews since 2002. I would like to thank my all interviewees, especially Mr. Prabhat K. Choudhary (Communist Party of India [Marxist-Leninist] Liberation) (ML), Mr. Santosh Sahar (ML), Mr. Pranava K. Chaudhary (*The Times of India*), Mr. P. N. Singh (Asian Development Research Institute, Ranch), Mr. Bhay Bhanjan Mahto (Asian Development Research Insitute, Ranch), Mr. Shambhu Kumar Suman, Mr. Rohit Kumar for very useful information and kind help.

(ML). They initially denied parliamentary democracy totally and believed in armed revolution leading to “annihilation of class enemies”. However, after experiencing JP movements and emergency, they changed their tactics gradually to participate in parliamentary democracy. At last, they succeeded in winning one seat from Bihar in 1989 Lok Sabha election. Why did ML change their strategy? For understanding this dynamics, let’s examine the party documents since the formation of ML<sup>18</sup>.

According to the Resolution (“Resolution on Elections”) adopted in 1968 by the All India Coordination Committee of Communist Revolutionaries (AICCCR) which was predecessor organization of ML, they denied parliamentary democracy as “positive impediment to the advance of revolutions in general and to revolutions in semi-feudal, semi-colonial countries like India, in particular, which is feudal and not bourgeois” (Ghosh [1992: 33]). Following this sentence, Resolution says,

The experiences of the last twenty years have taught the Indian people the bitter truth that the parliamentary path as an alternative to the Chinese path of armed struggle chalked out by Chairman Mao perpetuates their shackles of slavery and impoverishes them still further. ... So, Comrades, our call is “Down with Elections!” We call upon all revolutionaries and the revolutionary people to come forward and frustrate this sinister counter-revolutionary manoeuvre of reactionary ruling classes and their lackeys, the Dange clique and the neo-revisionists, by raising the slogan, “Boycott these Elections” (Ghosh [1992: 33-34]).

In their resolution, it is very clear that their basic strategy is to deny parliamentary democracy and pursue armed revolution vigorously.

However, they changed strategies drastically after the death of Charu Majumdar who led an “annihilation of class enemies” strategy. Vinod Mishra, who became new general secretary in 1975, initiated new strategy. He formed Indian People’s Front as a mass organization in 1982 to gain wider support and prepare for participating in parliamentary election. It was in the Third All India Congress of 1982 that ML changed party strategy formally. In the Political-Organization Report which was adopted at the Third Party Congress, ML admitted failure of an “annihilation of class

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<sup>18</sup> I consider this question in detail by comparing Bihar with Andhra Pradesh. See, Nakamizo [2009].

enemies” strategy and declared to abandon it.

···In many areas annihilation was conducted as a campaign, with a lot of indiscriminate and unnecessary killings, and it got isolated from peasants’ class struggle so that no resistance could be built up against police repression, and our struggling areas were smashed ··· In this context, the declaration in our first Party Congress (in May 1970)-“Class struggle, i.e. annihilation will solve all our problems” was definitely wrong (Mishra [1999: 274]).

Adding to this, ML continued self-criticism for missing the opportunity to lead anti-Congress struggle in 1974 as follows,

···Over this entire period of 1974-76, our main drawbacks consisted, firstly, in our failure to link up with the anti-Congress upsurge of students, youth, and all sections of people of Bihar(the leadership of this upsurge was later captured by JP and it degenerated into impotency) and secondly, in our failure, when the movement collapsed with the arrest of leaders and repression on the masses, to provide a new guideline to organize the remnant forces. Although we maintained the political line of building an anti-Congress united front and upheld our areas as models of the same, we could not link this with the actual anti-Congress mass upsurge (Mishra [1999: 279-280]).

Then what ML should do in future? Mishra analyzes the situation of 1982 and point out two facts (Mishra [1999: 309]). Firstly, “where red terror is exercised over the class enemies”, peasant movements either “perished or suffered setbacks and are in the process of reorganization”. Secondly, “there is a trend of democratic movements of vast sections of the Indian people, movements coordinating various sections of the people and even of nationwide character”. However, “Now there are opposition parties, revisionists, and selfish people who will try to divert these movements” (Mishra [1999: 309]. That’s why “there must come up an all-India people’s front basing on the areas of resistance struggle”. It is needless to say that “all-India people’s front” indicates Indian People’s Front.

Though ML set up mass organization, their attitude toward election was ambiguous as follows. “The election question at a certain time may be linked up with insurrection and then you will be forcing elections on the government. In other times, when there

are no prospects of slogans for a constituent assembly and provisional revolutionary government getting popular for a long time, you may think of utilizing elections, while in other prospects you should not” (Mishra [1999: 310]). After this formal decision, they participated in 1985 Bihar state assembly election as independents.

ML changed their attitude toward election at next fourth All-India Party Congress in 1988. Reflecting on the experience of participating in election for past few years, they admitted utility of election, saying that “True, the system of elections itself imposes many a fetter on us; but nonetheless election results are sensitive indicators of our influence over the masses and of the state of our organization” (CPI (ML) [1988: 1.7.1]). Then ML criticized harshly the opponents of participating in elections as follows.

If we cannot build an organization capable of winning even a few parliamentary seats, how could we ever accomplish the revolution which is a thousand times more difficult?… Advocating boycott on the basis of the very nature of the Indian parliament, on the plea of its being more reactionary than European parliaments is simply ridiculous (CPI (ML) [1988: 1.7.1]).

After this criticism, party declared the necessity of participating in elections as follows.

The Party desperately needs a group of resolute and capable representatives in the parliament as well as in State assemblies, because the combination of mass action outside the reactionary parliament and assemblies with an opposition directly supporting it within these institutions will provide a veritable boost to the revolutionary struggles. The whole party must earnestly strive to make this combination a reality (CPI (ML) [1988: 1.7.2]).

After this resolution, ML fought 1989 Lok Sabha election under the banner of Indian People’s Front for the first time, and succeeded to win one seat from Arrah constituency in Bihar. Since 1989, ML has been occupying a certain position in state assembly. In 2005 November election, ML got 5 seats which are 4 less than Congress party.



## ( 2 ) “Democratization” of Bihar politics

Why ML changed their attitude toward parliamentary democracy? As Mishra admitted, “Democratization” has been gradually advanced in Bihar by democratic institutions, especially the institution of election. Here “Democratization” does not mean ordinary usage in comparative politics, that is, the regime change from totalitarian/authoritarian regime to democratic regime. “Democratization” means the change of political and social power structure, in which center of power shifted from upper strata of society to lower strata, that is, from upper castes to backward castes in this occasion.

As already mentioned, Congress dominated Bihar politics up to 1990. The rule of the Congress had the character of being based on upper caste landlord dominance in Bihar, as the Congress relied upon the socio-economic influence of the dominant landed castes (Frankel [1990b: 502-504]). In spite of the upper castes’ small percentage in terms of the total population (almost 13%), their representation in the Congress’ legislator and cabinet had been overwhelming during the time of the Congress regime (Blair [1980: 68, Table 4], Srikant [1995: 25-26], Chaudhary and Srikant [2001: 325-326]).

It was the backward castes who expressed their discontent against the dominance of the upper castes. Despite the strength of their numbers (51.3% of total population), they were carefully excluded from the center of power. The backward castes started to support Socialist parties which claimed to realize “Social Justice”, that is, the fulfillment of the reservation policy for the backward castes. JP movement and following 1977 Lok Sabha and state assembly elections were second turning point for the rise of backward castes after 1967 elections (Frankel [1990a: 81-106]).

In 1977 state assembly election, Janata party defeated Congress and Karpoori Thakur who was the leader of backward castes became Chief Minister. As strong advocate of “Social Justice”, he succeeded in introducing reservation system for backward castes in state government’s institution despite of severe opposition from BJS (Frankel [1990a: 106-111]).

Realization of “Social Justice” attracted backward castes. In Bihar, it has become clear, through an analysis of the proportional relationship between the backward castes population share and the share of the vote of Socialist parties, that the backward castes

have the tendency to support the Socialist parties from the 1980 state assembly election onwards (table 2). We can confirm that OBCs population proportion is in direct proportion to the percentage of the Socialist parties' valid vote from the 1980 parliamentary election.

Table 2: Percentage of valid vote by socialist parties by OBCs population proportion (State Assembly election in Bihar: 1977-1995)

Percentage of OBCs	1977	1980	1985	1990	1995
Below 39% (100)	41.98	17.4	14.84	20.99	23.29
40-49% (44)	48.55	25.79	19.43	25.46	37.95
50-59% (166)	44.43	27.46	25.79	32.54	39.98
Above 60% (14)	47.88	37.87	44.33	47.72	39.60
Average (324)	44.44	24.85	22.70	28.80	34.54

(Source) Author, compiled from Election Commission Report and Srikant [2005: 175-178].

(note.1) "OBCs" means Other Backward Classes which covers Backward castes largely. For detail, see Backward Classes Commission [1980]. Parenthesis in "Percentage of OBCs" shows the number of constituencies.

(note.2) The figures show the vote percentage of Socialist parties as follows; in the 1977 election: Janata party, 1980: Janata Party (JP) + Janata Party (secular: Charan Singh) + Janata Party (secular: Raj Narain), 1985: Lok Dal + Janata party. In the 1990 election, the figures show the vote percentage of the Janata Dal (JD). The 1995 figures show the JD alliance; JD + CPI + CPM + JMM (Mardi) + Marxist Coordination Committee.

Vinod Mishra and members of ML must have carefully observed this political change. If parliamentary party can uplift backward castes and get their support, next target would be scheduled castes. If they can expand their support base to scheduled castes, ML definitely would lose their core support base. In fact, ML's apprehension came true under the Laloo-led Janata Dal government after 1990<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> According to Pradeep Jha, a member of Central Working Department of ML, ML was taken away the support of scheduled castes by Laloo, but it was temporary phenomena. Scheduled castes soon realized that Laloo's promise is just lip service, then they returned to ML. Interview to Mr. Pradeep Jha (Central Working Class Department), 24<sup>th</sup> October, 2002.

Initially, ML rejected parliamentary democracy as bourgeois democracy and impotent for socio-economic liberation. “Bourgeois democracy”, however, is slowly changing “feudal society” and lower strata began to raise their voices under the institutional framework of parliamentary democracy. We can understand self-criticism of ML and change of their strategy in this context. “Democratization” of Bihar politics urged ML to abandon “annihilation of class enemies” strategy and participate in election, core institution of parliamentary democracy. In short, democratic practice in Bihar has the potential to absorb violent conflicts and solve them under the framework of democratic institution.

## 2. 3 Private Armies

### ( 1 ) The formation of Ranvir Sena

Relating to Naxalite movements, private armies of landlord have been active in Bihar since the 1970s. Private armies were formed by landlords of mainly upper castes and upper backward castes to cope with Naxalite movements. Especially they feel menace to an “annihilation of class enemies” tactics of Naxalite. In the history of private armies in Bihar, the most brutal organization is Ranvir Sena which massacred 300 low caste poor peasants from the formation year of 1994 to 2005 as mentioned. This paper focuses on Ranvir Sena to consider the relationship between democracy and violence.

Why Ranvir Sena was formed in 1994? Analyzing sequent events of Belaur village which is the birth place of Ranvir Sena, it becomes clear that political factor is most important to explain the emergence of Ranvir Sena<sup>20</sup>. In Bihar, “Democratization” processes slowly progressed and finally overthrow the dominance of upper castes in state assembly after 1990 election (Table 3).

1990 was the first year in which number of backward castes MLA overtook upper castes MLA. In 1995 election, the gap between upper castes and backward castes is more than 100 seats in 324 member assembly. The deprivation of power from upper castes by backward castes becomes irreversible change in Bihar politics.

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<sup>20</sup> I examined the detailed process of the formation of Ranvir Sena in Nakamizo [2010]. For Belaur survey, I would like to thank my all interviewees, especially Prof. Ram Naresh Sharma of Patna University and Mr. Virbal Yadav (ML) for very useful information and kind help.

Table 3: Caste composition of Bihar state assembly (1967-2005)

Caste	1967	1969	1972	1977	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005
Upper Castes	133	122	136	124	120	118	105	56	56	68
Backward Castes	82	93	77	92	96	89	117	160	121	112
Number in total	318	318	318	324	324	324	324	324	324	243

(Source) Up to 2000 election, Srikant [2005: 37], Regarding 2005 February election, the document prepared by Asian Development Research Institute, Patna.

At government level, Laloo Prasad Yadav who is from backward caste Yadav led Bihar Janata Dal and consolidated his power. As a son of poor peasant, Laloo proclaimed the Messiah of the poor. Regarding Naxalite movements, Laloo announced a government policy not to intervene agricultural conflicts as saying that “if the agricultural labourers and landless grab land, police will not fire at them.” (Louis [2002: 139]). It was totally contrary to the policy of previous Congress governments.

During the Congress regime, governments harshly suppressed Naxalites with fully armed police forces to protect the interest of landlords. Recognizing the lack of police forces, Congress Government urged landlord to arm themselves by giving gun licenses and even set up shooting training center for landlords (Das [1983: 253], Kumar [2008: 97]). In actual operations of smashing Naxalites, police forces and private armies corporate to kill poor peasants who were suspected as Naxalite<sup>21</sup>.

However, situation has changed after the collapse of Congress government. According to DM of Bhojpur district in which Belaur village locates, Laloo government regards “Naxalite problem” more as socio-economic problem than as “Law and Order problem”<sup>22</sup>. It does not mean that Laloo government didn’t suppress Naxalite movements, but the extent of suppression became less than former Congress regime. This change of policy was revealed in concrete police actions in Belaur incidents of 1994.

<sup>21</sup> Patnaik [1990] reports the cooperation between Police and landlords in Danwar-Bihta massacre in which 23 ML supporter were killed by local landlords. The victims were just going to polling booth for casting their vote in 1989 Lok Sabha election.

<sup>22</sup> Interview to Mr. Sanjay Kumar, District Magistrate, Bhojpur District (2003/9/7)

In Belaur village, ML started activities from 1990 onward and succeeded in organizing mainly scheduled caste agricultural labourers to fight against the oppression of upper caste Bhumihar Landlord. Decisive incident happened in 1994. I am not going to describe detailed process here, but the important point is that police could not save Bhumihar Landlord. One Bhumihar landlord was killed accidentally or incidentally by ML side in a chain of numerous incidents, though ML denied the charge. Police didn't take "effective" measures to prevent killing, which was inconceivable under Congress regime.

Bhumihar landlords of Belaur village must feel political isolation after 1990. At state level, Government was grabbed by backward castes. At parliamentary constituency level, ML candidate Rameshwar Prasad won in 1989 election as a Naxalite candidate for the first time in India from their own constituency. At state assembly constituency level, Janata Dal candidate Sonadhari Singh (Yadav caste) won for the second time<sup>23</sup>. And most importantly, ML started activity in 1990 as mentioned.

It was ineffectiveness of police in Belaur incidents of 1994 that materialize their apprehension. If government doesn't have political will to protect life and security of upper caste landlord, they have to defend themselves. The commander of Ranvir Sena Brahmeshwar Singh explained the reason of formation of Ranvir Sena as follows, "Government doesn't protect life and property of peasants, that's why Ranvir Sena was formed. Peasants have to protect themselves by their own force"<sup>24</sup>. Considering the development of Bihar politics and detailed process of formation of Ranvir Sena, it becomes clear that upper castes' perception of insecurity came from "Democratization" of Bihar<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> When Sonadhari Singh visited Belaur village after 1990 election, he was slapped by Bhumihar landlords using chappal. According to Bhumihar landlords, he was slapped because he belong to different caste (Yadav caste) and different party (Janata Dal). This episode shows the strong hostility of Bhumihar caste to "Democratization" of Bihar. Interview to Bhumihar landlord in Belaur village, 25<sup>th</sup> August, 2003.

<sup>24</sup> Interview to Brahmeshwar Singh, 5<sup>th</sup> November, 2002.

<sup>25</sup> Gupta also points out Bhumihar's feeling of "threatened". See, Gupta[2001:2743,Table 2].

## ( 2 ) Disintegration of Ranvir Sena

It is said that Ranvir Sena got support not only from Bhumihaar caste but also from whole upper castes at first<sup>26</sup>. However, after Lakshmanpur Bathe massacre in which 61 low castes poor peasants were massacred by Ranvir Sena in 1997, they gradually lost upper castes' support including Bhumihaar. After Mianpur massacre in which 35 poor peasants including Yadavs were killed in 2000, Ranvir Sena haven't committed major massacre so far. In 2002, the commander Brahmeshwar Singh was arrested, which was said to be surrender because of internal conflict within Ranvir Sena. At present, Ranvir Sena becomes dormant.

Disintegration of Ranvir Sena does not mean the end of opposition of upper castes to Laloo government. They continue to show their will not by the means of violence, but in the ballot boxes. After 1995 state assembly election in which Laloo consolidated his power base, upper castes shifted their support decisively from Congress to BJP alliance (Table 4).

At last, Laloo government was defeated in 2005 November election and Janata Dal (United)-BJP alliance formed new government. It is said that upper castes regain their political and social power to a certain extent, though backward castes continue to dominate power center (Kumar [2008: 88-89]).

Table 4: Voting behavior of Upper castes in Bihar (1995-1998)

	1995 state assembly	1996 Lok Sabha	1998 Lok Sabha
Indian National Congress	39.1	10.1	8.7
BJP alliance	16.5	59.5	77.6
Janata Dal alliance	20.9	29.1	11.6
Rashtriya Janata Dal alaiance	N.A	N.A	Negligible

(Source) V. B. Singh, "Class Action", *Frontline*, 1995/6/2, p. 101, Kumar [1999: 2477].

The phenomenon of Ranvir Sena is an extreme expression of "Democratization" of Bihar. Their violence is terrible, however, their activities didn't continue for long. Some upper castes, mainly Bhumihaar, supported their activities, but, that didn't last long. On the other hand, their opposition to Laloo government has been repeatedly

<sup>26</sup> Interview to Mr. Sanjay Singh (*Hindustan Times*), 29<sup>th</sup> October, 2002.

expressed in elections. Even Brahmeshwar Singh ran 2004 Lok Sabha election from jail, in which he got third position. The difference with ML candidate Ram Naresh Ram is just 706 less votes. Considering the rise and fall of Ranvir Sena, it is possible to say that democratic institutions have power to absorb violent conflicts.

### **3 . Conclusion**

We examined three cases of violent conflicts, that is, religious riots, Naxalite movements, massacres by landlords' private armies. In these conflicts, requirement of democratic politics played an important role to invite these conflicts. In the case of Bhagalpur riots, 1989 election itself is decisive factor. Ayodhya mobilization by BJP and appeasement policy of Congress to win election jointly led to the Bhagalpur riots. In the case of Naxalite movements, the disfunction of democracy was major cause of movement. Indian democracy failed to solve poverty and inequality in 20 years since independence, which led to the spread of the Naxalite movements. Lastly, regarding emergence of Ranvir Sena, "Democratization" of Bihar has deep impact. The phenomenon of Ranvir Sena is an extreme shape of discontent of upper castes who felt isolation under Laloo regime. Examining these three cases, we cannot deny that democracy has some aspect of invoking violence.

Then, Does Democracy or "Democratization" just conclude to the wilds of violence? As we observed in three cases, violent conflicts didn't last for long time. In Bihar, politicians and political parties recognized well that religious riots can damage severely their political future. Though BJP is in power, present Nitish Kumar government pays very much attention not to invite religious riots. The situation is different from the time of Janata party government in 1979.

Similarly, ML may not return to an "annihilation of class enemies" strategy as general secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya criticized Maoists who stick to armed struggle line at present (Bhattacharya [2006]). Reflecting on the failure of annihilation strategy, they now think that they can expand the support base for their movement by participating in parliamentary democracy.

Lastly, leaders of Ranvir Sena have ambitions to become politician. As in the typical case of Brahmeshwar Singh, many of them don't want to finish their lives as just

murderers. In Bihar, many criminals or those who have criminal background become politicians (“criminalization of politics”) and the leaders of these private armies are not exception<sup>27</sup>. “Criminalization of Politics” is usually condemned as crisis of democracy, however, from different point of view, it also can be said that democracy has the power to absorb violent elements and violent conflicts.

In this paper, I focus on the case of Bihar and examine only three types of violent conflicts. In this sense, my argument has natural limitation to discuss on the relationship between democracy and violence in India. However, these violent conflicts are not specific to Bihar only, but we can observe all over India. Adding to this, it must be meaningful to table an extreme case such as Bihar. Democracy has the potential to absorb and solve violent conflicts even in one of the most violent states in India. An experiment of Bihar indicates that Indian democracy has the possibility to overcome violence in future.

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<sup>27</sup> See, Kalayan Chaudhri, “Bloodied Bara Naxalite revenge in Bihar village”, *Frontline*, 1992/3/13, pp.25-26.



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