

# The Complexity of Bihar Politics

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Bihar's politics has been dominated by caste alliances. The Bharatiya Janata Party has entered this scenario with the claim of carving out a new identity politics. This has attracted the upper castes too.

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The politics of Bihar defies any simplistic prediction as it is one state that is down in the development index but very high in political consciousness. It is dominated by regional parties primarily based on caste and community alliances. For the 2019 elections, all big and small parties are divided into two main blocs. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Janata Dal (United) (JD(U)) and Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) constitute the first bloc, which intends to combine the upper caste, non-Yadav Other Backward Classes (OBCs), including Most Backward Castes (MBCs) and Dalits. In opposition to this, the Mahagathbandhan includes the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), Hindustan Awam Morcha (HAM), Rashtriya Lok Samata Party (RLSP) and Vikasheel Insaan Party (VIP), which anticipates a

combination of a section of the upper castes, Muslims, Yadavs, non-Paswan Dalits and Kushwahas. To understand the formation of these two blocs and their capacity to hold their respective caste constituencies, we need to have a bit of background of the electoral history of the state.

## Historical Backdrop

In the decades following India's independence, the Congress party, chiefly led by the upper castes, ruled Bihar. The victory of the party was ensured by the alliance between the upper castes (particularly the Brahmins), Muslims and Dalits. The rise of the "bullock cart capitalists" constituted of OBCs, mainly Yadavs and Kurmis, during the green revolution has had a lasting impact on the politics of the state. The

anti-Emergency movement proved to be a turning point for the caste alliance in Bihar as a new class comprising the backward castes constituted the backbone of the Jai Prakash Narayan (JP) brigade. Since then, the OBC phase of



Bihar politics has emerged under the leadership of Lalu Prasad Yadav and Nitish Kumar, both representing two different communities—the Yadavs and Kurmis respectively. The two factions of the OBCs remained united in politics until the upper castes remained an important player in the state. Once the upper castes were out from the fray, the rivalry between them began and both the disciples of JP and Ram Manohar Lohia formed separate blocs of caste groups.

In this new caste alliance, smaller caste groups keep changing loyalties to one or the other. In the meantime, the third actor, the BJP has appeared on the scene, claiming to create a more significant identity of Hindutva and ready to give representation to all castes and carving out a new identity politics attracting abandoned upper castes in the phase of the OBC politics. In this new game, the worst sufferer remained the Congress party which lost its initial alliance and could not make any new one. The left parties have also lost their leaders and cadres to caste-based parties and finally have been reduced to a non-entity. The present politics in the state is an extension of the OBC politics in which there is an added dimension of assertion of the MBC identity. One should remember that the MBC, in contrast to the OBC, is a more fragmented caste group and it is only now that they are thinking of themselves as an identity group. There is a strong feeling in them of being used by the dominant OBC groups merely as a vote bank without giving their due share in the representation. The dynamics of politics in Bihar is determined by the alignment and realignment of these caste and community groups.

### Parties, Castes and Alliances

The Congress party which ruled the state for a long time has lost its social base almost entirely. The Brahmins and Bhumihars have gradually moved to the BJP as parties based on OBC identity built their rhetoric on upper-caste bashing, and the Congress had no capacity to save them from this onslaught. For instance, Lalu Prasad Yadav openly gave slogans like “Bhura bal saaf karo” meaning thereby, Eliminate Bhumihar, Rajput,

Brahmin and Lala (Kayasth) from politics. Later on, he gave another slogan to signify his new caste alignment, “Bhumihar ko saaf karo, Brahmin ko half Karo aur Lala ko Maf Karo” (finish Bhumihars, accommodate Brahmins partially and forgive the Lalas). The Congress party still commands the support of some sections of the upper castes, and with an alliance with the RJD, it manages to get a good chunk of Muslim and Dalit votes too. But this caste alliance has reduced the party to a dependent position during any negotiation for partnership. Despite being a national party, it could barely negotiate for nine seats for the 2019 elections with great difficulty. The chances are bleak for the revival of the party as with such a limited number of seats it is difficult to give adequate representation to different caste groups. Moreover, the RJD is aware that a strong Congress might snatch its Muslim support base and therefore, there always remains a tension in the collaboration.

After the collapse of the Congress party, the RJD emerged as a major party. Lalu Prasad Yadav became a leader of the aspirational middle castes that were numerically much ahead than the upper castes which had been ruling the state till then. The first phase of the RJD rule

was transformative in the sense that it changed the power structure at the ground level. He used his extraordinary capacity to speak the populist language and strike the right cord with his constituency. There is a point in his slogan “garibon ko di awaz to usko kaha Gunda raj” (I gave voice to the poor people, they called it Gunda raj) as he gave immense confidence to the OBCs and Dalits. The Congress’s soft Hindutva under Rajiv Gandhi’s leadership disillusioned the Muslim community, and it found the RJD as its saviour. Lalu made sure that Bihar remained riot-free under his regime. His famous MY (Muslim–Yadav) population made the RJD an unbeatable party. His arrest of Lal Krishna Advani during Advani’s Ayodhya Rath Yatra made this collaboration sustainable for a long time. Lalu Prasad’s second term degraded into the worst administration in Bihar. Law and order collapsed, extortion, killings and corruption became rampant and normal. The state hit rock bottom in health and education as there was a fund crisis in these sectors. Crime and corruption became synonymous with RJD.

The party is facing a severe crisis today due to Lalu Prasad Yadav being in jail. He might remain there for the next several years as the court has declined

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his request for clubbing all the cases together. He will have to move from one court to the other, and in each case, he might get several years of imprisonment. There is a new set of cases against him related to disproportional assets, and almost the entire family is implicated in this. A hostile regime has made him virtually absent from the politics in the state. The transition of leadership to the younger son Tejashwi Yadav is not going to be smooth. There are other contenders in the family, and the struggle for power is already on. Tejashwi is facing a problem in the party too as the senior leaders loyal to Lalu Prasad are finding it difficult to accept a young man as his replacement. Moreover, Tejashwi is developing his team, which annoys the leaders who used to get a lot of prominence in his father's time. However, the sympathy for Lalu Prasad is playing a cementing role, and this has consolidated the MY factor.

Knowing that the MY factor may not give enough seats, the party has attempted to expand the base by sharing seats with Congress (nine), HAM (three) of Jitanram Manjhi, RLSF (five) of Upendra

Kushwaha and newly emerged party called the VIP (three) of Mukesh Sahani. The party thinks that this seat sharing would draw a section of the upper castes, Dalits and the lower OBCs in addition to the Muslims and the Yadavs. There is no doubt that the RJD votes could be transferred to the alliance partners easily, but only time will tell the similar possibility in the case of other partners.

The JD(U) is leading the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in Bihar. Though the caste group that Nitish Kumar represents is not as big as the Yadavs, he has been using policy measures to expand his social base continuously. Apart from Kurmis, he has consolidated the (MBC) votes in his favour by introducing the category of *atipichhda* MBC officially and giving them the fruits of reservation. Similarly, he has created a new category of Mahadalit by bifurcating the lower section of the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and giving them a lot of direct benefits. Likewise, by introducing reservation in the panchayats and government services, he has been able to carve out a large constituency of women. This policy has empowered women and made them

independent political actors despite the initial problem of proxy representation by *mukhiyapati* and *sarpanchpati*, as the husbands of these representatives used to be called. His contribution to the education of the girl child has only added to this process of creating a new social base. For these reasons, he is known as *sushashan babu* (development man). His reply to the question about his agenda during the assembly election of 2015 was "law and order," and he repeated this several times to indicate that he considered it the most crucial contribution of JD(U) rule. And he was right as, in contrast to the RJD rule, the crime graph during his rule has gone down drastically. His development agenda has given him a lot of dividends; however, his change of side after the assembly election has brought a lot of slandering too. He is called *palaturam* (turncoat) for his decision to abruptly break the alliance with the RJD. His refusal to attend the dinner party of the NDA and leaving the coalition at the pretext of Narendra Modi being declared as the Prime Minister candidate has been engraved in the public memory. He ridiculed almost everything

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done by the BJP and then suddenly joined it once again.

### BJP and the Political Blocs

The rise of the BJP is relatively a new phenomenon, and the party knows well that it cannot form government without the support of the JD(U) in a caste-divided Bihar. The Hindutva agenda of the party does not suit the Bihar demography as much as it does in the case of UP politics. It has attracted the upper castes by throwing the slogan of Hindu *rashtra* and more so, by offering 10% reservation to the economically backward upper castes, but it has very few buyers in the OBC, MBC or Dalit constituencies. By collaborating with the JD(U) and the LJP, the NDA expects a sizeable chunk of OBC and SC votes in the state. In the last five years, the party has worked hard to develop its roots in rural Bihar through its populist gifts to the weaker sections. Moreover, in every assembly constituency, it has strengthened its structure by creating several caste- and profession-based units. On an average, every assembly constituency has around 450 office-bearers of these units apart from booth coordinators. It is interesting to note that all these units are hyperactive in most of the cases.

For instance, on Ambedkar Jayanti, the coordinators of the Mahadalit units arrange for a “Sahbhaj” (community dinner) in the Dalit basti, and all other coordinators join in. The money for these functions is locally raised. In another example, in the Seemanchal region all the district-level office-bearers came to attend the funeral of a coordinator of Atipichhda unit. The funeral was performed with the party flag wrapped around his body. It has collected a large set of data at the village level and is using it to consolidate its base. One of the advantages that the party has over the rival alliance is that the slogans of the party travel to the lowest level through its network. Unfortunately, the Congress party has no such organisational structure, and there is none to challenge this consensus at the grass-roots level. The NDA got 31 seats out of 40 in which the BJP alone had 22. If we go by the 2014 result, the party is expecting a massive success as three partners account for 30

seats. Despite all this, the common sense at the moment suggests that the NDA might get something between 20 and 25 seats as the new rival alliance has worked out the caste combination better than the last elections.

Both political blocs are struggling to catch the attention of the public by throwing two different kinds of agenda. The NDA alliance is mixing the BJP’s agenda of national security with JD(U)’s development agenda. The RJD is combining the agenda of secularism and social justice with the Congress promises of welfare economy. It is difficult to say which set of issues would be crucial during the election which is going to be highly polarised. It is the nature of this conflicting agenda and new caste collaborations of these two blocs that gives an impression that the final tally might be closer to 50–50.

In different regions of the state, different caste configurations are dominant, and this election will mostly depend on that as there is neither massive anti-incumbency nor any other overarching issue which can move the voters beyond the caste or community affinities while voting. For instance, the NDA has given more seats to JD(U) in the Seemanchal region as it is expected to pull MBCs and SCs along with a good chunk of the upper castes. In this region, the RJD has given more seats to the Congress to attract Muslims, Yadavs and Brahmins. Similarly, in the Bhojpur and Patliputra region, the BJP has fielded more of its own candidates. Whereas, the RJD is the main contender in this region against the BJP. The region-wise distribution of seats is done on the basis of minute calculations of caste arithmetic.

### The Begusarai Spectacle

No discussion on Bihar today can be complete without reflecting on Begusarai, as it is one of the most keenly watched seats in the country today. Kumar has become a symbol of the Kanhaiya “Big Indian Dream” enshrined in the preamble of the Constitution: sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic. He has emerged as the ideological other of Prime Minister Modi. An excellent speaker, Kanhaiya has been able to throw a stiff challenge to the

Hindutva’s well-known face, Giriraj Singh. Both of them belong to the same caste, but the latter seems to be more favoured by Bhumihars as he is the sole leader for them at a time of diminishing political power for one of the politically most influential but numerically small castes. There is a strong rumour that he was sent to Begusarai by his opponents to cut him to size. Kanhaiya’s other opponent is a popular Muslim leader Tanveer Hasan from the RJD, the party from which he was expecting support against Modi. Hasan has a sizeable support which is reflected in the results of last elections where he lost by a narrow margin. But, there seems to be a feeling amongst Muslims in the constituency that Kanhaiya should go to Parliament as he has the guts to challenge the Hindutva forces. It is a tough fight, but Kanhaiya has a definite advantage of being young and well known for his political stand and daring opposition to the Prime Minister.

Everyone is asking if winning Begusarai would revive the left politics in Bihar as despite being a product of media spectacle, Kanhaiya has harped on the left symbolism along with invoking Ambedkar. The combined left used to be a significant player in state politics until recently. However, despite their approximately 3%–4% share of votes, today they do not command the same respect. The RJD-led Mahagathbandhan did not agree to include the left parties except supporting Raju Yadav on Arrah seat in lieu of support for the RJD’s Misa Bharti, Lalu’s eldest daughter in the Patna constituency. Exclusion of the left parties from the Mahagathbandhan indicates the inability in combining the agenda of social justice, welfarism and radical transformation, which is necessary for a new imagination of Bihar. This only shows that revival of left politics is far from a possibility.

Electorally speaking, Bihar is a complicated case as there are many castes and a powerful caste alliance. No one knows if these alliances would work on the ground as expected by the leaders of the respective communities. These days it is difficult to read the minds of the voters as a good number of them make up their mind in the last few days before elections.