

# Bihar: Can Lalu Prasad Reclaim Lost Ground?

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The rise of backward castes to position of power in Bihar has seen a reliance on community-caste mobilisation by the main political actors, aided particularly by “Mandalisation”. Former Chief Minister Lalu Prasad pins his hopes in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections on using the same means of mobilisation. But with the change in the political choices in the state over time, will Lalu Prasad be able to recover his party’s predominant position in the state?

**B**ihar has always played a major role in national politics. As the verdict of the forthcoming 15th Lok Sabha elections is expected to be a fractured mandate similar to the earlier set of elections, the electoral outcome in the state would definitely have a bearing over the formation of the next government at the centre. The elections would also indicate the political equations in the state that have developed since the ouster of the longstanding Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) government in 2005. In other words, the election could provide answers to whether RJD supremo Lalu Prasad’s strategy of having a caste/community-based calculus of political support is still relevant or if such a caste alliance-based strategy has wilted because of improving conditions of governance under the present National Democratic Alliance (of the Janata Dal (United)-JD(U) and the Bharatiya Janata Party) regime.

At the state level, the ensuing election is more crucial for RJD than for any other party, even if the issues that matter in national elections differ from that of state-based elections. If the RJD repeats its electoral performance of the 2004 Lok Sabha elections, it will not only retrieve its political relevance in the state but it could also ensure that national parties such as the Congress and the BJP would play second fiddle as has been the case since the early 1990s. On the other hand, if the RJD performs badly it will have a demoralising effect among its party workers and run the risk of a split and breaking away of committed supporters at grass roots levels. Lalu Prasad is an astute politician and understands this. Learning his lessons from the consequences of not having a tie-up with the Ram Vilas Paswan-led Lok Janashakti Party (LJP) during the assembly elections held in 2005, Lalu Prasad has re-forged an alliance with the LJP by conceding many of Paswan’s demands.

The answer to whether the RJD’s electoral strategy of forging caste-community-based alliances would be successful “on the ground” is indefinite. The demography, political economy of social inequalities and recent political developments in the state have a bearing over the answer.

## Socio-Politics of Bihar

Bihar is the third most populous state of India. The social life in Bihar revolves around the villages. About 90% of the population resides in villages. Over half the population is illiterate. Over three-fourths of people secure their livelihood in agriculture and allied activities (according to the 2001 Census). Agriculture, on which the people of Bihar are excessively dependent in comparison to other states, is not in good shape, with prolonged stagnation over the years. Ownership of land-holdings is extremely skewed. In 2002-03, about 30% of the rural households had no land to cultivate. Again, 59.3% of the rural households had land less than a hectare (marginal holdings) and rest 11.7% households cultivated land above one hectare each. In terms of the area under agriculture, marginal holdings accounted for about 42.8% of total area operated. In other words, 57.2% of the total operated area was cultivated by only 11.7% of the rural households (data from National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), 48th Round, Report number 492, 2002-03). Bihar ranks the second highest amongst Indian states in terms of proportion of population below the poverty line. About 42% of the population was identified as living below poverty line in 2004-05 as against 28% for the whole country (Planning Commission of India).

Society in Bihar has been an ensemble of thousands of individual castes. Political watchers of the state have described these castes to be in constant conflict for social dominance and political power. In undivided Bihar, upper caste Hindus constituted about 13% of the total population but traditionally they constituted the most powerful section of society, and dominated the bureaucracy, academia, and big business and until recently in politics. Backward castes, demarcated under the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), constituted the largest

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chunk of the population. According to the 1931 population census, backward caste Hindus accounted for about 51% of total population. Yadavs constituting 11% of total population were the single largest caste in Bihar. The Koeris and Kurmis together constituted about 7.7% of total population. Unlike dalits, the backward castes did not suffer social disabilities, yet were seen to be enjoying lower socio-economic status compared to the upper castes. Traditionally, they have largely been engaged in agriculture either as cultivators or labourers. In urban areas, most of them have been engaged in unorganised sectors. Educationally, they are much behind the upper castes. Over the years, their access to socio-economic resources has improved because of affirmative action policies and political ascendancy in recent decades, but they are still behind the upper castes in socio-economic indicators (see NSSO 2004-05).

The scheduled castes account for about one-sixth of the total population. They are unevenly distributed across the state, though their concentration is quite high in some districts such as Gaya, Nawada, Kaimur, Vaishali, Aurangabad and Nalanda. They continue to remain in the margins of society with the vast majority of them being landless, poor and illiterate and experiencing very distressing living conditions.

Muslims also account for about one-sixth of total population of the state and constitute a significant part of society. While they are not unevenly distributed, there are certain pockets where they are either in a majority or constitute a number that could be decisive during elections. They are more numerous in the districts of Kishanganj, Araria, Katihar, Purnea, Darbhanga and Madhubani. They also constitute the poorest segment of the population and experience lower access to socio-economic resources in the state. Vast majority of them are either casual workers or engaged in self-employment in unorganised sectors (see NSSO 2004-05).

**Depletion of Upper Caste Hold**

Despite being numerically lesser, the forward or upper castes have dominated the rule of the state till 1990. The Congress Party that ruled the state till 1990, except

a brief interlude on two occasions during 1967-69 and 1977-79, was in fact a political enterprise of upper castes. The upper caste sections of the party dominated and controlled the legislature, even as they were perpetually in contestation among themselves. The disproportionate access to power enjoyed by the upper castes was a cause of unease and angst among the upper backward castes or middle castes. It was in the 1977 assembly election when the defeat of Congress accompanied a noticeable decline in the representation of forward castes in the legislature. The proportion of forward caste candidates to the legislative assembly elected from unreserved seats declined to 48.6% in 1977 from 55.1% in 1967. On the other hand, the proportion of backward castes surged from 34.5 to 38.5% (Blair 1980). Even as the forward castes continued to dominate the elected members to legislature, it was indeed a significant political development, for backward castes to have made their presence felt in the electoral politics. Consequent to an increase in representation in the assembly was an increase in the number of backward caste ministers in the cabinet. As against 29 upper caste ministers, there were about 42 (38 from upper backward castes and four from lower backward castes) ministers in then Chief Minister Karpoori Thakur's cabinet. It was for the first time after Independence that ministers belonging to backward castes outnumbered those coming from forward castes, although forward castes comprised about 40% of the Janata Party legislators. The Janata Party that came to power in 1977 was under the command of backward caste leaders like Karpoori Thakur and Ram Sundar Das. This implied that forward castes were not to carry undue weight. This was the classic example of "who controls the party controls the power equation within it".

The consolidation of backward castes was, however, short-lived, for the backward castes could not escape the malaise of internal political rivalry as did the forward castes. Karpoori Thakur who led the Lok Dal in Bihar (after the fall of the Janata Party led-government) in the 1980 assembly elections found it extremely difficult to bring backward castes into one umbrella. Individual leaders from backward castes

asserted their own claim to power and competed against each other with utter disregard to its effect on the strength of the backwards as a group (Frankel 1989)<sup>1</sup> Backward castes' solidarity was perhaps in need of greater impulse, which took a decade to achieve – due to the “Mandalisation” of politics.

### Mandalisation

The Mandalisation of politics in the late 1980s effectively mobilised the backward castes in the state. The backward castes now saw it as an opportunity to capture power decisively as the political “moment” during the “Mandal” phase was in their favour. Following the Bhagalpur communal riot towards the end of 1980s, Muslims too had fallen sick of the Congress and deserted it. The dalits were uncomfortable with the patron-client relationship with the forward castes during the Congress regime and had been waiting to break the shackles. The coming together of backward castes, dalits and Muslims was now ready to script a new chapter in the political history of the state. The results of Lok Sabha elections held in 1989 and assembly election in the following years corresponded to this new script. The Congress had suffered a major setback and a steady decline came into being for the party. Consequently with the decline of the Congress Party, the Janata Dal occupied much of the political space and the party's leader Lalu Prasad became the chief minister of the state, ruling it for nearly 15 years.

Riding on the Muslim-Yadav-dalit alliance, Lalu Prasad was able to capitalise on a strong support base, but showed little regard to the running of the state and therefore was perceived to have failed in taking the agenda of development forward. Even a casual look at the policies/programmes meant for the poor and their implementation suggests that nothing substantial happened between 1990 and 2000 that would have ensured a measure of economic betterment of the toiling masses, leave alone overall socio-economic development of the state. For example, the acquisition of surplus land and its redistribution would certainly have given a measure of empowerment to those having no land at all. Though data pertaining

to how much surplus land was acquired and redistributed in the 1990s was not easily available, one can make an assessment of the situation indirectly with the help of other data sources. In 1991-1992, about 14.19% of the rural households had no operational holdings (NSSO 1991-92). The proportion of the landless households increased to about 30% in 2002-03 (NSSO 2002-03). It can be assumed that land reform, a major political agenda in the state in the early years after independence and what is still regarded as a bona fide pro-poor policy, took a back seat in the priorities of the party in power.

On the economic front too, Bihar appeared to paint a dismal picture during the 1990s. For example, the annual growth rate of GDP was 4.66% during the period between 1980-81 and 1990-91. It fell to 2.69% during the period between 1990-91 and 1999-2000. Similarly, annual growth rate of per capita GDP fell from 2.45% to 1.12% during the same periods (Ahluwalia 2000).

Also during the 1990s, the law and order situation worsened considerably and as a result crime rates increased. In 1990, about 4,166 cases of murder, 2,138 cases of kidnapping and abductions and 3,164 cases of dacoity were reported in the state. The percentage share of Bihar in total cases of murder, kidnappings and dacoity reported for India was 11.9%, 11.6% and 28.5%, respectively. In 1999 alone, Bihar accounted for 14% of all cases of murder, 11.2% of kidnappings and 30.9% of dacoity reported in India as a whole.<sup>2</sup> In short, considering such numbers, Bihar under the chief ministership of Lalu Prasad had moved from bad to worse.

### Defying Expectations

Despite failures and widespread perception of worsening state of affairs, Lalu belied the expectations of political observers who had already written him off ahead of the assembly elections held in 2000. The RJD of Lalu Prasad did indeed suffer a jolt having lost 43 seats compared to what it had won in 1995, but it was still the single largest party after the elections. By and large, the RJD's vote bank particularly Muslims and Yadavs stood solidly behind it.<sup>3</sup> Though part of the dalit and lower OBC voters broke away from the RJD, a large chunk of them voted

for the party. The RJD performed even better in the Lok Sabha elections held in 2004. How did the RJD continue to marshal support from its vote bank despite widespread perceptions of worsening law and order situation and infrastructure, rising crime and so on? Two explicit reasons seem to explain this. One, the politics ushered in 1990s brought about a political reconfiguration in the state not only in terms of party politics but also of political classes and power elites. The upper castes were relegated to the background and had little role to play in the corridors of power. For example, in 1995 assembly elections, only 61 forward caste candidates returned to Bihar Vidhan Sabha as against 165 backward caste members. It was thus a case of role reversal as the numerical strength of forward caste members in the legislative assembly had reduced drastically and with only a few of them in the ruling party, the caste composition of the cabinet had also been completely altered. For example, in the Chandra Sekhar Singh-led ministry in 1983, about 44% of the ministers belonged to the forward castes, which came down to 27% in Lalu Prasad's ministry in 1990-95. As opposed to this, the share of ministers belonging to the backward castes increased from 24% to 47% in the two ministries, respectively, (Choudhary 1999).

Second, the patron-client system of voting in which the ryots (tenants) and “bonded” labourers (mostly dalits) had to vote to the call of their masters (mostly forward castes landlords) was also dismantled. The breakdown of this system undoubtedly brought about political freedom to a large section of people, though they were still in the fringes as far as socio-economic statuses were concerned in the state. One might claim that this political emancipation of lower castes and dalits was mere “tokenism” or “symbolism” but it is difficult to deny that once they were able to cast their vote against the will of their masters, they were free from several chains of constraints and were able to assert self-respect and dignity. Lalu Prasad's rule was thus the symbol of *izzat* (self-respect). Besides, Lalu Prasad kept the state free of communal riots, which was a recurring phenomenon during the Congress regime. Undisputedly, security of life and property happened to be the major

concerns for the vulnerable sections such as minorities, poor and marginalised castes. Other priorities such as electricity, roads and drinking water were only secondary. Lalu Prasad was able to ensure that there would be no communal riots, the houses of backward castes and dalits would not be burnt, and there would be no violence against the underprivileged. This instilled confidence among the minorities and marginalised communities and for this they voted for the RJD.

But the assembly elections held in February 2005, in a sense, stopped, the march of the unchallenged political chariot of Lalu Prasad and his party. He could not recover from this and finally succumbed to the winds of change that swept the state in the next election held six months later in the same year. The defeat of RJD was described by many as a result of politics in the state taking a new course. In other words, the perception now was that the politics centred merely on caste-community coalitions had played itself out. It was seen to have lost its energy and had given way to a more "sustainable" form of politics, that is to say, politics of development and governance. A close reading of the verdict, nonetheless, suggests that Lalu Prasad's vote bank did not deplete in any significant way. Yadavs continued to rally behind him. A portion of Muslim voters did drift away, yet largely the community threw its weight behind him. But the Ram Vilas Paswan factor made a difference by making a dent into Lalu Prasad's core support base. He took away a major part of dalit and also a part of Muslim voters and won 29 seats in 2005 February election. There is some substance in the argument that if Lalu had reached an electoral understanding or tie-up with Ram Vilas Paswan, the electoral outcome would have been different.

### The RJD-LJP alliance

Against this backdrop, the political coalition perfected by Lalu Prasad's RJD and Ram Vilas Paswan's LJP is likely to benefit the two leaders and their parties. For Yadavs, Lalu Prasad continues to be the symbol of power and self-respect. He is also the undisputed leader of Muslims because it is perceived that there is no alternative to Lalu Prasad. The Congress is in a moribund state and indications remain that it will remain so in

the near future. The JD(U)'s Nitish Kumar is seen as a serious leader and Muslims have no grudge against him except that his political partner, the BJP, is not acceptable to them. Hence, Muslims have no option but to fall back on the Lalu-Paswan alliance. With Ram Vilas Paswan alongside him, Lalu Prasad will benefit from the accretion of dalit votes. Seen in this context, the RJD-LJP alliance, at least on paper, commands over 47% of voters (the share of Yadavs, Muslims and dalits in total population of the state being 14, 17 and 16%, respectively). But this neat formulation is merely on paper.

Since 2005, much water has flowed down the Ganges. Change is visible in the state. Recent surveys have shown that Nitish Kumar is one of the most popular chief ministers in Indian states. People approve of his policies and programmes taken for the development of the state. Unlike Lalu Prasad who allegedly promoted the phenomenon of "Yadavisation"<sup>4</sup> whereby Lalu Prasad was involved in widespread patronage to members of his caste grouping, no such allegation exists against Nitish Kumar. It is expected that the people might not remain fixated within caste-community appeals. Seen in this context, the only thing that appears to be positive for RJD-LJP alliance is that lately people have begun to differentiate in electoral choices between assembly and parliamentary elections. It is possible that the RJD-LJP alliance might

work well in the upcoming Lok Sabha elections but may fizzle out in the assembly elections to be held next year as was the case in the 2004 Lok Sabha and 2005 assembly elections.

### NOTES

- 1 Frankel, F (1989): "Caste, Land and Dominance in Bihar" in Frankel and Rao (ed.), *Dominance and State Power in Modern India: Decline of a Social Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press).
- 2 See Crime in India 1990 and 1999, National Crime Records Bureau, Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India.
- 3 The post-poll survey carried out by the centre for the Study of Developing Societies indicated that about 78% and 60% among Yadavs and Muslims respectively voted for RJD in the assembly election held in 2000. About 31% among dalits also reported to have voted for RJD.
- 4 For some observers of Bihar politics, it was the Yadavisation phenomenon that angered upward mobile Koeris and Kurmis among whom there were more professionals and bureaucrats than among Yadavs. And finally it caused the split between Lalu Prasad and Nitish Kumar (who formed Samata Party in 1994). Also see Das (1997).

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