



A cut and paste victory

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It would be impossible to deny that development was the biggest issue in the recently concluded assembly elections in Bihar, but can the victory of the JD(U)-BJP alliance be summed up entirely as the story of development overriding caste-focused politics?

Development did triumph over other issues in Bihar, but not necessarily caste politics. Nitish Kumar's clever move of breaking the caste-based vote bank of the rival RJD-LJP combine did play an important role in the victory of the ruling alliance.

The JD(U)-BJP alliance has created a history of sorts by winning this election with such a huge margin. The alliance won 206 assembly seats (63 seats more than in the 2005 assembly election) while the nearest rival, RJD-LJP, managed a mere 25 (39 seats less than their total tally in 2005). The Congress managed only four assembly seats (five less than 2005). The Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) won one seat each while independent candidates got six seats. In terms of votes, the JD(U)-BJP alliance polled 39.1 per cent votes leading the RJD-LJP alliance by 13.5 per cent votes (RJD-LJP polled 25.6 per cent of the votes). There have only been a few elections in the past (Congress in 1952, 1957, 1962 and 1985 and the Janata Party in 1977) where the ruling party/alliance polled more than the votes polled by the JD(U)-BJP this time.

Our CSDS survey suggests that Nitish Kumar's achievements in development (which were to the satisfaction of 77 per cent of the people) ensured that a large proportion of the electorate, cutting across caste-communities, voted in favour of him. The satisfaction with the work done by the Bihar government was higher than the satisfaction levels expressed by other states that voted incumbent governments back in recent years, namely, Madhya Pradesh, Delhi, Chhattisgarh, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Tripura.

While it is true that Nitish Kumar, by his developmental work, managed to cut a slice of the vote from all major caste communities, the core social coalition of upper castes, Kurmis, Koeris alone may not have been enough to ensure his victory. In the process he managed to crack the traditional vote-bank of the RJD-LJP alliance. He aimed for Dalits, who traditionally favoured the LJP, and Muslims, who traditionally voted for the RJD. Nitish Kumar announced various welfare schemes that benefited all lower-caste Dalits referred to as "Mahadalits", only leaving out the Dusadhs, the caste to which Ram Vilas Paswan himself belongs. Similarly, he announced several schemes to benefit lower castes amongst Muslims, referred to as "pasmanda Muslims". While these policies benefited those for whom they were meant, they also helped Nitish Kumar effectively split the Dalits and Muslims and reap electoral gains for himself.

The CSDS survey indicates that the traditional support base of parties remained intact — 56 per cent Yadavs voted for RJD, 55 per cent upper castes and 60 per cent of Kurmis and Koeris voted for the JD (U)-BJP alliance, but Nitish Kumar managed to successfully divide the Dalit and the Muslim vote in his favour. Though the majority of the Dusadhs (55 per cent) voted for the RJD-LJP alliance, there was a shift amongst all other Dalit castes. Amongst other Dalits, 45 per cent voted in favour of the JD (U)-BJP alliance. The RJD-LJP alliance suffered from the division in Muslim votes, which went

to the JD (U)-BJP alliance (21 per cent), the RJD-LJP alliance (32 per cent) and 22 per cent for the Congress. The RJD got a sizeable proportion of the Muslim vote (45 per cent) only in constituencies where its candidate was pitted against the BJP candidate, but faced challenges in constituencies where it was pitted against the JD (U) candidate. The LJP hardly attracted any Muslim vote. In constituencies where the LJP candidate was contesting against the BJP, most Muslims voted for Congress and only 18 per cent voted for the LJP candidate. Lalu Prasad did not manage to transfer the Muslim vote in favour of alliance partner LJP. The shift in the Muslim vote towards the Congress is evident from the fact that in nine assembly constituencies where Muslim voters constituted 50 per cent or more of the electorate, the Congress polled 17 per cent votes.

Apart from the division of the Dalit and Muslim vote, what made this emphatic victory possible was the shift amongst the Most Backward Caste (MBC) communities in favour of ruling alliance. Our survey indicates that 55 per cent amongst the MBCs voted for the JD(U)-BJP. There was a change in voting patterns across the class spectrum. While there was a shift among voters from all economic classes, the shift away from the RJD-LJP alliance was the biggest amongst the poor sections (by 19 per cent) compared to its loss amongst the rich (by 1 per cent) and middle class (by 2 per cent) voters. Nitish Kumar cornered most of the gains of this shift.

Such an emphatic victory indicates that not only are people happy with the five years of the Nitish Kumar government, they also have high hopes. The real challenge before the new government is living up to these awakened aspirations.

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