

Witnessed a Phenomenon where the Backward Castes Embraced Sanskritization : 1920s and 1930s

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According to the vivid words of Francine Frankel, the social hierarchy in Bihar was dominated by Brahmins, Bhumiars, and Rajputs for a significant period of time. However, their authority was later challenged by the Upper Shudras, including the Yadavs, Kurmis, and Koeris. Among the Muslim community, the highest ranked were the Ashrafs, which included Saiyads, Sheikhs, and Pathans, who were landowners. They were followed by the Razil, who were considered the laboring class. These groups, along with the Kayasths, formed the "respectable" people in society, contrasting with other groups such as the Ahirs, Momins, Chamars, and Julahas. Various organizations like the Bihar Kayastha Provincial Sabha, Bihar Landholders Association, Bihar Provincial Muslim League, Gopajatiya Sabha, Bihar Pradesh Congress Committee, All-India Yadav Mahasabha, and Bihar Pradesh Kisan Sabha played significant roles in the political landscape of Bihar. These organizations represented the different social forces at play.¹

Simultaneously, the economic structure was led by landlords, with tenants following suit. This led to a four-fold impact on society, including social categorization, agrarian distress, socio-religious reform, and the national freedom movement. Each of these aspects was influenced and supported by caste mobilization and organization. Colonialism played a role in shaping and reinforcing existing identities, but it was not solely responsible for their creation. These identities have persisted long after colonial rule ended. Additionally, the national freedom movement had both positive and negative effects on regional and social movements. While it brought together the elites, it did not aim to completely reconstruct society and inadvertently entrenched a politics of caste-based exclusion.²

It was in this background that the process of backward or lower caste empowerment began with the *Janeyu Andolan*, which saw the Yadavs and other lower castes *sanskritising* themselves by wearing the Brahmanical thread, through the early years of the 1920s. This led to counter-measures by the Brahmins and there were violent as well non-violent encounters between peasants of the Yadav, Kurmi and Koeri castes and their upper caste adversaries. The *Janeyu* Movement reached its apogee between 1921 and 1925. This was the first modern milestone on the long road to mobility. It provided the Yadavs with a social-cultural legitimacy, which paved a

political path. Yadavs, also known as Goalas and Ahirs, were/are the most numerous caste in Bihar. They were 'cultivators of all kinds' and also 'herdsmen and milkmen'. Kurmis and Koeris too were among the 'great cultivating castes of Bihar'. Koeris were also known for being 'skilful and industrious cultivators', 'the best tenants' and 'market-gardeners of Bihar'.³

During the period of five years 1921-1925, both north and south Bihar, excluding Chota Nagpur area, were affected. Confrontations took place in twenty villages of the districts of Patna and Munger of central-south Bihar and Darbhanga and Muzaffarpur in north Bihar. Simultaneously, a Momin movement challenged the dominance of Syeds, Sheikhs and Pathans. Like 'other organisations of the oppressed social groups, such as the Kisan Sabha, Yadav Mahasabha, Triveni Sangh etc., the Momin Conference also emerged mainly from Bihar. M. N. Srinivas, relying on the Census of the India Report for 1921, referred to the violent reaction of upper caste men in north Bihar against the Yadavs' attempts at *sanskritisation*. The Census Reports ascribe the attempt of lower castes at social uplift to the efforts of their respective caste sabhas. They emphasise the socio-economic oppression of the lower-caste peasants in general and the Yadavs in particular by the landlords of upper castes as the root cause for violent upsurge.⁴ F. G. Bailey observed:

The acquisition of substantial wealth by the two dominant castes led to investment in land, for land is still the best investment and without it a man has no prestige. They followed this by *Sanskritizing* their customs and rituals in order to raise their position in the caste system.

During this time period, Bihar experienced minimal economic development except for the industrial region of Jamshedpur in the south. The agricultural sector remained underdeveloped. The society was still in the pre-capitalist stage, and there was a lack of full economic representation for different classes. Economic factors were closely intertwined with socio-political and cultural-religious aspects. The fight against socio-economic oppression in Bihar was closely connected to the advancement of caste interests. Historian Ramakrishna Mukherjee and others have highlighted the contradiction between the upper castes/classes and the lower castes/classes. The dominant focus was on caste rather than class, leading to a conflict between the elite upper class involved in the national freedom movement and the social movement of agricultural communities and backward castes. In Bihar, similar to other places but particularly pronounced, the privileged upper-middle classes/elites failed to address the socio-political and cultural-economic aspirations of the lower castes and rejected their attempts to engage in politics.⁵

It is instructive to remember the first consolidated political attempt at social equality made by the Yadavs, Kurmis and Koeris, the three landed castes among backward castes, seventy years ago. This was the *Triveni Sangh*, the organisational result of the *Janeyu* movement. Born on 30 May 1933 in Kargahar village of Shahabad district, *Triveni Sangh* was the first step to consolidate and produce a comprehensive political ideology for the backwards out of their various caste based legends and myths. The Congress, which had been afflicted by caste factionalism and manoeuvring since the early 1920s, was proving inadequate in reflecting the growing ambitions of the backward castes and lower middle classes.

Triveni Sangh was the first attempt to apply independent political pressure and form an autonomous political party in opposition to the indifference of Congress to upper caste domination.⁶ It should have provoked introspection in the Congress as to why those castes that formed the largest proportion of state's population and their representatives were absent from its leadership. But, as the tallest Congressman in Bihar, Rajendra Prasad, wrote, 'orthodoxy reigned supreme among the Hindus'. Given the way the Kayasths

politically dominated the Congress, the Bhumihars and the Brahmins dominated organisations like the Kisan Sabha, it was inevitable for an organisation to emerge, which would confront and cast a long shadow. After all, not one person of the lower castes was a member of the Bihar Pradesh Congress Committee between 1934 and 1946.⁷

Here it needs reiteration that the pre-independence period of Bihar politics was monopolized by the upper castes. The Kayastha's being the most educated, exploited the benefits of colonial rule. They were also first to form caste-associations because of their political, educational consciousness. But the dominance of the Kayastha was soon challenged by other caste groups particular by Bhumihars, who were relatively more numerous and economically more powerful. The rising aspirations of Bhumihars and other potential caste organization and their political assertiveness compelled Kayasthas to enter into alliance with the emerging caste of Rajputs in order to counter the growing influence of Bhumihars. The emergence of Brahmin on the political scene of Bihar was late than other groups, since they acquired leadership position for the first time in 1938. But they steadily enhanced their position and influence after that.⁸

Before 1952 general election, voting rights were based on property and educational qualifications. Therefore, politics was the monopoly of upper castes since they were the landowning castes and also the first to take education. But the adult-franchise made the difference, since it brought all the numerically superior castes into the political process of the state. Undoubtedly during the early period of independence the power structure of the state was dominated by upper castes and leadership of Congress party came from upper castes until the 1967 election. But after the 1957 election and particularly after 1962 election, the emergence of new social forces became evident in Bihar's social and political life. This was evident in the growth of political consciousness among the intermediary or backward castes.

And in this way the new situation enabled these backward castes to assert their political interest as the upper castes which hitherto dominated Bihar Congress in the initial stages of political mobilization had to compete among themselves to seek and mobilize additional base of support. They did it by recruiting supporters of the lower castes. Besides, the rise of strength of backward castes MLA in legislative assembly in 1957 and 1962 also compelled the leaders of upper castes to seek their support for their survival in the power structure of the state. This brought about a change in the balance of political forces which reshaped caste-alignments.⁹ A new kind of political mobilisation among backward castes took place and they started to assert themselves as an important force in the power politics of the state.

The political implications of mobilisations and competition of various castes resulted in the crystallisation of new political forces which challenged Congress hegemony through the support of backward castes. However, it was not until the 1967 elections that the backward castes assumed the position to influence the politics of the state. Now, they could assert their dominance in the formation of the governments, primarily because the realignments which occurred after the defeat of the Congress ushered in a prolonged period of instability and coalition politics in Bihar. The fourth general elections of 1967 marked a watershed in the history of political mobilization of the various castes in Bihar.¹⁰

The election effected some significant changes at the mass level of state politics. A new trend was evident after the election, when the old social and political order dominated by forward castes was challenged by the upcoming backward castes, which were encouraged by the emerging polarization between upper and middle castes or backward and forward castes in Bihar. This election provided an opportunity for the political articulation of the growing dissatisfaction of the lower middle castes which enabled them to compete for

political-power. Ram Lakhan Singh Yadav took the initiative in mobilizing the backward castes. On the eve of the 1967 elections, R. L. S. Yadav asserted that backwards must get their due share in political power and to achieve this he arranged a dialogue among the leaders of backward castes, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, to support all those candidates belonging to this caste groups irrespective of the political parties they belong to. When the United Front was formed by non-Congress political parties of the eve of election and the slogan of anti-Congressism was accepted as its basic principle, the core of the backward castes rallied their support behind the front.¹¹

In view of the newly acquired political influence after the election on account of the mass mobilization of backward castes it is not surprising that in the nine governments formed between 1967-72 as many as seven were led by the leaders belonging to the backward caste groups. The acute instability of the coalition period was sharply evident in the shifting loyalties of various factions and imbalances in the support of caste leaders particularly belonging to the backward castes. So what became evident from the coalition period was a peculiar political combination of backward caste domination in alliance with the upper castes. But this emergence of backward castes, however, did not significantly alter the structure of domination to the disadvantage of upper castes.¹²

The single most significant piece of social legislation for the Backward Castes, in the period 1967-1972 was the decision of Karpoori Thakur, as Education Minister in the Samvid Sarkar (1967-69), to abolish English education from school and college curriculum as well as to abolish its requirement in institutes of higher education. This led to a dramatic change in the social composition of institutes of higher education, with an influx of students from rural areas and Backward Castes, and a rise of the 'forward among the backwards' (Yadavas, Kurmis, Koeris). In contrast, Congress' cohort of landed, educated and contracted elite headed by men like Harihar Singh, L. N. Mishra, Daroga Prasad Rai, Kedar Pandey and Abdul Ghafoor did not alter in that 'the majority both before and after the 1969 split, remained with the Forwards and the Upper Backwards'.¹³

Here it needs to be remembered that twenty years before Lalu Prasad Yadav polarised Bihar's electoral scene, Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) had already articulated the cardinal aphorism of Bihar politics. In 1974, he had said, 'Caste is the biggest political party in Bihar'. By now, Bihar had become the battlefield of the largest nation-wide student movement against Indira Gandhi's rule, led by the *Bihar Chhatra Sangharsh Samiti*, fed by popular alienation among the urban middle classes against the Congress, and supported by the student fronts of Jan Sangh and Samyukta Socialist Party. *The Indian Nation* had written in January 1974, of 'back-breaking prices, acute shortage of essential commodities, galloping inflation, mounting unemployment and virtual economic stagnation. However, the opposition could not make any substantial gains as they had neither the ability nor the leadership'. Now, helmed by JP, it became a nation-wide popular campaign.

Initially, the JP movement had an eight-point agenda involving student union rights, provision of vocational education, bank loans for business, unemployment allowance, accommodation and scholarship, effective student representation, inflation, affordable food and study material. The *The Indian Nation* in 1975 attempted to capture the ambiguity in this period: "1974 was a year of processions and demonstrations, trials and tribulations, conflicts and confrontations for Bihar. It gave a shock treatment to the party in power, which had been fleecing the people. Significantly, the agitation took wings and spread over other parts of the country posing the first -ever serious threat to the party in power. Whether that would strengthen or weaken the country is a matter of opinion."¹⁴

In addition to these issues, the other burning issues the inflation rate reached 30% by August 1974 and there was outrage against the political murders which had become prevalent in Bihar from early 1970s, viz., those of freedom-fighter Suraj Narain Singh on 21 April 1973 and the then Union Railway Minister Lalit Narayan Mishra on 2 February 1975. Between 1971 and 1981, Bihar saw 'an average of 178 Ordinances compared to 15 Legislations' and between 1966-67 and 1977-78, the state's growth rate was 2.5%. After 34 years of planning, Bihar was 'at the bottom'. Despite not being expressly centred on the social questions of caste, this movement provided a boost to the process of the shifting of power and proved to be a training ground for the new breed of leaders. Just as the older generation of leaders had the reference of the struggle for 'first independence'; the new leaders now had the reference of the 'second freedom'.¹⁵

However, 'the tragedy of 1974', was pronounced by contemporary commentary as, ...a double whammy: the government failed to protect the people; the opposition failed to give a right direction to the movement, which launched an orgy of violence shaking the conscience of people and nerves of the government. Ideally it should have happened the other way around.³⁷ Nevertheless, the seeds of the politics of 1990s were sown in this social movement of the 1970s. As the poet Nagarjuna wrote, 'The decline of Bihar is not a story of yesterday. Actually, [since] history remains invisible to the common people therefore they start losing hope'.

The elections of 1977 were a disaster for Congress with no Lok Sabha seats from Bihar and only 57 out of 324 seats in the state assembly. It had been clear for some time that 'the flabby Congress, deeply involved in power politics, held only a tenuous touch with the masses as a result of its weakened base'. The party managed only a 23.5% share of the vote, an all-time low. But of greater significance is the caste composition of its 57 MLAs. Yadavs for the first time headed the list with 10, edging out the Brahmans (9), followed by the Rajputs (7), Bhumihars (6) and Koeris (4) and Kurmis (2). This was against the backdrop of the 1975-77 ministry of the *maithil Brahman*, Jagannath Mishra. But, the danger of empty and negative, anti-incumbency politics was not lost on all, amidst the widespread euphoria at the ouster of the Congress party from the corridors of power. The Indian Nation remarked the hollowness of the 'Janata Wave' thus: "The Janata wave was a natural outcome of the repression let loose in the country. Emergency had choked the people and, their mute struggle through the political dictatorship, once they became fully awake and sat up, but beyond that, the JP Janata wave is no more on the move because it could not [be]."¹⁶

However, disillusionment with the new non-Congress regime soon set in. Three months into the new government and a sense of helplessness can be detected as *The Searchlight* declared that 'as long as narrowness prevails, governments may change, but things will not improve. By then, Karpoori Thakur had formed his Janata Ministry on 22 June 1977 and on 9 March 1978 decided to implement the 25% reservation for the Other Backward Classes in government services. The second major decision of the government was to hold Panchayat elections. Held amidst widespread election violence, these broke the traditional dominance of the upper castes in local government forever. Unsurprisingly, Thakur's government was brought down in April 1979 and Ram Sunder Das succeeded him and formed a cabinet, which had more than 50% of its ministers from upper castes. Das did not last long either.

By January 1980, Indira Gandhi was back in power and she dismissed his ministry on 18 February 1980. The non-Congress forces were divided in the state and Congress came back to power in Bihar with 167 seats and 34.17% of the votes; figures that increased to 196 and 38.62% respectively in 1985. Even the number of Scheduled Caste MLAs rose to respectable figures (24/48 and 33/48), but these should not be construed as indicators of their return to the Congress' fold. The decade of the 1980s in general and the two years of 1988-

9, in particular, with four CMs, witnessed incredible episodes of anarchy and violence, unprecedented misrule and opportunist vote bank politics, led the way for a permanent eclipse of Congress rule in Bihar and made it easier for anti-Congress groups to succeed. Certainly as another editorial in *The Indian Nation* put it: "...the schizophrenic Congress [had] made both democratic politics and democratic governance meaningless. But which brand of change? The Jan Sangh brand? The Socialist brand? The Congress (O) brand? A mixture? This question remains unanswered..."¹⁷

The Congress in the 1980s was still installing upper caste CMs; three were Brahmins and two Thakurs. The backward groups, meanwhile, continued towards their goal of political representation and power. But, by the 1990 election, backward empowerment had become the *only* question. This is best illustrated by the 'political odyssey of Karpoori Thakur after the 1980 elections until his death in 1988', which saw the emergence of two contradictory potentialities in the consolidation of larger political identities within the framework of the division between the Backward Classes and Forward Castes. Over all, the larger caste categories, i.e., forward and backward, were strengthened as the basic units of political identity. At the same time, within the Backward Classes, divisions emerged along class lines which simultaneously created an attrition in "Backward" strength, and opened up the potentiality of a broader coalition of the poor.¹⁸

The conclusion that the writings on backward caste empowerment in the post-Mandal politics of Bihar have suffered from many limitations. Most of the writers were motivated by the circumstances and their socio-political background while reconstructing the electoral process of modern Bihar. Therefore, the earlier studies have failed to provide a comprehensive study of the process of backward caste empowerment. Hence, in this study an attempt has been made to fulfill this gap.

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