

Politics of Panchpania and Pasmanda : Development as Politics

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The rule of the RJD, which was considered unruly, reached its peak by the beginning of the 21st century. During this time, a sense of despair, lawlessness, and general gloom became evident. The governing regime provided protection to the unruly political class, leading to widespread insecurity and helplessness among the people. The RJD rule faced contradictions within its own politics, making it impossible to maintain its caste coalition. It was clear from the start that Yadavs, a dominant backward caste, had gained an unfair advantage during Lalu's regime, even though they were a minority compared to the Kurmis. The Kurmis, though numerically smaller, started to express their discomfort and disenchantment.

The history of Bihar repeated itself, as efforts to unite the dominant backward castes of Yadav-Kurmi-Koeri through the Triveni Sangh in 1934 failed due to internal contradictions and poor caste management strategies by the Congress. The Congress had formed the Backward Castes Federation in 1935 to counter what they saw as the dangerous class characteristics of the Triveni Sangh and the Kisan Sabha movement. The past experience of failure to achieve unity, along with a sense of inequality and differing perceptions of status and strength among these castes, made the backward caste coalition a questionable project from the beginning of Lalu's rule. Despite claims by Yadav leaders to be at the forefront of the backward caste political movement and emancipation, the extremely backward caste groups gradually realized the dominant role and behavior of the "Yadav Raj." In 1995, the Janata Dal, with over 57 percent OBC MLAs, could be seen as representing the lower castes. However, the Yadavs received the majority share of 38 percent, surpassing all other castes, including the Koeris with 8.4 percent. These figures suggest that the rise of the Janata Dal in Bihar may actually be the rise of the Yadavs.¹

The group, which was feeling, left out was a heterogeneous caste group of EBCs who make up 32 percent of the population and they had less than 5 percent representation in the Bihar assembly. This heterogeneous category of EBC castes now called for rallying together under another dominant backward caste leader and flag. It was this call that provided political space for Nitish Kumar, a Kurmi caste leader and Lalu's old comrade-in-arm.

In 1994, Nitish Kumar defected from Lalu, and together with George Fernandes, formed Samata Party. The timing of this move and use of certain caste platform was reminiscent of the past. Exactly 100 years after the first Kurmi caste association was founded in 1894, Nitish used the Kurmi Chetna rally in 1994 to start projecting himself as a leader of the Kurmis. "Kurmis resented against Lalu Prasad for his bias against the

Kurmis when he appointed Yadavs as heads of important boards such as the Bihar Public Service Commission, the Bihar Secondary Education Service Commission, the Bihar State Electricity Board and the Bihar State Development Corporation.”² OBC coalition forged during Mandal agitation and in the elections thereafter could not be maintained for long and internal contradictions along with rival political aspirations started showing signs of fissures in the unity. The limits of ‘popular sovereignty’ of Lalu’s regime were obvious and political mobilisation of other than Yadav-OBCs started taking shape.

The rallying point of this mobilisation became the EBC caste group who are often referred by the upper castes and even by OBCs as pachpania (an assortment of various lower castes). Due to their geographical dispersal, lack of numerical strength of their individual castes and heterogeneity, they were never in a position to make claim on government and politics of the state. Nitish Kumar had assiduously worked to bring together a coalition of Kurmis, Koeris, EBCs, lower Muslims (Pasmada) and Mahadalits³ and the upper caste and business community supportbase of his party’s coalition partner, BJP. Finally, in November 2005 assembly elections, EBCs consolidated their votes in alliance with lower caste Muslims and upper castes and RJD regime was replaced by the JD(U)-BJP coalition. Widening of caste representation in the Assembly initiated by Lalu in this way further deepened with Nitish Kumar’s governing strategy to include the lowest among the backward castes and community.

The re-entry of upper caste in ruling coalition of 2005 now made the project of caste management by a backward-caste leader intriguing yet exciting, though complicated. An old student of backward-caste identity politics, Nitish Kumar was sharp enough to realise that OBC politics had run its course and it needed to be reinvented and couched in a different language of politics. A perceptive social engineer who had refined the craft of caste and community management in his favour projected a developmental orientation of governance and claimed to provide sushasan (good governance) by replacing kushasan (bad governance) of the Lalu Prasad regime. In order to win over masses in the context of rising frustration with the RJD regime and to capture popular expectation, slogans and symbols were modified by Nitish Kumar accordingly. His most popular slogan was Nyaya ke saath vikas ka wada (promise of justice with development).

Revival and strengthening of state institutions, improving the law and order situation, road and other infrastructure development and improving accountability comprised the idiom which was used to demonstrate the idea of sushasan. However, behind these ideas of sushashan, Nitish Kumar was absolutely convinced that the success of his politics was dependent on consolidation and sustenance of new caste coalitions. During 2005 election, Nitish candidly remarked “If the EBCs have voted for us, then we will form the government; if they voted for RJD, Lalu will ... The EBCs were divided even last time. In places where they were directly against Yadavs, they came to us. And where the forwards were their main exploiters, they went to RJD. But this time, they have decisively voted for change.”⁴ In his first government, Nitish Kumar inducted four members from EBCs (15 percent of the cabinet strength) which was considerably higher than their 2.1 percent representation in Rabri Devi government. Besides, the core of JD(U) electorate, the Kurmi and Koeri castes now benefited most as they reached their highest percentage in Bihar assembly in 2005.

Another prominent feature of Nitish Kumar’s skilful caste management has been to enhance upper caste (37 percent) representation in government, a move towards ensuring their continued support. In this revival of upper castes in government, the biggest share was appropriated by Bhumihars, a caste that had been dominant all through during Congress regime, despite being numerically minuscule, so much so that within the first month of Nitish’s rule, people of Bihar began to joke about his sushasan (good governance) slogans. It was not

'sushasan', they said, it was bhushasan, governance by Bhumi-hars.⁵ Nitish Kumar was well aware that he owed his victory to the upper castes, the political base of the BJP, who were trying to invent an OBC leader who could counter Lalu and his politics. "Rather than empowerment of the OBCs in the political sense, the end-game (in the chess board) of social engineering is to rework the socio-political agenda to ensure the continuance of upper caste hold over the political establishment by co-opting individual leaders from among the backward castes and even accord them positions of prime importance. The BJP had put this strategy in place in Uttar Pradesh (through Kalyan Singh) and in Madhya Pradesh (through Uma Bharati) and in Bihar, it is Nitish Kumar."⁶ Besides the organisation base of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) helped BJP-JD(U) facilitate grassroots mobilisation and micro-manage voters. Accepting the importance of the BJP as a coalition partner, JD(U)'s outspoken leader, Sharad Yadav, candidly remarked, "We had the masses with us but I am not sure we would have won such a landslide without the BJP. Although some JD(U) members wanted to break from BJP, we realised that it was the BJP which had the support system the upper caste dominated press, bureaucracy and judiciary. Though Nitish led from the front, the BJP played its part in this win."⁷

The upper castes who had backed Nitish Kumar and helped him replace Lalu regime obviously wanted their share of the pie through political decisions that suited their interest. The first important decision they forced Nitish to take was disbanding the Amir Das Commission that had been constituted to examine the political links and role of the Ranvir Sena in perpetuating caste violence in the plains of central Bihar plains. The Amir Das Commission was set up in the wake of the brutal massacre of more than 60 men, women and children belonging to socially and economically oppressed groups in Laxmanpur Bathe village, Jehanabad, in December 1997, allegedly by the Ranvir Sena, a Bhumi-har caste militia. Due to sustained pressure by movements and campaigns by Left and human rights groups, the then government of Bihar had been forced to set up this commission to identify the political forces patronising the killers of the Dalit and rural poor of Bihar. By refusing to give extension to the commission which was close to completion of its tasks and submission of its report, Nitish Kumar tried to assure the upper castes that he was committed to safeguarding their interests. In another move, clearly a political gesture aimed at upper caste appeasement, the Nitish government constituted Bihar Rajya Savarna Aayog (a commission for the upper castes) to identify the underprivileged and deprived communities from among the upper castes.

Moreover, the contradiction between the political compulsions of social engineering and the need to maintain status quo became apparent when the Nitish government took a decision not to implement the recommendations of Bihar Land Reforms Commission. In June 2006, the Nitish government set up the Bihar Land Reforms Commission under the chairmanship of D. Bandyopadhyay, formerly land reforms commissioner of West Bengal. The commission submitted its report in 2008. One of its recommendations argues for legal recognition of bataidars or tillers: "...the Bihar Tenancy Act did not recognise the vast mass of cultivators commonly known as bataidars through whom 30 to 40 percent of arable land in Bihar is getting cultivated. Hence it is immediately necessary to recognise this category as a legal entity and give them protection regarding fixity of tenure, fairness of sharing of crop, prevention of legal ejections and other economic oppressions from which they suffer." The fear that the bataidari law would eventually give land to the tiller brought together influential political leaders from landed upper castes cutting across party line. The dissent in his political coalition and the looming threat to his government was manifest in the by-elections for 18 assembly seats in 2009 when Nitish's political coalition had to face defeat in 13 constituencies. In the absence of political will to

implement land reforms along with the spectre of backlash from landed gentry, Nitish Kumar relented and this most fundamental issue for Dalits and extremely backward castes was thrown out of the political agenda.

While making sense of the growing power and influence of a 'new' generation of state-level leadership along with its distinctive characteristics, it is most instructive to focus on Nitish Kumar's leadership, for at least three reasons. First, Nitish Kumar, a powerful state-level leader from a state-level party, with national ambition, receives much attention like Narendra Modi, now Chief Minister of Gujarat for the third successive term, with his impressive electoral victories and acclaimed success as an administrator (vikas purush). Kumar has been widely credited for bringing about a turnaround in a state that was almost given up not long ago as a 'failed state' by everyone, including citizens of the 'Republic of Bihar'. Second, and more importantly, like in the case of Lalu Yadav, founder-President of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), the other powerful and influential leader in postMandal Bihar, a study of Nitish Kumar's leadership invariably leads to focus on important political changes that have taken place in Bihar recently.

The rise of both leaders coincided with the emergence of two significant trends in state politics in contemporary India: Assertion of the newly mobilised and empowered lower/middle castes in the Hindi-speaking states of north India (with exceptions like the majority of the upper castes in Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand) and the rise of states, state level parties and leaders. Third, there is a critical need for a deeper realistic assessment of the leadership model of Nitish Kumar by using conventional parameters of politics, rather than merely stereotyping him, as happened to Lalu Yadav, portrayed by the media as well as academics either as a lower caste hero or a 'clown/showman'.⁸ An effort to compare Kumar with leaders like Chandrababu Naidu or Narendra Modi, among other custodians of their respective states' self-awareness and pride (asmita), and development (vikas), could also be instructive for leadership studies. To what extent Nitish Kumar in Bihar has earned the image of a 'game changer' in the people's imagination is a moot question.

The change in Bihar, whether it has occurred in political or economic terms or not to the extent being publicised, has certainly happened in terms of popular perceptions about the state's image at the national level. Perceived in the media as 'India's cesspool' with its 'vicious poverty, caste wars, messy politics, corruption and lawlessness'⁹, Bihar also qualified as the leading Bimaru (sick) state, as two other states in this hallowed category (which also includes Uttar Pradesh), namely, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, had started performing reasonably well in the 1990s. In popular psyche, as every non-resident Bihari would testify, the term 'Bihari' had even become a pejorative abusive term. One could often hear it while travelling outside Bihar or watching Hindi movies where actors playing the role of villains/comedians/servants (seldom a hero) would be speaking Hindi in 'Bihari tone' to bring authenticity to the character. Once considered a well-administered, peaceful state in Nehruvian India, Bihar turned into a cursed place, identified with the worst forms of poverty and economic backwardness, social inequality, caste and communal riots, political greed, institutionalised corruption and criminality. People would avoid travelling through Bihar, such was the fear of lawlessness. Cultural degeneration and political/electoral violence prevailed.¹⁰

Bihar came to be considered as an appropriate case for cross-regional studies of crisis of governability and governance. Past masters of caste-based divisive politics like Lalu Yadav, preceded by a string of leaders like Jagannath Mishra, virtually ruled over a 'Jungle Raj'. The recently changed perception, even if somewhat hyped by supposedly compromised local media, as observed by the then Press Council chairman in the state capital Patna on 24 February 2012, has to be supported by actual happenings on the ground in this information era.

Apart from popular perception, some credit for bringing about a perceptible shift in the political and electoral discourse in Bihar, even at the rhetorical level, does go to the leadership of Nitish Kumar.

Bihar assembly elections were an important litmus test for the policies of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) particularly in the aftermath of the socio-economic upheaval caused by COVID-19. Unfortunately, the poor have had to face a disproportionately higher brunt of the crisis. The results in favor of the NDA came as a surprise (it was counter to what majority of the exit polls had predicted) primarily due to the following factors, first and foremost, the anti-incumbency; second, the humanitarian and economic crisis precipitated by COVID-19; and third, to a limited extent, a spirited campaign, centered around jobs and unemployment, led by the leader of Rashtriya Janta Dal (RJD), the leading party of the Maha Gath Bandan (MGB). Political experts while attempting to explain NDA's surprising victory over MGB have focused primarily on two classes of voters; (i) women voters, who recalling the misrule of the RJD, favored the NDA, and (ii) the Muslim vote which was diverted away from the MGB by parties such as All India Majlis-EIttehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM).¹¹

The elections seem to have witnessed two competing consolidations — Yadavs and Muslims on the side of the MGB, and upper castes, Kurmi-Koeris and EBCs on the side of the NDA, with Dalits being the swing vote. Muslims and Yadavs, RJD's traditional voters, consolidated in a major way behind the MGB, at least in the first two phases. Close to nine of every 10 Yadavs and three-fourths of Muslims voted for the MGB. However, to be able to make a bid for power, the MGB needed an MY+. The Dalit vote came to the MGB in the first two phases, and the alliance with the Communist parties was a crucial factor. In the last phase, Dalits seem to have swayed towards the NDA, according to our data. Within the Dalit community, support for the MGB was restricted to the Ravidas community and the Dusadhs. Musahars, however, mostly voted for the NDA. The NDA also got four-fifths of votes from Kurmis, the community to which Nitish belongs, and nearly three-fifths of the EBC vote.

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