

## Caste Politics in Bihar after 1990 : An Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

In this research article I will analyse the antecedents of recent social change in politics Bihar; specially focused on the impacts of Caste Politics in Bihar after 1990. This article also provides a long – narrative of movements for social change and social justice in Bihar, precipitated by the steady rise to political power by backward castes or class and other various types of cast politics and regional political parties' emergence to impact on voting behaviours of the people of the state of Bihar after 1990. In this article also discussed that in 1990s, there was a complete breakdown of the 'Congress system' in the state on one hand and a major transformation in the social basis of political power on the other. In this phase the upper castes were replaced by backward castes as the political elite of Bihar. The Brahmins, Rajputs, Bhumihars and Kayasthas (who together constitute 15 percent of the population) were replaced by Yadavs, Kurmi-Koeris, and other OBCs. The upper castes and the OBC community struggled with each other for political space in Bihar and after a long struggle, the upper castes accepted the leadership of the OBCs. The article attempts this historicisation of Bihar politics by drawing upon a variety of sources – from official records to newspapers – and supplementing them with relevant secondary literature.

**Key Words :** Caste politics, OBC, SC, ST, Social change, voting behaviour

### INTRODUCTION

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. 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 Brahmins (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.

In 1978, Karpoori Thakur of Janata party

implemented the, Mungeri lal Commission report. This Commission was constituted in 1971 and it submitted its report in 1975. It was the first major effort to understand the plight of backward classes in Bihar. This Commission recommended the bifurcation of the backward classes into Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Extreme Backward Classes (EBCs). The report when implemented by Thakur for state level backward castes reservations resulted in widespread rioting by forward caste youth and the fall of his government. This move of the Janata government led to conflicting social mobilizations in Bihar and shaped the politics of the state on caste based assertions in the coming decades. It also saw the emergence of Lalu Prasad, Nitish Kumar, Sushil Modi and Ram Vilas Paswan in the politics of the state.

Since the regional identity was slowly getting sidelined, its place was taken up by caste based politics,

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1. Maya, Hindi fortnightly (Allahabad), Issue dated July 15, 1990.

power initially being in the hands of the Brahmins, Bhumihars and Rajputs. However the period of 1980s witnessed a remarkable change in political scenario of Bihar, when riding upon the wave of “social justice” and no vote without representation the middle OBC castes like Yadav, Kurmi and Koeri replaced upper castes in politics.

The 1990s marked a sharp change in politics of Bihar. The implementation of Mandal Commission report was opposed by upper castes across the country. In Bihar, backward caste groups were mobilized to counter the anti-Mandal agitations. This led to a violent struggle on the streets between the anti-reservationists (mainly upper caste youth) and pro-reservationists (mainly the backward caste youth). This struggle further intensified the hatred between forward and backward castes. Lalu Prasad and Nitish Kumar both became strong supporters of Mandal and reservation politics.

Bihar’s electoral politics was by and large dominated by four upper castes (Brahmin, Bhumihar, Rajput, and Kayastha) till 1980s in the post-independence republic era. Political mobilisation of the dominated and ‘governed’ castes and gradual economic progress of a section amongst the backward castes saw the rise of backward politics in the state which finally has come to stay in power since 1990 and thus by now is in place for approximately three decades.

### **The post-Mandal politics in Bihar and the Advent of Lalu Prasad Yadav:**

Janata Dal came to power in the state in 1990 on the back of its victory at the national stage in 1989. On 10 March 1990, the new CM took oath in public at the sprawling Gandhi Maidan. The early image of himself, which he sought to cultivate was that of a ‘leader of the people’: After a difficult election Laloo Yadav heads an unsteady coalition government, a difficult administration and the greenhorn CM - already being hailed as a “leader of the people” - would have to prove that he has the wherewithal to lead a government, if it has to last long...<sup>2</sup> Proving everyone wrong, the incumbent went on to *rule* Bihar for fifteen years, first and foremost, as an aggressive representative of the drive for backward empowerment. This was his power, but this also provided

an intrinsic limit to his power. His ability to ‘connect’ with his social and electoral base and his projection of his personality as his politics were a symbol of pride for them.

Even before him, there had been lower or Scheduled Caste CMs, but they had not personified empowerment, barring Karpoori Thakur. Lalu Prasad Yadav, the grass root Lohiaite, hardened by JP’s Total Revolution, became the prince of social justice and secularism in power. The principled socialists, Nitish Kumar included, gradually left him and Lalu Prasad Yadav was the uncrowned king by 1995 as both Chief Minister as well as the President of his party, Rashtriya Janata Dal. He was a charismatic leader who had people’s support and Bihar had got such a person as the chief minister after a long time. But he couldn’t bring the derailed wagon of development of the state on to the track. When corruption charges got serious, he quit the post of CM but anointed his wife as the CM and ruled through proxy.

### **Caste engineering and social justice by Lalu Prasad:**

The tone and tenor of slogans, political speeches, and administrative acts of Lalu Prasad were cautiously crafted to undermine the hegemony of the erstwhile ruling elite of the state. Conscious of the fact that caste-based political practice excluded many backward castes from the political process, Lalu’s omission and commission became a reaction against these structural preferences and exclusion. To facilitate the upsurge of excluded castes, Lalu Prasad mindfully brushed aside development related issues and concerns. His slogans like ‘Vikas nahi, samman chahiye’ (we need dignity, not development) proclaimed the language of claim-making. These marginalised groups speaking in the local dialects, lacking human capital or physical assets, and separated by a wide social distance from the landed, well-off sections of the OBCs as well as the upper castes, found a credible notion in the assertion that social justice was more important than development<sup>3</sup>.

In response to occasional demands for better roads and infrastructure, Lalu Prasad always questioned the efficacy of roads for the marginalised. He would tend to question whether roads were really of much benefit to ordinary villagers, and suggest that real beneficiaries

2. The Hindustan Times, Friday March 9, 1990, p. 7.

3. Witsoe. 2006. “Social Justice and Stalled Development”, p. 2

would be contractors, businessmen and other wealthy persons belonging to upper castes.

During his visits to villages in rural Bihar, Lalu always made it a point to visit the areas inhabited by backward castes and he stayed away from visits in the hamlets inhabited by upper castes. This was in sharp contrast to what upper-caste leaders of Congress regime were doing during their visits to villages. Such gestures and symbolism were meticulously planned by Lalu to consolidate his caste engineering. One might discount this political emancipation of lower castes and Dalits as 'tokenism' or 'symbolism' but it is difficult to deny that once they became able to cast their votes against the will of their masters, they were free from several chains of constraints and were able to assert their self-respect and dignity.

#### **Lalu Prasad was the symbol of izzat (self-respect)<sup>4</sup>:**

The political craft of Lalu was styled on putting the concerns of honour, dignity, and voice much above the 'empty' concerns of development, and this craft was practised aggressively and unambiguously. He was never tired of proclaiming 'Humne garibon aur phichron ko swarg nahi swar diya' (I might not have given heaven but I have provided voice to the poor and backward). These practices transformed to a certain extent the structure of dominance and subordination through an expansion of popular politics and representative democracy, which Witsoe refers to as 'territorial democracy<sup>5</sup>'.

In this period, the administration deteriorated fast. During this time in Bihar Yadav caste had emerged at political height and started controlling of all the machinery of the state, they had captured almost all the political post under their control. By 2004, 14 years after Lalu's victory, The Economist magazine said that "Bihar had become a byword for the worst of India, of widespread and inescapable poverty, of corrupt politicians indistinguishable from mafia-dons they patronize, caste-

ridden social order that has retained the worst feudal cruelties".

In 2005, the World Bank believed that issues faced by the state was "enormous" because of "persistent poverty, complex social stratification, unsatisfactory infrastructure and weak governance<sup>6</sup>". By 2005, the popularity of the RJD government had sharply declined, heralding the fourth phase of the state's politics. The party's fifteen-year rule witnessed a decline in the quality of governance, characterized by slowing growth and a breakdown in law and order.

#### **New caste coalitions and social engineering during Nitish Kumar Regimes:**

From the beginning of Lalu rule. Yadav leaders claimed to be the vanguard of backward-caste political movement and emancipation, the extremely backward caste groups gradually realised the dominant role and behaviour of the 'Yadav Raj'. "With more than 57 per cent OBC MLAs in 1995, the Janata Dal may well claim to represent the lower caste. However, the Yadav's got the lion's share – 38 per cent – and no other castes, not even the Koeris with 8.4 per cent could rival them. These figures suggest that the rise of Janata Dal in Bihar may be the rise of the Yadavs<sup>7</sup>".

The group which was feeling left out was a heterogeneous caste group of EBCs who make up 32 per cent of the population and they had less than 5 per cent 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.

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,

4 Sanjay Kumar, Mohammad Sanjeer Alam and Dhananjai Joshi. 2008. "Caste Dynamics and Political Process in Bihar", Journal of Indian School of Political Economy, vol. 20 no. 1 &2, Jan- June, p. 14

5 Jeffrey Witsoe. 2009. "Territorial Democracy: Caste, Dominance and Electoral Practices in Postcolonial India", PoLAR: Political and Legal Anthropology Review, vol. 32, no. 1, p. 65

6 Worldbank.org.in 31 may 2012 retrieved on 13 July 2012.

7 Christophe Jaffrelot. 2003. India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Low Castes in North Indian Politics. Delhi: Permanent Black, pp. 380-81.

EBCs, lower Muslims (Pasmanda) and Mahadalits<sup>8</sup> and the upper-caste and business-community support-base 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.

Nitish Kumar 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).

Despite the separation of financially richer Jharkhand, Bihar has actually seen more positive growth in recent years. The BJP-JD (U) alliance forged a powerful political coalition that exploited the BJP's popularity among Hindu upper castes and the JD (U)'s constituency made up of the lower rungs of the OBCs, a new grouping that came to be known as extremely backward castes (EBCs). The construction of the EBC identity was a savvy attempt to strip votes of non-Yadav backward castes from the RJD. Kumar's JD (U) also fractured the vote of Bihar's Dalits by again targeting the most backward among them, fashioning a new Mahadalit category and directing welfare benefits to this new group.

The caste factor had played a crucial role in the coronation of Nitish Kumar as Bihar Chief Minister in 2005. He received support from forward castes, non-Yadav backward class and Dalits. After Lalu and Rabri's rule, for the first time people of Bihar got the taste of development. It was Nitish Kumar's development mantra which reined into the traditional vote bank of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD). But Nitish set the example of brilliant social engineering by forming Extreme Backward Class Commission which, led to further division in the OBC category.

Then Nitish Kumar brought Dalit into his camp by dividing them too. He formed a new category called Mahadalit from Dalits. So in his term of Chief Minister Ship Kumar had divided and further divided the OBC into several groups and sub groups. Sach groups has been separated from the RJD support toward Nitish Kumar. That thing had continued till 2009 Vidhan Sabha election in which result has seen and a large section of OBC and upper caste group has voted in favour of JD (U) BJP coalition and Nitish came into power with a vast majority. In this situation basically OBC vote bank shifted towards nitish and his social engineering works.

Again in 2015 assembly election scenario has been changed various caste communities in Bihar seem to be polarized for or against one of the two big alliances ahead of the state assembly polls; however, it is the lower backward caste voters, referred to as Most Backward Castes, who might decide the outcome of the elections.

In view of the strongly competitive politics of social justice in Bihar, Nitish Kumar had the challenge of walking on a double-edged sword. On the one hand, he had to keep his coalition with the upper castes going; on the other, his own politics rested on ensuring that his main social base of EBCs-Koeris and Kurmis further consolidated itself in the power structure at the grassroots level. He realised that he could attain the prospect of further social engineering through the PRIs if he wanted to counter the supremacy of dominant castes.

Through an amendment in the Act, 50 per cent seats at every level including single posts like Mukhiyas, and heads of panchyat samitis and zila parishads were reserved for women. The ambit of caste-based reservation was also expanded by reserving 20 per cent seats for EBCs at every tier of PRIs. After the 2006 Panchayat elections, the state had more than 2,60,000 elected representatives in these PRIs comprising Mukhiyas (chairpersons of GPs) and ward members; Sarpanches (elected heads of Gram Katchahries at GPs) and panches; Pramukhs (chairpersons of Panchayat Samitis) and Panchayat Samiti members; Adhyakhas (chairpersons of ZPs) and ZP members

From amongst the EBC category, 1,464 were elected as Mukhiyas, 18,901 as Gram Panchayat Members and 1,464 as Sarpanchs and 18,900 as panchas. Expansion of EBCs and women representation through panchayat was too evident to be discounted for political

8. Mahadalit: the poorest and most marginalized among Dalits are termed as Mahadalit by Bihar government

analysis and subsequent assembly election in 2010 saw a large-scale consolidation and assertion by OBCs in favour of the JD(U) coalition. This deepening of representational politics further reorganised power equation at village and municipal ward levels; and has perhaps initiated far-reaching consequences for assertion by another stratum of backward castes in the politics of the state.

**Other Caste politics in Bihar:**

Apart from the above analysis Ram Vilas Paswan still remains the most popular leader amongst the Dalits, more so among the Paswans, and he has the capacity to lend this support to whichever party he may align with. No wonder Paswan manages to form an alliance with parties of his choice much more easily than others. For any party of LJP’s size, Paswan has managed to remain in power for much longer than any other leader.

The reason for voters of a particular caste voting for a particular party in large numbers is mainly due to the leadership coming from that caste. The absence of leadership among the lower OBC voters has resulted in their votes getting split between various parties.

The division of votes also took place because they voted mostly on local considerations. With Upendra Kushwaha on their side, the BJP reminding the voters about the caste to which the prime minister belong (lower OBC), and some clever ticket distribution (giving proper representation to the lower OBC candidates), I personally believe, the BJP may corner a bigger chunk of these votes in the forthcoming assembly elections.

The lower OBCs always hoped that power would get decentralized and trickle down to them for their benefit. The hope remained alive at least for a few years. The prospect has got alive again with the BJP as the possible agent of change. Hopes, aspirations and perception have an important role in mobilizing opinion and finally votes. It remains to be seen which party manages it the best.

Jeetan Ram Manjhi as a Mahadalit (Manjhi’s) leader of “HAM” and “VIP” related to the caste of (Mallah or Nishads) parties also new emerging as a effective caste representation in the politics of Bihar.

**Upper Caste Politics in Bihar After 1990:**

In 1990s, there was a complete breakdown of the

‘Congress system’<sup>9</sup> in the state on one hand and a major transformation in the social basis of political power on the other. In this phase the upper castes were replaced by backward castes as the political elite of Bihar. The Brahmins, Rajputs, Bhumihars and Kayasthas (who together constitute 15 percent of the population) Against the Mandal Movement emerging a (savarna) Upper caste political party in Bihar (Bihar People’s party), founded in 1993 by former leader of the Samajwadi Krantikari Sena and former Janata Dal MLA, Anand Mohan Singh. BPP merged with the Indian National Congress party in February 2004<sup>10</sup>.

Currently the BJP enjoyed even greater consolidation of the upper castes, which makes up 15 per cent of Bihar’s electorate, among lower class members (71 per cent) than upper class members (53 per cent) in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. However, this gap is the exception that reveals the norm. In the 2000, October 2005, and 2010 Bihar Assembly elections, the upper caste vote was not segmented on the basis of class. Nitish Kumar rose because he empowered backward castes which were less fortunate.

But, the vehicle he chose for this empowerment was upper caste bureaucrats. So, at the end of 15 years, things stayed where they were for us,” said the mallah leader. The net result is, a person like Mukesh Sahani, a mallah, returned from Mumbai after a successful film career (he organised the sets for films like Bajrangi Bhaijaan) to plunge into mallah politics, has now accused Nitish Kumar of ‘betrayal’ of the EBCs. This was even after Kumar included Nishads into the list of scheduled tribes, which means a bigger reservation cake for the community — by no stretch of imagination is the Nisada tribe.

Proportion in the Population of Bihar	
Brahmin	5
Bhumihar	4
Rajput	5
Other Upper Caste (Kayashthas etc.)	1
Yadav	15
Kurmi and Koeri	11
Other OBC’S	24
Dalits(Census)	16
Muslims(Census)	17

Source: Estimates are based on various Post Poll Surveys conducted by CSDS in Bihar.

9 This term was coined by Rajni Kothari to describe the Congress party as a system which dominated Indian Politics till 1967.

10 “Bihar People’s Party merges with Congress”. *The Hindu*. 29 February 2004. Retrieved 7 June 2015

**Caste composition in Bihar:**

***Proportion in the Population of Bihar:***

Lastly I would like to quote the statement of Lalu pd Yadav to economic times on 3<sup>rd</sup> Oct. 2015 that caste is the biggest star in the bihar. Caste is central to Bihar politics, the Rashtriya Janata Dal leader and former CM told ET in an exclusive interview, projecting the upcoming polls as a battle between the upper castes represented by the BJP-led alliance and the backward castes under the Grand Alliance, which includes his party. “You cannot ignore caste. It is a reality in India also,”

**Conclusion:**

The discriminatory processes and practices by upper caste-controlled institutions that limited the associational autonomy of backward castes were severely undermined by the emerging political society led by backward-caste political leaders in the last two decades. The reach and authority of the juridical and democratic polity have been partially transformed with the writ and power of upper caste strongmen being replaced by that of the backward castes. The domination of upper castes over state, district, block and village level institutions, cooperatives, petty contract work, and other spheres of government activity have effectively been checked by backward-caste politics.

Bihar has been at the centre of politics in India for a

very long time. Many significant political changes that have taken place in India during the last several decades have had their genesis in Bihar. Not only was Bihar the epicentre of pro- and anti-Mandal agitations in the 1990s, the state was also the epicentre of the anti-Emergency movement of 1975, popularly referred to as the ‘JP Movement’ and led by the great socialist leader Jayaprakash Narayan when the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi imposed a national emergency.

In Bihar caste politics clearly signify the role since the 2014 Lok Sabha polls. The JDU that had left the NDA just ahead of the 2014 LS elections has returned to it after having a brief alliance with the RJD and Congress for the assembly polls in 2015. Some of the small regional parties have also switched sides. These have brought up new challenges for parties. While Kumar’s return to the BJP-led NDA means a possible combination of upper castes and MBCs in his favour, the RJD, which is fighting alongside the Congress for the assembly polls in 2015. Some of the small regional parties have also switched sides. These have brought up new challenges for parties. While Kumar’s return to the BJP-led NDA means a possible combination of upper castes and MBCs in his favour, the RJD, which is fighting alongside the Congress and small regional parties, is making desperate attempts to consolidate OBC voters and woo SCs as a part of its strategy to go beyond its intact MY (Muslim-Yadav).

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