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Hopelessness and Despair in Bihar: Misgovernance does not Matter, Caste does

By: Apoorvanand, Neel Madhav

There is no connection between politics, elections and governance in Bihar. It is instead caste that defines both society and politics: caste parties and caste-based alliances seek to get the better of each other. In the meanwhile, Biharis seek to migrate to other states in search of a better life.

In a strange and involuntary development, bridges started collapsing in Bihar immediately after the declaration of the results of the recent Lok Sabha elections.

Fifteen of them collapsed in less than a month. It is quite metaphoric as it could symbolise the end of the era of Chief Minister Nitish Kumar, who was called the *Vikas Purush* ("Development Man") of Bihar because of the massive scale of construction of roads and bridges during his regime. However, the value of this construction-led development is revealed by the collapse of bridges in quick succession. Some media persons demonstrated on camera the poor quality of the material used in their construction. It also showed how hollow this development has been and how corrupt the government has been.

Falling bridges make a dramatic picture. However, the gradual erosion of schools and higher education in Bihar and its larger impact on the economy and society fails to register in the consciousness of people. The people of Bihar pass by its wreckage and go to another state like Delhi. The decline of primary, secondary and higher education in Bihar can be contrasted with the astronomical growth in the coaching industry in Bihar at all levels. The government is not seen as responsible for the destruction of the education system in the state. It is not even a topic of discussion. No one asks how many new schools and colleges Kumar established during his long rule and by how much the education budget increased. Whoever has the resources sends their children to schools and colleges outside of Bihar. Be it Bengaluru, Delhi, or Pune; Biharis form the bulk of the student body. Bihar is now only a place to vote.

Do the people of Bihar expect elections to change their lives? The collapse of the bridges tells the whole story. There is no longer any relationship between politics and governance. There is deep despair in the life of Bihar and its people have given up on the ability of politics to bring about any change. In the 19 years of Kumar's rule, the only development work undertaken by the government was construction, which involved contractors and the collection of huge cuts. This was the main source of funding for the ruling party.

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Kumar, the development man, perhaps realising he could not do anything to change the material life of the people, decided to bring about a moral revolution in Bihar by banning the sale of alcohol. This has instead made life in Bihar completely immoral. The parallel economy that depends on illegal liquor supply has given birth to a criminal machinery with the help of the police. What this has done to the youth in the rural life of Bihar has not yet been studied.

The funny thing is that for the last 19 years, barring a nine-month stint of Jitan Ram Manjhi as chief minister, Kumar has been heading the Bihar government but alternatively in coalition with parties which are politically and ideologically opposed to each other. So, we see this government under Nitish Kumar attacking the previous government of Nitish Kumar. Members of the current government of Nitish Kumar accuse the ministers of the previous government of Nitish Kumar of misgovernance.

What is strange is that Kumar is left untouched. Any mistake in Bihar is blamed on the previous government. It is Nitish Kumar's previous government that stands accused, and it is Nitish Kumar's present government that accuses. This baffles outsiders but the people of Bihar remain unperturbed.

It is those who do not understand this puzzle who ask: *What has happened to Bihar?*

Election results

The secular lot has been disappointed with the results of the Lok Sabha 2024 elections in Bihar. They had expected that this time Bihar would vote against the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA). Just before the elections, Kumar broke his relationship with the INDIA bloc and joined the BJP. This was his third U-turn and we thought he had so thoroughly discredited himself that the people would teach him a lesson for his amoral politics.

But the NDA with Kumar back in its fold won 30 out of the 40 seats in Bihar. Kumar's Janata Dal (United) – JD(U) – won 12 seats: the same number as the BJP. Ram Vilas Paswan's son Chirag Paswan's Lok Janashakti Party (Ram Vilas) won five seats and Jitan Ram Manjhi's Hindustani Awam Morcha (HAM) got one seat.

Why does Kumar continue to be relevant despite his poor record? There is only one answer: the social and political language of Bihar is cast in caste.

The INDIA alliance won only nine seats. The Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), the largest party in the alliance, got a mere 4 seats and the Congress Party secured three seats. One seat went to Pappu Yadav who fought as an independent candidate even after taking the membership of the Congress party. The Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) won 2 seats.

Why does Kumar continue to be relevant despite his poor record? There is only one answer: the social and political language of Bihar is cast in caste. And different caste groups see each other as competitors, if not enemies. The RJD and BJP represent two opposing interests. Kumar's support smoothens the edge of this hostility. Even if he is with the BJP, Muslims vote for him, and despite him being with RJD, the Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and the Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs) who are 'opposed' to the Yadavs, vote for him. The upper castes maintain their support for him as he can restrain the expansion of the RJD.

It is also clear that despite all the efforts of the RJD, its base has not expanded much beyond the Yadavs and Muslims. It is believed that the OBCs and EBCs will never join the RJD because of their animosity towards the Yadavs. People ask why the PDA (*pichre* (backward), Dalit and *alpashankhak* (minority)) formula, which worked in Uttar Pradesh, could not have been implemented in Bihar. Tejashwi Yadav took the Mallah caste leader Mukesh Sahni and his Vikasheel Insaan Party (VIP) into his fold and tried to tell the non-Yadav castes that they were safe with him. But the results say that Tejashwi Yadav was not believed.

Domination of caste in the political landscape

If there is one party that outplayed all other parties in the game of caste politics in the 2024 election, it is the BJP. Secure with an upper caste vote base, it has stitched alliances with parties which speak in the name of different castes. It is a win-win situation for all. The BJP remains a party above castes, while using the benefit of its association with the caste-based parties.

It is said about the BJP that it does not do caste politics. This is not true of Bihar or for that matter of other states. It is clear from this election in Bihar that the BJP has executed the most successful caste politics amongst all other parties.

The BJP's formula in 2024 was to have broader alliances with parties representing their caste groups. Two of the biggest parties representing Dalits: Paswan's Lok Janashakti Party (Ram Vilas) and Manjhi's Hindustani Awam Morcha were part of the NDA. The BJP had worked hard on Kumar and Paswan to gain from the loyalty of the EBCs and Dalits to these leaders and combined this with the stable upper caste vote bank of its own. Outsiders wondered why the BJP finally settled with the same Paswan whose party it had broken some time ago and had Paswan thrown out of his bungalow in Delhi, humiliating him. They were also surprised when Kumar returned to the BJP. These were not a sudden move. The BJP had worked for months with the help of the leaders of the JD(U) to make Kumar make yet another U-turn.

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It is said about the RJD that its main base is the Yadavs and Muslims. But it is equally true that the BJP has a stable social base of the upper castes. They have been steadfastly with the BJP over the last several elections and this has turned into a kind of ideological alliance that is beyond the consideration of any material gain or loss.

It is a common understanding in Bihar that the EBCs and Dalits feel threatened by the dominance of the Yadav caste, while the upper castes are ready to compromise with anyone to counter the Yadav dominance. This is the reason why the upper castes need a

compromise between BJP and Kumar as only this combination can defeat the RJD's caste alliance. The support of the EBCs for Kumar is a decisive factor here.

The backward castes are grateful to Kumar and remain with him for granting them special status in his first stint as the chief minister. So we know that Kumar's utility in Bihar politics is due to his hold on this vote bank of around 32% and not because he is a man devoted to development. The people of Bihar are aware of this. After all, they have been victims of his misrule.

We were told by the leaders of the INDIA bloc that had Kumar been with them they would have swept the elections, winning all the seats. It only means that Kumar has his social base solidly behind him despite us finding his U-turns unpalatable. In the same way, Manjhi, who returned as the only MP of his party and was rewarded with a ministership in the union government, remains relevant and useful.

Generally, we think it is bad for a leader of a caste and his family to dominate that caste, but it is evident from the results of this election that people of each caste seem to have no objection. Rather, they love it. For example, Lalu Yadav's family obsession was criticised when this time too he fielded his two daughters but there was no discussion that out of the 5 winning candidates from Paswan's party, two were from his family.

One way to understand the electoral politics in Bihar is that it revolves around two axes which ideologically represent contrasting ideas. While Bihar, unlike a lot of Indian states, is not electorally bipolar, all the political outfits, except the left parties, are ideologically fluid enough to align in any way with the BJP or RJD with successful vote transfers to the bigger parties. Another reason for the domination of the JDU for the last 19 years is that the two poles in Bihar, BJP and RJD, have reached a certain saturation in their support bases. The attempt of both is to bring communities into their fold to expand their electoral base.

Prospects

There is no evidence of anger amongst the people of Bihar over the collapsing bridges. It did generate some humour. We saw memes and jokes but no expression of anger. The ruling NDA knows its people. That explains the audacity of Manjhi, now a union minister, who said one had to understand that it was the monsoon at work and the bridges collapsed due to heavy rain. Another minister of the state government refused to take responsibility, saying that the leader of the opposition, Tejaswi Yadav, was responsible as he was the road transport minister for one and a half years.

Elections are when social barriers can be broken and communication between communities becomes possible. We do not see it happening in Bihar. We do not see a universal democratic language emerging. Elections are also about people experimenting with alternatives. But unlike in the neighbouring states to the west and south, the electorate of Bihar has been slow to change governments. The voting patterns of the population with political allegiance have remained more or less the same, and the responsibility for change over the last 19 years has rested on the shoulders of Kumar who has steadily been flip-flopping in choosing his alliance partners.

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The idea of accountability has limited resonance in Bihar. The symptoms of this are reflected in the reaction to the collapsing bridges or the response to the devastation caused by annual floods. The lack of state support beyond providing survival measures is tolerated, as reflected in the continued support to Kumar in elections.

In the 2020 Vidhan Sabha elections, it seemed as if people of all castes came together on the issue of unemployment. The trends from the 2020 assembly elections, which was a close contest, indicated that the electorate had wished to have power back in their hands. It was reflected in the numbers, where the contest became close, and the issues of unemployment and jobs started to become talking points. But this did not give birth to any new language of social interaction. The parties representing the electorate failed to build upon that and do a reset. The excitement about the prospect in 2020 was nowhere to be found in 2024.

In the Lok Sabha elections, the candidate selection by the RJD was questionable, the INDIA parties did not feel like they were on the same page, and the Congress was largely missing from the elections. Political parties were back in the business of the old manipulation of caste equations. This compromise between society and the political class is convenient for both. But this is at the root of Bihar not changing. What can be said for sure is that caste has solidified as the basic unit of politics and society in Bihar.

The presence of Muslims in the Lok Sabha elections has been muted. The BJP demonised and tried to isolate them, and the secular parties made sure they did not talk about them. But they played their role by being steadfast in their support to the anti-BJP INDIA bloc, though they knew well that they could not expect any vocal or visible solidarity even from this alliance.

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The representation of the aspirations of the masses through political parties seems like a long shot in the present circumstances. Migration from the state, floods and droughts, and poverty have now started to become a matter of unwritten, predestined fate rather than the responsibility of the state to address. A generation has passed with accepting the idea that migration outside the state is the only ticket to a good life, without making any demands for a functional system of education, livelihoods, and healthcare in Bihar.

If there is a ray of hope in all this despair, it is the victory of two candidates of the CPI (ML). One must study the party's politics to find out how it won without claiming to represent a particular caste base and without drawing on and spending a huge amount of money. How did they fight their election with just support from the people themselves? Their win tells us that you can find a new social and political language. But that requires going beyond the sphere of political parties.

The failure of politics in Bihar has to do with the absence of a conversation in the society of Bihar about its nature and role, and its relationship with the lives of the people. That cannot be done by political parties that are confident about their ability to crack the caste code during elections. They are not interested in such a discourse. The disappearance of civil society in Bihar is also one of the reasons for the morass in politics. Only a revival of civil society can ensure this discussion. In its absence, it is the political parties that define politics. The revival of universities is another task as they are the spaces where a new language of social interaction beyond castes can be developed. That can be a beginning that Bihar is waiting for.

Apoorvanand is a teacher and writer. Neel Madhav is a journalist and researcher based in New Delhi.