

# Status of Dalits and MAHA Dalits in the Grammar of Bihar Politics: A Case Study

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## I. An Introduction

For the past one century, Bihar has been the scene of massive peasant movements, violent mobilisations, suppression of popular solidarities, and continuous restlessness in society. It is also the ultimate instance of mis-governance. At times it has appeared that the state is going to crumble, and only through authority or authoritarian rule the state can become governable. Bihar has been held also as a classic case of a 'failed state' much in the same way in which the phrase is used in international politics literature. It is considered again as an example of why liberal democracy cannot institutionalise itself in India. One of the factors related to this supposed state of affairs is considered to be the salience of caste in politics. Caste prevents the modernisation and democratisation of politics. It prevents resolution of social conflicts. To be sure, it makes it impossible to govern Bihar.

If the political history of post-Independence Bihar were to be captured in two key words, they would definitely be Forward Castes and Backward Castes.

Caste as we know has refused to vanish from the society and politics of Bihar. Its capacity to impact politics and democracy in a dynamic manner speaks of its resilience as a category and as an institution.

Indeed, historical evidence suggests the viability of caste as a valuable political resource for modern politics in the state. Caste networks and associations were the channels through which political movements were launched and recast. The movement for the creation of a separate Bihar province in the colonial period is seen as the outcome of the organisational efforts of the Kayasthas. Like elsewhere, Bihar has had its fair share of caste associations and sabhas, the latter including for instance, Bihar Kayastha Provincial Sabha (1889), Bhumihar Brahman Sabha, All India Kurmi Mahasabha (1894), Gopajatiya Sabha (1909). Most of them were geared towards the organisation of cognate sub-castes and focused on a set of issues that combined the zeal for social reforms with efforts towards accessing public employment.

The world view about society and politics in Bihar is all about different castes and how they are the basis of support for political parties. These castes are constantly in conflict for social dominance and political power. The history of the state has numerous instances of caste alliances, networks and mobilizations (Jha and Pushpendra 2012). Even in recent years, for all the development that the state of Bihar has seen, caste continues to remain as one of the most important factors in the political discourse and electoral positioning of the state (NP and Mishra 2013). The caste politics in Bihar can be categorized into two phases, pre 1990 phase and post 1990 phase. In pre-1990 Bihar, the upper castes – Brahmins, Bhumihars, Rajputs and Kayasthas not only dominated the social and political space, but also the bureaucracy and the judiciary. These upper caste Hindus were numerically small as compared to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), but they dominated social, economic and political sphere of the state.

	Proportion in the population of Bihar
Brahmin	5
Bhumihar	4

Rajput	5
Other upper caste[Kayasth]	1
Yadav	15
Kurmi and Koeri	11
Other OBCs	24
Dalit [Census]	16
Muslims [Census]	17

[Source : estimates are based on various Post Poll Surveys conducted by CSDS in Bihar]

In the year 1913, Dalits started to raise their voice through caste associations, and 1952, when the first election took place in Independent India there were various social campaigns, like the anti-untouchability campaign by a determined Congress under Gandhi, which faced stiff challenges from the orthodox sections of the caste-Hindu society. In the absence of a Dalit ideological campaign which was the case in some other parts of India under the inspiring leadership of Ambedkar, these efforts had a crucial role in raising Dalit issues.

The resistances of orthodox sections, however, failed to stop Dalit issues from being raised. The Dalits of Bihar remained with Congress with high hopes till 1952. During this period, Dalit leaders from Bihar such as Jagjivan Ram and Jaglal Chaudhary had been trying to put pressure on the Congress leadership with legitimate and reasonable demands of Dalits. They believed that Congress represented the mainstream political space and that any development of Dalits could be possible only if along with attempts to raise the sense of unity among different Dalit castes, the efforts were made to impress upon the well-intentioned great national leaders of the country.

### [1.1] Governmental Data

In Bihar, the percentage of Scheduled Castes in the total population in Independent India has been in between 12 and 15 per cent and that of Other Backward Castes has been in between 51 and 52 per cent (Blair, 1980, p. 5).

In Bihar, according to the 1961 Census report, Scheduled Castes constituted 14 per cent of the entire population of the state (Prasad, 2005, p. 12). In 1941, the total population of Dalits was more than 4.3 million and in 1951, it rose to more than 5 million, which was 12.6 per cent of the total population of the state. According to the Census, the major Scheduled Castes of Bihar were Chamars (2.38 million), Dusadhs (2.1 million), Musahars (1.1 million), Bhuiya (438 thousands) and Dhobis (433 thousands).

### [1.2] The search for national Dalit icon and the dominance of Congress

It can be said that one of the reasons why Dalit movements of Bihar have not attracted Dalit historians the way those of some other regions, like Maharashtra or Andhra Pradesh, did, could be that in Bihar, Dalit movements were not inspired by any Dalit icon like Ambedkar but by Gandhi and his followers. Ambedkar was a respectable name among the Dalits of Bihar, but his ideological and political significance became powerful only in the 1980s when the search for a national Dalit icon began.

One of these historians has put it bluntly: *'In Bihar, the Dalit liberation movement was not strong and it was obviously under the influence and control of congress.'*

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This process of Dalit and backward caste mobilization in Bihar had given scope for their leaders to claim for more representation in political space and a prominent backward caste leader Veer Chand Patel (a deputy minister in 1952, a cabinet minister of Health and Agriculture in 1957 and a finance minister in 1961), had asserted in a very well-attended meeting that the backward caste movement is the greatest movement of India. It is bigger than the movement against the British. The imminent Indian revolution is speaking through the voice of Jagjivan Ram. (Pichhada Varg, 18 May 1953 cited in Chaudhary & Srikant [2005].

A close look into the various speeches of the backward leaders of the Congress reveals that there existed a hope that the Congress should try to see reasons for giving backward leaders their due. This speech can be cited as an example: *'Congress kis jatiyasamuday ki bapautinahi ... Hindustan ki azadi mein dalit aur pichharenega ne bhi ahambalidankiyahai ... desh ki bagdorapne hath meinlene ka, apnaadhikar aur uchithissamangane ka, daya ki bheeknahi ... Jagjivan Ram Bharat ke Stalin hain. Jistarahbhukhenange Chamar keladke ne Russia ki kayapalat di, Shri Jagjivan Ram Hindustan ki kaya palatdenge. Wah jo mantra hamein de rahe hain, wah mantra France ki jan-krantikepahle France ki janata ko Rousseau meinmilatha'*

This speech, delivered in March 1953, at the First Backward Castes District Conference of Munger, held at Sahid Bag at Tarapur, in which more than 50,000 people attended, summed up the mood of the Dalit backward leaders and their aggressive approach in Bihar. This mood and expectation from the government was there in Bihar without any direct impact from the leaders like Ambedkar. But, one should not, however, ignore the

impact of his ideas while raising the voice for Dalits in India. Unfortunately, there is no study available which can give any idea of Ambedkar's influence among the Dalits and backwards of Bihar in those days. On the basis of available sources so far, it can be said that it is the cumulative effect of various socio-political movements involving Dalits in Bihar which shaped the Dalits' political assertion in those days.

## II. A history of caste politics and elections in Bihar



[Ram Manohar Lohia, Jayaprakash Narayan, Karpoori Thakur, Lalu Prasad Yadav and Nitish Kumar]

### [2.1] An Overview

The history of caste politics in Bihar would perhaps require many books to do it full justice. For many laypersons, not from the state, this history begins and ends with the rise of Lalu Prasad Yadav. This is untrue, obviously. The vital history of Bihar begins from the Janeyu Movement of the 1920s and the Triveni Sangh, through socialist leaders like Ram Manohar Lohia, Jayaprakash Narayan and Karpoori Thakur to the making of Lalu Prasad Yadav, and the subsequent rise of Nitish Kumar.

Whenever there is talk of the history of 'backward' and 'lower' caste movements in Bihar, particularly in the English media and social media discourse, then such conversations extend to the rise of Lalu Prasad Yadav in the nineties, with a cursory mention of Karpoori Thakur and the 'JP [Jayaprakash Narayan] Movement.'

Bihar politics has often been characterised by fragile institutions of liberal modernity, indeterminate political personalities, populist discourse, corruption and criminal activities. 'Institutional decay' in Bihar emerged with the two-decade rule of the Indian National Congress after the transfer of power (1947-67), was exacerbated by the crises, excesses and emergency of the following decade (1967-77) as well as the populist response to it led by Jayaprakash Narayan (in 1974-75)

How not a single person belonging to the 'lower' castes was a member of the Bihar Pradesh Congress Committee between 1934 and 1946. "Brahmans, Rajputs, Bhumi-hars and Kayasthas commanded over 40% of Congress legislators from 1952 to 1962 and controlled 'vote-banks' of the Scheduled Castes and the Muslims." While the Bihar Land Reforms Act of 1950 produced a "new class of people" from among "occupancy tenants" which affected the traditional social pyramid, this led mostly to patronage networks and caste alliances, with the reins still in the hands of the 'upper' castes.

The Socialists, having broken away from the Congress in 1948, decided to target the "backward caste agricultural groups" to establish their political base. Ram Manohar Lohia, who led this charge, gave the slogan "*pichhda pave saumeinsaath...Socialists ne bandhigaanth* [Socialists have given their pledge and 60% benefits to the backwards/downtrodden] /]" which was popularised by Karpoori Thakur, "the emerging Socialist leader from the 'lower' Shudra nai or barber caste".

A new, post-independence generation was coming of age and increasingly disillusioned with the Congress. 1967. The first non-Congress government in Bihar, drawn from different parties. In national elections the number of Congress Scheduled Caste MPs is reduced to more than half of the reserved seats (23/45) for the first time, with 13 of the remaining going to Socialists and Communists. 1968. The Samvidh Sarkar (led by Mahamaya Prasad Sinha and Karpoori Thakur) in Bihar falls and is followed by ministries of B. P. Mandal

(Samyukta Socialist Party) – “the first person from the Backward Classes to become Chief minister” and B. P. Shastri (Congress) – “the first person from the Scheduled Castes to become Chief Minister”. 1969. Mid-term elections indicate Scheduled Castes are continuing to move away from the Congress. The number of Congress Scheduled Caste MPs is further reduced to 15.

In the four years after 1967 “Bihar had five chief Ministers (CMs) from the Backward Castes, two Scheduled Caste CMs”. “However, the accessions of these ‘backward caste/scheduled caste ministers’ had been the result of political compromise and did not alter the social vantage.”

In the elections held in 1972, after the Bangladesh War, the Congress recovered in Bihar. Also in the early seventies, the Naxalite movement gathered support in Bihar, where it “continued till about 1976, even leading the Harijans of the Patna area”. This culminated in the early eighties in “a Naxalite Belt” in Bhojpur, Patna, Gaya and Aurangabad.

## **[2.2] Karpoori Thakur and revival of Congress**

1977. In the assembly and national elections after the JP [Jayprakash Narayan] Movement and Indira Gandhi’s Emergency, Congress won no Lok Sabha seats from Bihar and only 57 out of 324 seats in the state assembly. However, out of these 57, “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)”. In Bihar, Karpoori Thakur formed the Janata Ministry as Chief Minister.

In 1978, Karpoori Thakur of Janata party implemented the, Mungerilal 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 Most Backward Classes (MBCs) (Ahmed 2010). 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 (Ibid). 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.

1978. Thakur implements 25% reservation for the Other Backward Classes in government services and decides to hold Panchayat elections which breaks the dominance of the upper-castes in local government. 1979. Thakur’s government is brought down and Ram Sunder Das replaces him with more than 50% ‘upper’ caste ministers in his cabinet. 1980. Indira Gandhi, back in power, dismisses Das’s government and Congress comes back to power in Bihar with 167 seats and 34.17% of the votes.

## **[2.3] Congress and the installation of upper caste**

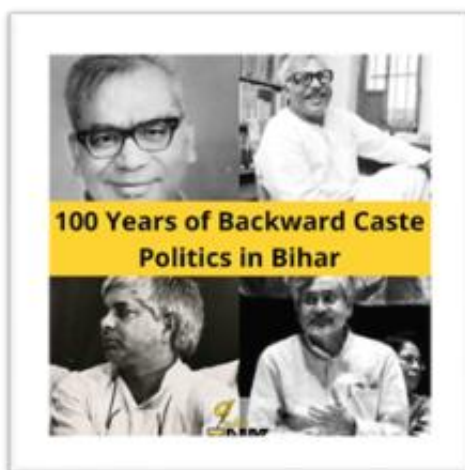
Throughout the eighties the Congress continued to install ‘upper’ caste CMs: three Brahmans and two Thakurs. During this period, “the squabbling and short-lived Janata government and the sympathy factor after Mrs. Gandhi’s assassination had overshadowed the question of empowerment of the backwards. Therefore, in this period in the legislative assembly, the representation of the backwards remained steady without being spectacular. But, by the 1990 election, backward empowerment had become the only question.”

The period between 1972 and 1990 saw a rise of armed groups – led by rebels like Mohan Bind (Kaimur region) and Kailash Mandal (Diayara) – targeting the dominance of the upper castes. Between 1988 and 1989, Bihar saw the rise of caste armies like the *Lorik Sena (Bhumihars)*, the *Kunwar Sena (Rajputs)*, the *Lal Sena (landless labourers)* and the “Naxalite parallel government” in parts of the state.

The quotes from Atul Kohli’s *Democracy and Discontent: India’s growing crisis of governability*: ‘The ‘turmoil in Bihar’ was seen as a product of two related but independent struggles: a political struggle for control of the state pitting the forward castes against the backward castes, and a socio-economic struggle of the landless lower castes against the land owning forward and backward castes.’

It was in such circumstances, after Karpoori Thakur’s removal from the post of leader of opposition, that Lalu Prasad Yadav filled that position and then the position of Chief Minister of Bihar, which he was to hold for 15 years.

## **III. Backward Caste Movement in Bihar: The Beginning**



### [3.1] 1920s and 1930s : the *Janeyu* Movement and the *Triveni Sangh*

In Francine Frankel's vivid words, in Bihar, 'Brahmins, Bhumihars and Rajputs held sway over society for at least one thousand years' until challenged by the 'Upper Shudras, the Yadavs, Kurmis and Koeris'.

The 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 as 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 'skillful and industrious cultivators', 'the best tenants' and 'market-gardeners of Bihar'.

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.

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

### [3.2] Socialists, Naxalites and the Politics of Caste and Ram Manohar Lohia

To build a powerful opposition to Congress, Ram Manohar Lohia decided to turn to the backward caste agricultural groups as his political base. The rising groups within the backward castes were also looking for a party that could represent their political ambitions. It was here that Lohia's slogan, '*Pichhda pave saumeinsaath...Socialists ne bandhigaanth*' [60% benefits to the backwards/down-trodden], was popularised by Karpooi Thakur, the emerging Socialist leader from the lower Shudra *nai* or barber caste. *Within his 'New Socialism', Lohia retained Liberal Populism and Gandhism but replaced Marxism with his own understanding (since called 'Lohia-ism'), which linked the continuing caste and social-assertion movements of the backwards with the socialists. In so doing he recognised a home-truth of Bihar Politics, as The Indian Nation re-affirmed fifty years ago: 'The general impression is that almost everyone is casteist'.*



[Ram Manohar Lohia]

The 1967 elections were held against this background ending Congress two-decade long electoral domination and a 'non-Congress government was formed with tremendous goodwill political parties.

The ministries of B. P. Mandal – 'the first person from the Backward Classes to become Chief Minister' and B. P. Shastri – the first person from the Scheduled Castes to become Chief Minister – mid-term elections were held in 1969 and the Scheduled Castes continued to move away from the Congress. The number of their MPs in Congress (15) was now equal to those in Samyukta Socialist Party (13) and Praja Socialist Party (2) combined. Later, the pro-Janata wave of 1977 saw the Congress being reduced to 2/45 in the reserved constituencies.

The Naxalite Movement, on the other hand, emerged from the ideological struggle and splits within the Indian Communist Movement. By early 1970s, the Naxalite Movement was losing support in the rest of the country but in Bihar, it continued till about 1976, even leading 'the Harijans of the Patna area'. By the early 1980s, a 'Naxalite Belt' would emerge in Bhojpur, Patna, Gaya and Aurangabad. Later, however, they would have to contend with Lalu Prasad Yadav, who would boast: *I have proven that ballot boxes are more powerful than machine guns. Votes can decide whether a man will be in the dust or riding in an airplane. I am a true Naxalite [militant, communist revolutionary], from birth, a democratic Naxalite.*"

### [3.3] 1967 to 1989: The fall, rise and eclipse of Congress

The period from 1967 saw the social movement of the Backwards reaching the corridors of power for the first time. In the next four years, Bihar had five chief Ministers (CMs) from the Backward Castes, two Scheduled Caste CMs, as well as the only Backward Caste minister from Congress. Between 1967 and 1972, Bihar had nine governments, including ones that lasted as briefly as for three days and nine days. However, the accessions of these 'backward caste/scheduled caste ministers' had been the result of political compromise and did not alter the social vantage.



[The 1974 JP movement was to be the watershed, which decisively turned this class (“politically conscious backward castes, classes and tribals”) away from the Congress. As well-known, almost all of the later political leaders of the 1990s were a product of this movement.]

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 Chhattr 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.

Among 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 1966-7 and 1977-8, 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.

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 1988-90, 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.

The ‘turmoil in Bihar’ was seen as ‘a product of two related but independent struggles: a political struggle for control of the state pitting the forward castes against the backward castes, and a socio-economic struggle of the landless lower castes against the land owning forward and backward castes’. The ‘always factionalised’ political elite of Bihar – whether Brahmans, Kayasths, Bhumihars, Rajputs or Yadavs, Koeris and Kurmis – always sought ‘a correlation among high status, landownership and political power’.

#### IV. Redefining the grammar of Bihar politics

##### [4.1] The of Lalu Prasad Yadav



Karpoori Thakur died an untimely death in 1988. By then, ambitious and younger Yadav legislators had already harassed and undermined him to the point of exhaustion, particularly the trinity of Anoop Lal, Srinarayan and Lalu Prasad Yadav. They collaborated with the Speaker of the State Assembly, Shiv Chandra Jha, and had Thakur removed from the post of leader of opposition in a dubious episode. The void left by Karpoori Thakur’s ousting and death was the one which Lalu Prasad Yadav filled with some luck and some help. He assumed the chair of Karpoori Thakur but neither by a unanimous decision nor a majority choice, rather as a compromise candidate.

‘*Jab tak Samose me aalorahega, tab tak Bihar me Lalu rahega.*’ The ‘*Subaltern Saheb*’ began his political life as the Patna University Student Union’s President. He had been a member of the student organisation committee for the 1974 movement. He entered the Lok Sabha in 1977 and Vidhan Sabhas in 1980 and 1985, emerging as the leader of opposition in the latter, in 1988-89. In March 1990, he became the CM despite not contesting the 1990 state elections, having earlier won the Chhapra Lok Sabha seat in the 1989

general elections. The 1989 Lok Sabha and 1990 Vidhan Sabha contests had, as their major issues, the Bofors Scandal, the corruption of Rajiv Gandhi's Central Government and the permutations forged by Vishwanath Pratap Singh, Devi Lal, Chandrasekhar, the BJP and the Left front. But the strongest undercurrent was that of backward empowerment, encapsulated in the word 'Mandal' apart from the 'Mandir/Kamandal' politics around Ayodhya Ram-temple.

In the 1989 Lok Sabha elections, Janata Dal won 31 seats out of 54 in Bihar and for the first time the number of Backward Caste MPs (18) (Yadavs (11), Kurmis (3), Koeris (4)) was equal to that of upper caste MPs (18). This issue of backward empowerment became even more important in the 1990 Vidhan Sabha elections. Janata Dal emerged victorious with 121 seats leaving behind Congress (71), BJP (39), CPI (23), CPM (6), and JMM (19). Independents also emerged as a major force having won 30 seats.

While in 1990 there were 117 Backward Caste MLAs as against 105 upper caste MLAs, by 1995 there were 161 Backward Caste MLAs as against 56 upper caste MLAs. The composition among the four 'forward among backward' castes in these two elections was as follows: 1990: Yadavs (63), Kurmis (18), Banias (16), and Koeris (12); 1995: Yadavs (86), Kurmis (27), Banias (18), and Koeris (13). In the 1991 Lok Sabha elections, there were 24 backward castes MPs in all – Yadavs (13), Kurmis (6), Banias (1) and Koeris (4). These three elections thus saw a conclusive displacement of the upper-castes from the corridors of political power at the hands of the 'forward among backward' castes.

He gave his constituency; the Backwards and Muslims, to unprecedented sense of belonging and dignity by making them believe that he was their man, ruling on their behalf, for their benefit. He, then, brilliantly employed it by his knowledge of the nature of caste antipathies, social estrangements and constituency arithmetic. Once installed, he went about creating an iconoclastic image of the 'common Chief Minister'.

In the process, neither did he have to nor did he wish to *govern* Bihar in order to *rule* it; the twin themes of Mandal and Mandir, giving him an electoral ascendancy that the need for performance fell by the wayside. He emerged as a popular anti-establishment underdog and a rustic *messiah*.

Among the heterogeneous caste/class groups within the Backwards, the economically rich and politically influential Yadavs (the so-called creamy layer) cornered most of the benefits of the 'Lalu Raj', while the larger mass of Backwards remained poor. But, they supported Lalu Prasad Yadav till 2005 because he provided them with a sense of pride and participation.

*The one real change Lalu Yadav brought was a change of the caste character of the exploitative order. He gave the Backwards a sense of political participation and a qualified sense of security in fractured times. He undid the hegemony of the upper castes and installed his own. He was a product of Caste and not its producer. Political violence and electoral malpractice in Bihar much predated him and his constituency had long been the victims.*

The story of Lalu Prasad Yadav then was also his transformation from being 'the solution' to becoming the problem, through the 15 years from 1990 to 2005. Since then, 'just as Indira was not India, so Lalu is not Bihar'. Nitish Kumar's government 'expedited the enquiry process into the Bhagalpur riots (1989) and many aggressors [were] convicted.

Most of these [were] Yadavs, which raised uncomfortable questions about Lalu's famous mantra of the Muslim-Yadav electoral partnership'. Nitish Kumar's governments have also shown 'arguably better performance in matters of law and order, road construction, electric supply, reservation of seats for the OBCs and women, 15-point package for minorities.

#### [4.2] The advent of Kumar Government





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. Nitish then 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. Each group 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.

#### **[4.3] Rising Stars of Dalits: The Paswans**



Union Minister Ram Vilas Paswan, who passed away after a brief illness following a heart surgery, was a product of the socialist movement that gripped the country in general and Bihar in particular during the late seventies. A follower of Karpoori Thakur and Raj Narain, Paswan was elected to the Bihar Assembly in 1969 and in less than five years catapulted to the national stage.

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.

Drawn into the vortex of 'sampoorankranti' of Jayaprakash Narayan, he spent the 1975-1977 Emergency period in jail like hundreds of political leaders in the country. He announced his arrival in Parliament winning the Hajipur Lok Sabha seat with a record margin boasting of an entry into the Guinness Book of World Records. Since then, barring 2009, Paswan was elected to the Lok Sabha for eight terms and to the RS twice.

Associated with several parties — the Sampooran Samyukta Party, Janata Party, Lok Dal and Janata Dal — at the turn of the century he formed the Lok Janshakti Party. He served several PMs, including VP Singh, HD Deve Gowda, Atal Behari Vajpayee, Manmohan Singh and Narendra Modi as a Cabinet Minister, handling the Railways, Chemicals and Fertilisers, Communications, Parliamentary Affairs and Food, Civil Supplies and Public Distribution.

Paswan possessed the uncanny acumen of reading the political tea leaves right and switching sides ahead of elections to ally with a party that eventually formed the government at the Centre. Of course, in 2002 Paswan quit the Vajpayee government over riots in Gujarat and worked with the Congress-led UPA, finally coming back to the BJP in 2014, a move he credited to his son Chirag.

Forming the Dalit Sena in 1983, Paswan worked to consolidate his position as a leader of the Dalits at a time the Bahujan Samaj Party under Kanshi Ram and later Maya wati was emerging a strong voice for the oppressed classes.

Born in Khagaria in 1946, Paswan was selected as a police officer but chose the calling of politics and became an MLA for the first time in 1969 on a Samyukta Socialist Party ticket. He was elected to Lok Sabha

eight times and also held the record of winning his constituency, Hajipur, with the highest margin for several years.

In 1975, when an emergency was proclaimed in India, Paswan was arrested and spent the entire period in jail. On being released in 1977, he became a member of the Janata Party and won election to Parliament for the first time on its ticket, and he held the world record for winning the election by highest margin.

Paswan was elected as a member of 16th Lok Sabha after the 2014 general election from Hajipur constituency, while his son Chirag Paswan won from Jamui constituency also in Bihar and is a part of member of parliament.

Always at the forefront of raising issues concerning the disadvantaged sections of society, he was also a skilful grassroots politician who enjoyed good equations with leaders across the spectrum, and his dedicated following in his state ensured that every national party courted him in his over five decades of career. He was a minister in central governments headed by parties of contrasting ideological persuasions, ranging from the Janata Dal to the Congress and the BJP, since 1989.

#### **[4.4] How Bihar chief minister Manjhi revived Dalit politics in the Hindu belt**



Though Bihar has had two previous chief ministers from the Scheduled Castes, never before has Dalit politics become as significant as in the months since Manjhi took oath on May 20, 2014. The two previous Dalit Chief Ministers of Bihar – Bholu Paswan Shashtri (who occupied the top post thrice between March 1968 and January 1972) and Ram Sundar Das (who was Bihar Chief Minister between April 1979 and February 1980) – had been content to operate within a political structure dominated by the state's upper caste and other backward classes.

Manjhi was handpicked for the position by the previous chief minister, Nitish Kumar, after JDU performed poorly in the Lok Sabha elections, Kumar quit on moral grounds and gave Manjhi the job. But he quickly succeeded in breaking out of Kumar's shadow, carving out his own niche among the majority of Dalits – particularly Mahadalits or the poorest among Dalits in the state. This is despite the fact that many of his actions, including his decision to transfer several senior bureaucrats close to Nitish Kumar and his public statement that a Dalit should be the state's next chief minister, have annoyed the JDU brass – a development that is said to have rendered him extremely vulnerable.

#### **Non-Paswan coalition**

Bihar has 22 Dalit castes, which account for nearly 16% of the population. Of these, Paswans, who constitute the core vote base of Ramvilas Paswan's Lok Janshakti Party, an ally of Bharatiya Janata Party, are numerically the strongest. They make up around 4% of the state's total population. For a long time, Nitish Kumar has tried to nurture the non-Paswan Dalit castes, declaring them *Maha Dalits* and announcing a series of benefit packages for them. But since he himself belongs to the OBC caste of Kurmis, he was unable to develop a natural bond with the state's Dalits. Manjhi, who belongs to a Maha Dalit caste called the Musahars, does not suffer from this handicap, nor does he miss any opportunity to underline his origins. Manjhi's pro-Dalit vocabulary has turned him a symbol of Dalit politics in the state and has successfully allowed him to signal the fact that the ruling combination intends to take the plank of social justice to the lowest strata of Bihar's society.

### **V. How caste shapes politics and governance in Bihar?**

What does the Bihar election say about the social balance of power? Though most parties attempted to reach out beyond their core social base, there were some predictable patterns. About half the candidates fielded

by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) belonged to the forward castes and, according to the Lokniti-CSDS post-poll, most upper-caste voters supported the National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

Half the tickets in the RJD went to Yadavs and Muslims who overwhelmingly voted for it. The Kurmis and Extreme Backward Classes (OBCs) supported the Janata Dal (United). It is no surprise that caste matters in elections, but should it matter in what the *sarkar* does? Do historical trends teach us something about the kind of policies that the next government is likely to prioritise?

In the first few decades after Independence, the forward castes in the Congress dominated Bihar politics. Upper caste landlords consistently made up more than 40% of the ruling alliance until the 1990 elections. More than a third of the state budget in these decades, perhaps not surprisingly, went into investments in agriculture and irrigation.

An Other Backward Caste (OBC) middle-class began to emerge from the 1950s after the abolition of *zamindari* and due to the gains of the Green Revolution. As the stronghold of upper caste landlords weakened, Yadavs, Kurmis and Koeris asserted themselves politically. This was first reflected in caste conflict within the Congress.

As Samuel Huntington predicted, the inability of existing institutions to absorb the rising social mobilisation resulted in political chaos. Between 1967 and 1972, Bihar went through nine different changes in government and three periods of President's Rule.

The decline of the Congress in 1967 created the space for smaller parties to emerge. This period further witnessed the emergence of the Jayaprakash Narayan (JP) movement.

Most contemporary OBC political leaders, including Lalu Prasad and Nitish Kumar, trace their political career to the JP movement. The first non-Congress government, led by Karpoori Thakur, won in 1977. And, in 1990, the first OBC-majority government led by Prasad assumed power. This election marked an end to upper caste dominance in Bihar.

The RJD's poor record in governance is no secret. The state's development expenditure declined in both absolute terms as well as in proportion to its overall budget. As the rest of the country reaped the benefits of economic liberalisation, Bihar's per capita income declined. But this period proved to be transformational for lower caste empowerment.

For the first time, social justice was explicitly discussed in the state assembly. In fact, about 20% of the policy speeches were devoted to identity-based issues.

Appointment of lower caste officials in positions of power became the key agenda of the government. Though the higher bureaucracy remained dominated by upper castes, Yadav and Muslim state civil officers were five times more likely to be promoted to the Indian Administrative Service (IAS) under the RJD. More importantly, at the local level, the proportion of OBC and Dalit BDOs and SHOs doubled in this period. In the process though, chain of command and official procedures were broken. Power came to be centralised in the Chief Minister's Office. To avoid perpetuating upper caste dominance in the bureaucracy, positions remain vacant. State capacity deteriorated as a result.

The next 15 years, under Nitish Kumar, represents yet another distinct phase in the state's politics. A Brahmin CM would be unimaginable in contemporary Bihar, but upper caste representation in the government increased once a gain under the BJP-JD(U) alliance. According to the data from the Trivedi Centre for Political Data, the proportion of upper castes in 2020 is even higher than the last election. This has implications for policy.

While State capacity during the RJD tenure was low, spending patterns shifted towards social sectors. Under the JD(U)-BJP alliance, the state witnessed a proportional increase in economic spending, with the most dramatic increases in roads. Absolute spending in social sectors too increased, in large part due to greater availability of resources from the Centre.

While it is difficult to predict the policy agenda of the government in the next five years, past trends strongly suggest two outcomes. One, the presence of BJP at both the Centre and the state will help Bihar fiscally through central transfers. And two, a larger share of these resources is likely to be devoted to economic sectors.

## **VI. Editorial sources and T.V. reports**

### **[6.1] Oct 1, 2014: Hindu temple in India purified after low-caste chief minister visit**

The government in the Indian state of Bihar has ordered an investigation after reports that a Hindu temple was cleaned and its idols washed after a visit by the state's chief minister who belongs to a lower caste community.

Chief Minister Jitan Ram Manjhi, a member of the Musahar community, said he had been told the shrine in Bihar's Madhubani district was "purified" after he visited it last month. "I have asked the local divisional commissioner and inspector general of police to probe the case and bring out the truth," Manjhi, who is from the Janata Dal United (JDU) party, told journalists on Monday. He said he had ordered the investigation because it was important to highlight caste biases in the society, adding that if the reports were true, those

responsible would be punished according to the law. Caste-based discrimination, or “untouchability”, was banned in India in 1955, but centuries-old feudal attitudes persist in many parts of the country and Dalits still face prejudice in every sector from education to employment.

Manjhi became chief minister of Bihar in May after his predecessor resigned following a poor performance by the JDU in general elections. Low-caste people make up 15 percent of Bihar’s population and Manjhi is the state’s third Dalit chief minister since India’s independence from Britain in 1947.

Leaders across political lines condemned the incident and said stern action should be taken against those responsible.

“Untouchability is a crime in the country. It cannot be allowed to take place to even ordinary citizens,” said food minister and prominent Dalit politician Ram Vilas Paswan.

“What can be more shameful (than) when a Chief Minister says the temple was cleaned after his visit?” asked Paswan, leader of the Lok Janshakti Party which is part of the ruling coalition.

Last month, New York-based Human Rights Watch said hundreds of thousands of poor low-caste Indians were being forced to clean human excrement from dry toilets and open drains, despite a ban on the discriminatory and undignified practices

### **[6.2] November 4, 2020: “Our plight will not change without political representation,” Dom community members decry govt indifference**

Doms are scheduled caste people generally referred to as Dalits or the downtrodden. In Bihar, current chief minister Nitish Kumar has included them in a subcategory called the Mahadalits or the most downtrodden.

According to the 2011 census, there were around seventeen thousand Doms in Patna while the total population of scheduled caste people in Patna was around nine lakhs and twenty thousand. The Ravidas (the community identified with Mayawati) and Dusadhs (the caste which late Ram Vilas Paswan belonged to) are around 90 lakhs while Mushars/Manjhi are around 26 Lakhs.

Doms are nearly around 1 lakh 42 thousand in population. They are known for their Bamboo work making Tokri, Soop, Daura and some decorative items. Ironically though they are still considered untouchable but their Soop and Daura are used in the most revered Hindu festival of Chhath Puja in Bihar.



*[Bamboo work by doms]*

A couple of months ago, a poster appeared in Patna with a caption ‘Son of Dom’. The poster was of Sunil Kumar Ram who had described himself as ‘Son of Dom’ and he demands to induct Dom caste persons in Bihar’s cabinet of ministers.



Sunil Ram says that “they (Doms) don’t get Samman (Respect) and don’t get election tickets. “Our community does not have proper houses. They are forced to live on the outskirts of the towns,” says Sunil who is fighting for political representation of the Doms.

It is known that Bhola Ram Toofani was a minister from the Dom community in RJD government but Sunil Kumar says that he was from Mehtar caste which is known for sanitation works.

For Sunil Kumar, the plight of Doms will not change without their representation in politics. Kumar names the likes of Ram Vilas Paswan and Jeetan Ram Manjhii who worked for their caste interests. “I want one such leader for the Dom community,” he adds.

### **[6.3] December 9, 2022 Delhi: Chirag Paswan raises issue of 'rising' crimes against Dalits in Bihar in LS**



Lok Janshakti Party (Ram Vilas) leader Chirag Paswan on Friday raised in Lok Sabha the issue of a alleged rise in crimes, especially against Dalits, in Bihar and said Parliament can't be mum when the state government is maintaining "silence".

The Jamui MP noted that a woman and her five-year-old daughter were burnt alive in Arwal after their house was set ablaze by people accused by the mother of trying to sexually assault her.

Raising the issue during the Zero Hour, Paswan said the culprits were angry with her, a member of the Paswan community, for complaining to police and alleged that the local administration was hand in glove with them. He said a Paswan woman was gang-raped and killed in Begusarai as he hit out at the state government for its "silence".

While acknowledging that law and order is a state subject, he said the Centre should act on its own and order a CBI probe as the people of Bihar are angry at the JD(U)-RJD-Congress government's alleged lack of action.

## **VII. Conclusion**

Caste has been hailed as a great facilitator of the twin processes of ‘democratisation of politics’ and ‘consolidation of democracy’ and its role in helping bridge the gap between India’s social and political democracy that has been underlined time and again.

Today, Bihar is a heartland of an estimated 100 million people, 40% of whom are below poverty line and 90% of whom continue to have a rural existence. They share a collective trajectory that can be traced to the colonial creation of rent-seeking landlords by the permanent settlement of 1793. That set Bihar on becoming a 'classic enclave economy' through the British Raj. Post-independence, the 'freight equalization scheme', an 'explosive mix of caste and class struggles', 'transfer of caste power and material benefits to the marginalized', a 'deinstitutionalized state apparatus and curtailed development', and, large social groups, from the 14% twice-born castes, 39% OBCs (20% upper OBCs, 19% lower OBCs, 12% Yadavs, 3.5% Kurmis, 4.1% Koeris), 15% Dalits, 16% Muslims have operated within a paradigm of continuity of caste and class conflict.

In these seven decades, from the Congress' 'social coalition of extremes' dominated by the upper castes, followed by first the emergence and then the fragmentation of the OBCs, if Karpooori Thakur symbolised what was a precursor for the following Lal Prasad Yadav, then the latter personified a 'democratic upsurge', a 'plebeian politics [of] narrow-poor redistributive coalitions.' Since 2005, Nitish Kumar has represented a 'wide-poor coalition of Dalits and upper castes', with the 2015 Bihar assembly elections showing that 'themes of identity remain central to mobilization efforts of political parties.'

"...it is said that the class and caste neutral economic policies of Nitish Kumar have broad sub-national support, and have triggered the formation of a 'Bihari' identity for the first time, especially after the implementation of positive discrimination for women, lower backwards, and the Dalits in the Panchayati Raj Institutions and essentially represents the agglomeration of non-powerful social categories (AtiPicchra which also includes most of the Arzal and Ajlaf communities of Muslims, and Maha Dalits)."

On the other hand is the view that Nitish Kumar's 'governmental concern of welfare and development' and Lal Prasad Yadav's political government are complimentary to each other. One's caste-based politics is matched by the other's functional social engineering; 'for an emancipative politics of the Dalits, this history holds a clue'.

This case study shows the electoral victories achieved from 1989 onwards and the emergence of the legend of Lal Prasad Yadav represents continuity in this cycle of democratic empowerment and 'breakdown of the Brahmanical social order'. It is another milestone on this road of identity assertion in Indian and Bihar politics. Bihar has always been severely limited by a deeply divided social structure. Since 1937, Congress adopted the strategy of dealing with these divisions by co-opting the elite into the power structure, providing affirmative actions for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and increasingly the Other Backward Castes, and granting considerable, if conditional and contradictory, cultural autonomy to Muslims. This strategy left much of the ugly social reality untouched.

Nevertheless, social mobility was always on the rise widening access to political, economic and social power. In democratic India, castes – as a social unit – have always been perceived as a strong vehicle of improving access to power and promotion of interests and it continues to matter. Increased political significance of castes has provided them a greater social hold. Democracy, industrialisation and an equitable economic redistribution have softened their edges but have not eroded their bases. In fact, they have provided an added economic dimension.

Conflicts have plagued Bihar not so much from economic deprivation, but a deep sense of exclusion and marginality along caste-lines, which must be moderated as much by means of a social and political transformation as by economic development. The question is whether social mobility in Bihar, having been expressed through the sphere and language of politics, will ultimately reflect a proper economic dimension in India's postcolonial democracy.'

'Caste is the biggest star in Bihar.. Caste is the central to Bihar politics.. You cannot ignore caste it is a reality in India' quotes by Lal Prasad Yadav in an interview to Economic Times which perfectly portrays the definition of caste and politics in Bihar.

From the advent of Triveni Sangh to the star kingship of Nitish Kumar, Bihar has come a long way and fought against the atrocities against Dalits. Though, there is still a need to completely eradicate casteism from Bihar and rewrite the caste free practice of politics. From the first iconic Dalit leader Bholu Paswan Shashtri to the young Dalit minister Chirag Paswan, Bihar has witnessed a much social and political transformation, but the question of complete eradication of caste politics is still rhetorical.

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