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Loud and Unclear: The Choice Between Development and Dignity for Voters in Bihar

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Incumbent Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar has firmed up a 'mahagathbandhan' (grand alliance) with Lalu Prasad's RJD and the Congress in order to keep the BJP at bay. PTI

*Who will win in Bihar? As the spotlight moves to the upcoming hotly contested Bihar elections, **Sarthak Bagchi** provides a primer to the three political coalitions that are vying with each other for political domination. Based on extensive fieldwork currently being undertaken in Bihar, Sarthak provides an elaborate map of social alignments and realignments that will undergird the victory of one of the three alliances currently in the fray.*

Vikas nahi sammaan chahiye (we want dignity not development) — this was a popular slogan when Lalu Prasad Yadav from the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) was the Chief Minister of Bihar in the 1990s (Witsoe 2012). During this period, Lalu Yadav's politics was centered on social justice and the uplift and empowerment of the backward castes

and classes in Bihar, based on the recommendations of the Mandal Commission report. This period simmered with both pro- and anti-reservation forces vying for political one-upmanship. Laloo Yadav, with his pro-reservation agenda, ruled in Bihar, while the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), under the leadership of Lal Krishna Advani, started to get a foothold in national level politics against the backdrop of its anti-reservation politics.

Almost 25 years later, the 2015 election to the Bihar Assembly has presented the Bihari voter with a choice between *vikas*(development) and *sammaan/swabhimaan* (dignity/self-respect). Today there are two main blocs that have emerged from a cacophonous campaign. The first is the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) comprising the BJP, the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP), the Rashtriya Lok Samata Party (RLSP) and the Hindustan Awam Morcha (HAM), which is still highly dependent on the face and personality of Prime Minister Narendra Modi for taking its pro-development (pro-*vikas*) and pro-change (pro-*parivartan*) message to approximately 6.6 crore voters in Bihar. The second formation calls itself a *mahagathbandhan* or grand alliance that includes the political stalwarts of Other Backward Classes (OBC) and backward caste politics in Bihar — Lalu Yadav (RJD), Nitish Kumar, the incumbent chief minister from the Janata Dal (United), and the Indian National Congress.

Nitish Kumar is the preferred chief ministerial candidate of the *mahagathbandhan* and is being pegged as the *vikas purush*(development man) in Bihar, while his alliance partner, Lalu Yadav, still seems to be upholding the flag of social justice and caste-based empowerment by espousing a new Mandal-II regime in his campaign speeches. Nitish, too, appears to have found a knack for espousing identity-based pride and *swabhimaan* (of being a Bihari) with more enthusiasm, rather than pitching for his usual development rhetoric, which for now has been deftly hijacked by the BJP. The main issue with the pride or *swabhimaan* slogan is that it is a floating concept and not a very concrete idea on the ground like development can be.

Swabhimaan/sammaan can be of being a Bihari, being a low caste Bihari, being a low caste Bihari from a backward area and so on. In a campaign speech during a *Swabhimaan* rally at Gandhi Maidan in Patna, Rabri Devi, the wife of former Bihar chief minister Laloo Yadav, said, “Today, our Bihari brothers have to tolerate the insult and humiliation of being a Bihari when they go out to other cities like Mumbai, Delhi, Chandigarh, in search of work.” This particular public rally was the only one where the *mahagathbandhan* decided to orchestrate a show of strength compared to the BJP-led alliance's four rallies across the State attended by PM Modi.

When combined with the backward-forward cleavage within the caste-sensitive social sphere of the State, this humiliation becomes a double problem for the average Bihari from a backward caste. These feelings of contempt led to a reactionary espousal of *swabhimaan/sammaan* and was seen as a perfect platform to launch a poll campaign on the social justice agenda, which will cater to 80 per cent of the electorate in Bihar. Having a *vikas purush* like Nitish Kumar as the face of this campaign for social justice will just gift-wrap it in the attractive package of development.

It is with this thought in mind that the *mahagathbandhan* had been convened under the socialist umbrella of reuniting all the ‘socialist-minded’ parties in the Hindi heartland, and, this alliance saw the coming together of popular leaders like Mulayam Singh, Nitish Kumar, Lalu Yadav and Sharad Yadav. However, the Janata Parivar has the ominous distinction of failing to keep an alliance going for a longish period of time since its inception in 1977. This revived Janata Parivar, too, succumbed to fragmentation with the exit of Mulayam Singh Yadav’s Samajwadi Party (SP) on the issue of ticket distribution. The SP, which has a minimal presence in Bihar and no electoral significance in the State, despite being in power in neighbouring Uttar Pradesh, was apparently upset with its relegation to just five seats by other members of the *mahagathbandhan* (Ashraf 2015).

The exit of the Samajwadi Party from the *mahagathbandhan* has allowed for the formation of a third front in the State, where the SP has combined its limited forces with parties like the Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) led by Tariq Anwar, the RJD rebel Pappu Yadav-led Jan Adhikar Manch (JAM), former Lok Sabha speaker P.A. Sangma-led Nationalist People's Party (NPP), former union minister Nagmani-led Samajik Samaras Party (SSP), and former union minister Devendra Prasad Yadav's Samajwadi Janata Dal-Secular (SJD-S). Although the third front has announced it will be contesting in all the 243 seats, its predominant presence will be in the Seemanchal-Kosi region of eastern Bihar, which lies between the delta of the river Kosi and the border with Bangladesh, Nepal and West Bengal. Both Tariq Anwar (the NCP MP from Katihar and the face of the third front) and its other formidable leader Pappu Yadav (MP from Madhepura) have a sizeable mass support in this region. Pappu Yadav has much influence amongst a significant majority of Yadav youths between the ages of 18 and 35 years.

Pappu Yadav is a leader known for his ability to connect with the masses on a personal level, is reported to be easily accessible and is seen as a very generous benefactor. Because of this, he has cultivated good ground support in the districts of Saharsa, Supaul, Madhepura and Purnea. The Kosi-Seemanchal region, which has around 25-30 seats with a considerable presence of Muslims in the electorate, was the only region where the BJP could not make inroads during its triumphant display in the Lok Sabha elections of 2014. The region was thus being pegged as a *mahagathbandhan* stronghold as both Muslims and Yadavs (in the Kosi region) are abundant here. A common saying, "*Rome hai Pope ka, Madhepura Gop ka*" (Rome is ruled by the Pope and Madhepura is ruled by the Yadavs) indicates Yadav dominance in Madhepura. Incidentally, Madhepura is also home to the man who headed the Mandal Commission, B.P Mandal.

However, the unpredictability that makes Bihar elections one of the most keenly observed and bitterly contested ones has meant that this region has become the theatre of a new interesting battle. Assaduddin Owaisi, leading his party Majlis-e-Ittehadul-Muslimeen (MIM) all the way from Hyderabad (via Maharashtra) to the electoral arena of Bihar is the reason behind this new heightened political interest in the region. Believed to be quite capable of drawing a sizeable chunk of the Muslim votes away from the *mahagathbandhan*, Owaisi intends to break into the set mould of appeasement politics in Bihar by targeting the young and educated but unemployed Muslim youths and by taking Muslim politics away from the *madrassa* concessions and *qabristaan* construction (Daniyal 2015). This was also evident from his recent foray into the Maharashtra assembly elections where his "jai-bheem, jai meek (MIM)" slogan, based on a targeted politics of Muslims and Dalit empowerment, attracted him striking support in many seats and his party eventually went on to win two seats. Keeping this in mind, observers and political watchers are wary of neglecting Owaisi as an also-ran in the Bihar election. "This time it is difficult to say confidently that Lalu Yadav or the *mahagathbandhan* will be getting the majority Muslim support. Owaisi has started networking quite well on the ground and might see strong support here. Apart from that, Muslims might also be doing tactical voting as they have many options to choose from," says a senior political science researcher from Delhi, who has been camping in the Seemanchal region for the past two months.

Let us shift focus now to the NDA alliance. The BJP, which has largely been an upper caste party in Bihar, attracting the Brahmin, Bhumihar and Rajput votes comprising less than 15 per cent of the population, has for the first time openly targeted the backward caste voters from the OBC as well as from the Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs). Allying with Dalit icons like Ramvilas Paswan and Jitan Ram Manjhi has also helped in further strengthening their support base. Paswan has repeatedly proved the solidarity of the Paswan (Dusadh) vote behind him as this Dalit sub-caste of five per cent of the total population in the State has always strongly supported him. The total population of Dalits in Bihar is close to 16 per cent that includes 23 chief sub-castes. Barring the numerically dominant and socially assertive Paswans, the remaining 22 sub-castes comprise what are collectively known as the *Mahadalits*. *Mahadalits* are highly deprived Dalits and they form around 11 per cent of the population of Bihar.

Jitan Ram Manjhi, the *Mahadalit* leader, was ushered into the political limelight in Bihar only in 2014. After more than three decades of his initiation into politics, he was made the chief minister of Bihar by Nitish Kumar after the debacle of the JD (U) in the 2014 parliamentary elections. However, his ouster from the chief minister's office by Nitish Kumar in February 2015 paid some political dividend. Manjhi's ouster transformed him into a *Mahadalit* icon, who was relegated and disposed off by a bigger leader from a stronger caste. Manjhi came from the Musahar sub-caste, which literally means the rat eaters and are counted amongst one of the most backward communities in the socio-economic hierarchy of Bihar.

This story was projected as the routinised contempt directed towards the *Mahadalits*. This contempt was played out in the public sphere at the highest levels of State politics and gave more credence to the theory of daily humiliations that *Mahadalits* had been subjected to historically. Manjhi became a political rebel; his ouster transforming him into a powerful symbol of Dalit politics. He talked about *sammaan/swabhimaan* and it paid off.

The *Mahadalit* are a caste category created by Nitish Kumar with the twin purpose of creating a social constituency of his own and also to carve out better mechanisms of distributing targeted benefits to the most backward groups among the Dalits, which could not grow as well as other Dalit groups like the Paswans did. *Mahadalits* are known to be spread across the State in sparse numbers, but in certain districts of south Bihar close to the Jharkhand border, like Jamui, Banka, Gaya, Aurangabad, and Rohtas, they appear in larger concentrations. Predictably, these are also the regions in which Manjhi has decided to field his candidates from his newly launched party HAM-S. However, despite being floated on the issue of dignity and pride of the *Mahadalits*, out of the 20 candidates that HAM-S will be fielding, at least five hail from the upper castes. This is indicative of the political specificities of Bihar State politics, with variation from one constituency to another.

Not merely relying on the support of its backward caste ally, Upendra Kushwaha and his RLSP, the BJP has also fielded many middle or backward caste leaders on its own. As many as 22 Yadav leaders have found nominations among the 160 seats that BJP has so far confirmed its candidates for. However, the larger share has been given to candidates from the upper castes. The prominence of backward caste support for the BJP was clear by the importance being accorded to the leader of the opposition in the Bihar Assembly and the BJP's biggest Yadav leader, Nand Kishore Yadav, in its campaigning. Apart from that, the party also did not leave any stone unturned in its efforts to reinforce Modi's backward caste background in its campaign. It also tied up with a host of backward caste associations — *teli-sahu*, *vaishya*, *kevat samaaj* and so on. However, the main political campaign of the BJP has been revolving around Prime Minister Modi, with only his picture being projected on hoardings all across Patna and in some of the other cities like Bhagalpur, Gaya, Motihari, etc. Everything Modi centric from his development agenda, to his economic package for Bihar, to his UAE trip and mosque visit, to his prompt aid to neighbouring Nepal post the earthquake, to even his caste identity as that of an OBC and that too from Teli jati — an EBC in Bihar — everything features in the campaign rhetoric of the BJP.

In the rhetoric of dignity and pride, *swabhimaan* and *sammaan*, the Left Front is also seeing an opportunity to revive its political capital, which is eroding fast from its traditional strongholds. In a recent convention of the Left Front unity at Patna's Sri Krishna Memorial Hall, around six Left parties came together with cadres coming from as far as Katihar and Kaimur, two opposite ends of the State, in a show that was more suggestive of unity than of strength. The Left Front comprises the Communist Party of India (CPI), the Communist Party of India (Marxist Leninist) Liberation, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI(M), the Socialist Unity Centre of India (SUCI), the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and the Forward Bloc. With a strong base in the anti-upper caste, Dalit movement for political and social empowerment as well as land and wage reform movements in Bihar, parties like the CPI and the CPI-ML have a strong cadre base in the southern districts of the State. Both the CPI and the CPI-

ML won eight seats together in the 2005 assembly elections garnering a vote share of over 20 per cent in the seats that they had contested. However, in 2010, the CPI could win only one seat in the election, that was swept by Nitish Kumar (Mohan 2015). This time, by deciding to join their forces together, the Left Front is also hoping to revive its flagging fortunes by joining the discourse of *sammaan* and *swabhimaan* of not just their voters but of the Leftist ideology as well.

As noted political scientist Rajni Kothari had said writing about the role of caste in Indian Politics, “In India, it is not so much as casteism in politics but its more about the castes getting politicised.” (Kothari 2004) Nowhere is this more evident than in Bihar perhaps and taking a leaf out of this strategy of politicising caste(s), the *mahagathbandhan* has been shaping their campaign around the ideas of the continuation of the social justice agenda along with development and mixing it with the issue of Bihar *sammaan/swabhimaan*. Lalu Yadav is not playing a direct role in the electoral contests due to his conviction in the fodder scam. However, he is still largely considered to be the more dominant player in the *mahagathbandhan*, as was evident when he was the last one to speak on the stage at the *swabhimaan* rally. Banking on his development credentials, good governance card, image of an able administrator and distribution of benefits to a large number of communities, Nitish Kumar might be able to fetch more votes for the *mahagathbandhan*. But the *mahagathbandhan* is still dependent on Lalu Yadav for his charismatic and characteristic caricaturing. Lines like “*Yadav ka beta ko nakhoon se notch liya*” (brutally scratched Yadav’s son with fingernails, implying injured him badly), “*bhains Yadav ko nahi gira paya, eeh gira dega?*” (even the buffaloes could not budge the Yadavs, will he do that?) and “*yaduvanshi krishna jail se nikla tha kans mama ka vadh karne*” (the Yadav ruler Lord Krishna came out of the jail to kill his uncle Kans) incite thunderous applause from the audience in rallies as well as in news conferences or televised interviews.

Bereft of any policy issues and large programmatic politics, Lalu Yadav’s political discourse seems to have changed little from the 90s when he used to talk of empowerment for the backward by pitching them against the upper castes, which he called forwards. To the criticisms of terming his reign of 15 years in Bihar as that of a ‘*jungle raj*’, Lalu Yadav now screams out of the publicity posters in and around Patna that his reign gave voice to the poor and lowly, instead of being a ‘*jungle raj*’ — “*gareebon ko jab diya awaaz, usey kehte ho jungle raj?*” Laloo claims to promise a return of the Mandal issue with a Mandal II, ensuring more caste-based empowerment in Bihar in the coming days, if Nitish Kumar is re-elected to power.

Out of the three OBC leaders in Bihar who have acquired a mass following — Lalu, Nitish and Karpoori Thakur — only Lalu has a sizeable social backing of Yadavs, who consist of around 14 per cent of the State’s population. Karpoori Thakur belongs to the Thakur or nai (barber) community, which has limited numerical strength, and Nitish comes from the Kurmi caste, which is a middle caste with an OBC status but are only around four per cent of the total population. Given the highly sanskritised nature of the Kurmi community, most of the Kurmis are educated and into professions other than politics and are also with a “capitalist bent of mind”. This description of the Kurmis was offered by a few Kurmi leaders that I interviewed in Nalanda district.

Kurmis are also not known to be an aggressive or assertive caste like the Yadavs among OBCs or the Dusadhs (Paswan) amongst Dalits. It is this lack of backing from a numerically powerful and strong vociferous support group that prompted Nitish Kumar to go forward with the social engineering to create the constituency of EBCs and *Mahadalits*. What was known as the MBC or Most Backward castes during Lalu Yadav’s reign was accrued the new status of EBC along with many State-sponsored preferential benefits in order to empower them. The *Mahadalits* also similarly got several preferential allocations from the State and their share was further increased by giving them reservations in the Panchyati Raj system. *Mahadalits* with a certain level of education also found new jobs created at the village level like *tola sahayak*, Indira Awaas Sahayak etc. Jobs for the

educated *Mahadalit* youth in the village itself not only checked the outward migration but also brought a new found dignity and self-respect for them in the local settings of their village.

Nitish Kumar reaped political dividend out of this targeted distribution of large-scale benefits to *Mahadalits* by getting their strong support in the 2010 assembly elections and 2014 parliamentary elections too (Sardesai 2015). The reservation of 50 per cent for women in the panchayat seats also empowered the women to a large extent although, still, the men of the household controlled the policies and politics of their elected wives. In rural Bihar, these men are known as MPs or *Mukhiya Pati* (Mukhiya's Husband) and have clout of their own. This has been further facilitated by Nitish's development programmes under which village panchayats started receiving funds for developmental schemes. With such funds at their disposal and discretion, the *Mukhiya Patis* became local power centres despite not having much land holding or upper caste lineages. A similar kind of empowerment was visible with the EBC community as well, which benefitted from the several distributive schemes Nitish Kumar had carved for them. As a result, Nitish Kumar got a resounding majority in the 2010 polls in the State with huge support from the social constituencies that he had carved out — *Mahadalits*, EBCs and women — along with the Kurmi support he already had.

During his two terms in office, out of which Nitish spent eight years* in alliance with the BJP, he proved that development and caste are not antagonistic or mutually exclusive, a view that many scholars and researchers who have been observing Bihar for some time agree with (Choudhury and Kumar 2015). *Vikas*, or the many *samaan* (goods) attached to it, like bicycles for students, scholarships, old age pension, diesel subsidy for farmers, electricity and concrete approach roads to the remotest of the villages, mid-day meals, etc. could be distributed properly when coupled with caste-based empowerment. But with his development agenda getting absorbed by the caste-based rhetoric of the *mahagathbandhan* in its present campaign, it will be interesting to see which way the Bihari voter swings when *vikas* once again gets the spotlight it deserves, with or without the appendage of caste.

Note - The population data is based on the figures released by the CSDS Lokniti data unit, New Delhi.

**This article was updated on Oct. 7, 2015 (18.59 IST), to correct a factual error. The corrected sentence reads: During his two terms in office, out of which Nitish spent eight years in alliance with the BJP, he proved that development and caste are not antagonistic or mutually exclusive, a view that many scholars and researchers who have been observing Bihar for some time agree with (Choudhury and Kumar 2015).*

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