



Bihar Assembly Elections

A Tale of Two Campaigns

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Oct 31, 2015



Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar addressing an election rally in Vaishali, Bihar on 23/10/2015. Photo : PTI

*As Bihar enters the final phases of polling in the Assembly Elections, **Sarthak Bagchi** reflects on the competitive campaigns launched by the Bharatiya Janata Party led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the Grand Alliance of Nitish Kumar and Lalu Yadav, called the Mahagathbandhan. Bagchi's reports bring out the divergent and distinct campaign strategies of the two alliances, with one clearly on a grand scale catering to a richer, upper-caste voter base, designed to dazzle and dazzle, while the other targets individuals in villages and hamlets, and is low-key. However, as Bagchi points out, both campaigns have been hard pressed to strike a balance between the rhetoric of caste and development.*

A tarpaulin sheet has been hastily erected to make a *pandal* (marquee) for a *mahagathbandhan sabha* (Grand Alliance meeting) in Samastipur district in Bihar. Sitting under its shade, Pintu Yadav, 26, is craning his neck eagerly

scanning the skies for an incoming helicopter. “All these *chutka netas* (small leaders) keep occupying the stage till the *badka neta* (big leader) comes. I am waiting for the *badka* to arrive by helicopter.”

The *badka neta* Pintu was waiting for happened to be the Chief Minister of Bihar and the face of the *mahagathbandhan*, Nitish Kumar. Pintu and the crowd of about 10,000-odd people were gathered in the dusty ground of a middle school in Samastipur district. They did not have to wait for too long for their *badka neta* to come and address them. A sudden rush of eager hands started waving upwards in the air, as soon as the whirr of the approaching helicopter started getting louder.

I was sitting on a small patch of unkempt grass on the ground near the stage from where Nitish Kumar was to speak. As the helicopter with Nitish Kumar on board arrived, I could see the frenzy behind me — a frenzy that only a chopper carrying a chief minister can bring. A loud cheer rose from the crowd as soon as Nitish Kumar alighted from his chopper with a cabinet minister in tow. A large group of women jostled for their share of space: Not just in that rally ground, but in the larger public sphere of Bihari society. They had managed to come to the front of the enclosure by the time the chopper had landed. They were waving fiercely at the Chief Minister, who waved back and smiled, perhaps getting reassured that women supporters were still rallying behind him.

Nitish walked up to the stage and urged the enthusiastic crowd to sit back, making it easier for the security persons to control the environment of the rally venue. After the ceremonial exchange of garlands and shawls, and some more platitudes by the local *chutka netas*, Nitish addressed the gathering with his sharp and focused speech. He interspersed facts and data with some humour and held his audience captive for quite a while. The crowd sat on the dusty ground in rapt attention to the points their leader was telling them. Soon after the speech, Nitish Kumar flew away into the distant horizon from where he had emerged a while ago, recreating the initial frenzy. Only this time, there was a reassurance in the frenzy.

Helicopters carry a charm and distinction in the politics of Bihar. Bringing my attention back to the rally ground from the helicopter’s fanciful flight, I encountered the very same group of women who were enthusiastically cheering for Nitish from the first row near the security enclosure. “*Yeh bohot kuch kiye hai humare liye, acche aadmi hai*” (He has done a lot for us, he is a good man), said one of the elderly women, who had come to see and hear her leader, as soon as the *sabha* (meeting) got over. Another young man of the Kushawa caste, Santosh, said, “I have studied hotel management and am leaving for Australia next month. I have secured a job there in a hotel. Nitish Kumar has helped youngsters like me to study and secure loans for further education. How can I not support him?”

“But what about caste? Kushwaha is not Kurmi, right?” I prodded. Santosh gave a very self-explanatory smile in response. I believe he wanted me to understand that pre-ordained caste ties could be trumped by personal benefits and development.

In this article, I will compare the two different kinds of campaigns led on the ground by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance and the Janata Dal (United) and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD)-led *mahagathbandhan* in the on-going Assembly Elections in Bihar. I have been closely observing the electoral process in Bihar for the past few months and have catalogued campaigning, mobilisation, persuasion and polling strategies of the various political parties involved in the fray. Today, the Bihar election has largely ended up becoming a bi-polar contest between these two alliances. The election is fought, as many have also pointed out, largely over ‘what Nitish Kumar has already provided’ and ‘what Narendra Modi promises to give’. In such a situation, it becomes vital to understand and analyse the two different campaigns that are running parallel on the ground and the impact that they leave on voters’ minds.

The pivot of the NDA's entire campaign is the personality of their most popular leader, Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Amit Shah, the BJP president, also commands his space in the NDA propaganda as well as the popular imagination of BJP activists in Bihar. The election hoardings that I saw upon arriving in Patna towards the end of July were all too full of Modi. Later, from September onwards when the elections were closer, Amit Shah started giving company to his State brethren on the BJP hoardings across the length and breadth of Patna and its surrounding areas. After the first two phases of the elections, as if in an introspective and corrective manner, and perhaps also in response to Nitish and Lalu's insistence on the 'Bihari vs Bahari' card, the NDA hoardings started showing not only their allied party leaders like Ram Vilas Paswan, Jitan Ram Manjhi and Upendra Kushwaha, but also State level BJP leaders like Nand Kishore Yadav, Sushil Modi, Ravi Shankar Prasad, Shahnawaz Hussain and so on.

However, outside the fixed dimensions of these hoardings, big and small, the true measure of a campaign's effectiveness is seen on the ground, in rallies and election meetings. NDA election rallies, like Modi is used to saying in almost all of his speeches, are not "*rally but rallaa*". Effectively managed with aplomb and opulence, from the setting of the stage to the seating space, NDA rallies are an example of showmanship, if one can say so, in campaign politics. Big Modi rallies in Gaya and Bhagalpur attract huge seas of supporters from about five or six adjacent districts and even the neighbouring State of Jharkhand. A small election meeting for one candidate by Amit Shah in Samastipur had about 5,000 people. Either way, NDA rallies are very precisely organised events. The stage has a distinct decorum in which, moving away from the normal practice of giving space and opportunity to local leaders of speaking to their heart's content, NDA rallies follow a strict timeline with short and sharp speeches. Usually all the local leaders are made to finish their speeches before the arrival of the main speaker or *badka नेता*, who then arrives to address the gathering and leaves. Everything is done on time.

During the course of my field visits, I attended several rallies organised by all political parties in Bihar. The crowd at NDA rallies is also distinctly different from what one can see in *mahagathbandhan* rallies. At NDA rallies, there are chairs laid out for the crowd, under the tarpaulin marquee that is erected to cover a better part of the ground. These chairs are usually occupied by upper caste women and the elderly. Upper castes are the dominant demographic at NDA rallies. Much of the crowd is also made up of restive young people, who go in hordes to see and hear their favourite Modi Ji. They often crowd up the area near the jimmy-jib cameras, which are also a mandatory feature of Modi's rallies along with LCD screens.

Being a master orator, Modi also does not disappoint them. He fires his salvos and one-liners — even if these are based on uncorroborated facts. Amidst a frenzy of over 5,0000 enthusiastic supporters and onlookers, who has the time and patience to wait for facts and figures? Neeraj Singh, a *bhumihar* by caste, whom I met in Mokama told me: "I had been in Modi's rally at Bhagalpur. He landed at Purnea, from where he reached Bhagalpur by three helicopters. Everything was meticulously planned to the last detail. People had been arranged from at least two commissionaires, apart from Munger and Bhagalpur. There were two trains specially organised to bring supporters from Jharkhand. It's like a huge festival." Modi has a mastery over merchandising as well, with NaMo T-shirts, caps, wristbands, badges and water bottles being made available at the rally venue. In Patna, during the much widely celebrated festival of *raksha bandhan* in August, I also found Modi *rakhis* (wrist ties) in some shops, which were selling like hot cakes according to the shopkeepers.

In Patna city, Nitish and Lalu with their respective brands of politics and slogans did manage to hog a fair amount of space in hoardings and publicity materials. Huge posters of "*Phir ek baar, Nitish Kumar*" (once again, Nitish Kumar) in yellow and "*Jhanse mein na aayenge, Nitish ko Jitayenge*" (Will not be fooled, we will make Nitish win) in bright red caught many eyeballs on the streets of Patna and matched Modi's propaganda poster for poster. Even

Lalu came out boldly from his posters claiming he had given voice to the poor which was now being termed as 'jungleraj'.

Mahagathbandhan rallies on the other hand are quite a contrast when compared to those of their main rival. Starting from the much talked about *swabhimaan* (self-respect) rally, at Patna's Gandhi Maidan on August 30, to other small election meetings or *sabhas*, by its leaders, I have been following the *mahagathbandhan* campaign also quite closely over the past few months. All NDA rallies, whether those held by BJP or by allies like LJP or RLSP, emulate the set standards of their leader Modi. On the other hand, *mahagathbandhan* rallies are distinct. For instance, a Lalu rally is markedly different from a Nitish rally. Nitish Kumar and Lalu Yadav, as journalist Sankarshan Thakur writes, are like chalk and cheese, very different in their characteristics, ideas of governance, mass support etc. Their coming together might have been more of a marriage of compromise, than a union of compatibility. But the positive thing to emerge out of this marriage, even if forced, is the space both are giving to each other in their campaign.

Unlike Modi rallies, which centralise all power at one place by combining six-seven constituencies in one go, much like a war elephant brigade moving with grandeur, Nitish and Lalu have never shared the same stage since the *swabhimaan* rally in Patna and prefer to hold single election meetings separately in all the constituencies. They hop from one constituency to another and cover around five constituencies per day and sometimes even eight or nine. Their hop-on, hop-off *jansabhas* were likened to the game of kho-kho (an Indian sport in which players have to touch the opponent and run away) by BJP president Amit Shah, who insisted that BJP will rather play kabbadi. In my opinion, Nitish and Lalu's swift movement for mobilising voters across the State can be likened to the swift movements of cavalry units which approach the battlefield from side flanks and wade through the enemy lines at a fast pace incurring maximum damage and minimum casualty.

Nitish Kumar prefers to engage his audience with speeches laced with data. He talks about his development agenda and never shies away from listing out his achievements and thereby staking his claim to being perhaps one of the best Chief Ministers Bihar has seen. Lalu Yadav, on the other hand, continues to enthral his audience in his characteristic style using humour with some hardline facts, and, concentrating on his position as one of the biggest caste-leaders that Bihar has ever seen. This is not to deny any of the symbolic caste-politics that Nitish has indulged in and symbolic development that Lalu has given under his tenure as Chief Minister. The separation of these two different protagonists and their respective agendas has enabled the *mahagathbandhan* to keep the necessary distinction between caste (which is Lalu's domain) and development (which is Nitish's forte), while at the same time there is an engagement with both the issues, even if at separate junctures in the campaign.

The problem that the NDA faces with centralising the whole campaign around Modi, burdens the Prime Minister with engaging in both the caste rhetoric and the development discourse, which often ends up with Modi underperforming on both counts. The stage at *mahagathbandhan* rallies is also not as extravagant as the ones I have seen in NDA rallies. Except for the *swabhimaan* rally, none of the other *mahagathbandhan* rallies had used jimmy-jib cameras or LCD screens.

The venue of a *mahagathbandhan* rally, irrespective of whether being held in Patna or in Samastipur or Wazirganj or any other remote area of the State, is devoid of any chairs. People sit on the ground. Tarpaulin *pandals* are also not a common feature in all *mahagathbandhan* rallies, however in some rallies they have been used. "*Mahagathbandhan* does not hold rallies, they hold *sabhas*. *Sabhas* are more organic and less of hype. That is a basic difference between the NDA and the *mahagathbandhan*," says, Ghanshyam Thakur, a JD(U) sympathiser in Samastipur.

Another attack used by both campaigns, works on a more scaled down level. Candidates from both alliances also conduct on the ground campaigning. I witnessed some such campaigning in several constituencies. Even at this level, there are distinctions between the mahagathbandhan and the NDA campaigns. While the NDA has used *parivartan raths* (chariots of change) fitted with LCD screens and GPRS monitoring devices for spreading their message, the *mahagathbandhan* has used both LCD screen fitted vans as well as cycles with placards and hoardings for their campaign. The videos being screened on the *parivartan rath* that I saw featured Modi with bits and excerpts from his speeches. It looked more like an instruction module in Modi's speeches for those that had missed them earlier. The *Mahagathbandhan* van, however, had a well-researched video showing the internal collusions within the NDA where BJP leaders were shown badmouthing their present allies, drawn on video footage from archives. Apart from knowledge and information, this definitely provided some entertainment to the onlookers. I could see the smiles on their faces, as we watched the video in a van stationed at a small roadside shop in Samastipur under a balmy evening sky.

The cycle *pracharaks* (instructors) of the *mahagathbandhan* are also working in an organised and dedicated manner. On my many sojourns through out the State, I could often spot a beaming yellow cycle chariot silently pedalling away from one panchayat to another, quiet and resilient in nature, much like the EBC and Mahadalit voters of the *mahagathbandhan*, who are known to be silent voters, not revealing their choice till the time of polling. Some of the cycle *pracharaks* I spoke to described their arduous routine to me and explained how they covered almost two panchayats, comprising 10-12 villages, in a single day. "It's a lot of hard work and we are not even getting paid much, except some money to eat, but we do it because we believe in the message we are spreading. I am a Rajput by caste and still I support *Mahagathbandhan* over the BJP because it has given us safety and development" said, Aman Kumar Singh, a young cycle *pracharak* standing next to his yellow cycle, wearing a matching yellow T-shirt.

In the constituency that I was studying in Samastipur district, I did encounter the local BJP candidate depending more on motorcycle rallies. These included 150-200 bikes with mostly young boys riding them enthusiastically. The JD(U) candidate also used motorcycle rallies, but was never directly seen in the company of the bikers, preferring to keep it as a supplementary tactic and not a main one. The BJP candidate, being quite young himself, used it often to effectively reach out to his constituents while campaigning. However, the might and aplomb which a bike rally of say 150-200 bikes causes in a rural area has its own repercussions, as I came to know in the course of my field work. "*Yeh sab dhool uda ke gaya abhi, fir aankhon mein dhool jhonk ke jayega!*" (They have gone after raising the dust here now, then they will throw the dust in our eyes by telling us lies), said Rambilas Rai, a JD(U) supporter as we were sitting and discussing Bihar politics at a roadside tea-stall in Samastipur immediately after a huge BJP bike rally had passed on that road.

Another JD(U) sympathiser told me that if upper caste boys take out aggressive bike rallies in Dalit and backward villages, then instead of giving a strong message it gives out a negative message and there occurs an anti-polarisation of the Dalit and backward voters. This effectively translates the positive *hawa* (air) into a negative *hawa* (hawa)! This might be the reason behind the NDA's decision to scale down their grand campaign by bringing down its campaigners from the comforts of their helicopters to the potholes of Bihar's roads, making its campaign more grounded in a literal sense. Whether this scaling down of the NDA campaign will prove to be an effective step or it will be too little too late, will be clear for everyone to see when the votes will be counted on the November 8. However, until then, what remains concealed within the confines of the Electronic Voting Machines along with the votes is also the secret of sustaining a successful campaign, which touches a chord with the voters in Bihar.

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