



THE HINDU CENTRE

for

Politics and Public Policy



Bihar Assembly Elections

From despair to hope to victory: How Nitish Kumar had his revenge

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Nov 23, 2015



Supporters of the Janata Dal (United) at the party office in Patna after the Grand Alliance won the Bihar Assembly elections, on November 8, 2015. File photo by:Ranjeet Kumar

In 2013, Nitish Kumar parted ways from an alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Narendra Modi, arguing that Modi's politics was at odds with India's constitutional vision of inclusion and egalitarianism. The results of the 2015 assembly election brought home the relevance of Kumar's words. Vidya Subrahmaniam writes on the political and social dynamics that resulted in Bihari voters turning down the BJP.

If I had to describe the Bihar assembly election in one word, I'd use the word, guts. Nitish Kumar's guts. The Bihar verdict is remarkable by any yardstick. Nitish Kumar and Lalu Prasad Yadav (inclusive of Rabri Devi's term) beat a quarter century of anti-incumbency. Between them the Yadav couple held the reins for 15 years and Kumar has been Chief Minister since 2005.

Add the Congress years to the combined incumbency of the Janata Dal (United) and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and their cumulative time in power would add up to more than 60 years - a point repeatedly made by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on his campaign. It is another matter that when Modi totted up Kumar's crimes, he forgot that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was in alliance with him until 2013. The BJP was with the Bihar Chief Minister for eight of his 10 years in office, which made the party an 80 per cent partner in his alleged omissions and commissions.

Modi turned out to have unwisely omitted the BJP's own contribution to the Nitish Kumar Government. Modi's taunts about the 60-year incumbency recoiled on him. The Mahagathbandhan (MGB) formed by the JD(U), RJD and the Congress not only overcame the humongous weight of its incumbency to win the election, it won a larger share of votes than the winning JD-(U)-BJP alliance of 2010. The MGB won 178 seats for 42 per cent against the JD(U)-BJP's 206 seats for 39 per cent.

The odds don't end here. Kumar and Yadav struck up a friendship that most judged as doomed – not simply because of their ruinous previous enmity but because structurally their constituencies were seen to be in conflict. Kumar and Yadav had similar ambitions and self-image; each saw himself as Bihar's pre-eminent leader which is why they broke up. Both competed for the Muslim vote and wanted sole leadership of the community. On the other hand, Kumar's core Kurmi vote was hostile to the Yadavs. Nor was the Congress a natural fit in this alliance as Kumar and Yadav, both products of the Jayaprakash Narayan movement, cut their teeth in anti-Congress politics. The widely shared pre-election opinion was that lack of chemistry among the constituencies would torpedo the MGB even if it had arithmetic on its side.

However, Kumar's high stakes gamble paid off. The major reason for this was his own hard work and the visible improvement in Bihar's social and economic indicators during his years in office. Yadav's iron-clad hold on his Muslim-Yadav constituency and Modi's declining appeal and his fostering of an environment that threatened minorities and Hindu backward segments contributed the rest.

Yet, this triumph goes all the way to that one moment when Kumar decided to split from the BJP. The JD(U)-BJP alliance endured for 17 years and had delivered the elusive Chief-ministerial chair to Kumar. However, the pact also became a gilded cage from which he could not escape. Indeed, the Bihar Chief Minister seemed to hover on the brink forever, not having the courage to break free. Ahead of the 2009 general election, Kumar had a flaming row with the BJP over what he saw as Modi's interference in Bihar. And things came to such a pass that a separation seemed inevitable.

Modi had long been the fly in the ointment in Kumar's relationship with the BJP. Undoubtedly, this can be seen as posturing. For Kumar stayed with the BJP through the horrific 2002 anti-Muslim violence in Gujarat. Secondly, he differentiated between Modi and the BJP, choosing to see only the former as communal. Like many of the BJP's former allies, Kumar gave an exalted place to Atal Bihari Vajpayee and came around to accepting Lal Krishna Advani as his successor. This was a flawed and problematic approach because Modi, Vajpayee and Advani are all *swayamsevaks* committed to Hindutva and inseparably linked to the virulently right wing Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. Vajpayee memorably authored the essay "The Sangh is my soul" and was a student of class X when he penned the poem, *Hindu Tan Man*, *Hindu Jeevan* (I'm a Hindu in body and mind and my life is of a Hindu). History of course bears witness to the death and devastation that Advani's Ram rath yatra left behind.

Unarguably, though, Modi is the most sectarian face of the BJP. And Kumar, who artfully juggled two personas, nursing the Muslim constituency on the one hand and 'living in' with the BJP on the other, drew the line at Modi.

As long as Modi was a regional leader confined to Gujarat, Kumar did not have overt problems with him. Because within Bihar, Kumar had kept the BJP under his thumb. His message seemed to be that though in alliance with the BJP, he would never give up on his secular convictions.

This delicate balance came apart when Modi's ambitions began to soar. If Kumar disliked and resented Modi, the latter in turn saw Kumar as a challenge to his growing clout and aspirations. But his way of dealing with Kumar was to provoke and needle him. Sparks flew when the secular Kumar and the sectarian Modi came face to face.

Sankarshan Thakur writes in his book, *The Brothers Bihari*, that Kumar's aversion to Modi increased manifold after the latter deliberately compromised the Bihar Chief Minister by forcing himself into a photo-op with him. The occasion was a BJP rally held in Ludhiana ahead of the 2009 general election. To quote Thakur: "He (Kumar) had barely set foot on the crowded stage when Narendra Modi, having quickmarched from the other end, took his hand and held it aloft for the crowd to see. A cheer went up that must have buzzed like a fly in Nitish's ears. Cameras popped and Nitish must have felt like he was being shot. It was over in a trice. Before Nitish could recover his wits, Modi had left him and retreated to his appointed place on the dais..."

The next morning's newspapers predictably flashed this picture, leaving Kumar foaming at the mouth but unable to deny what the photograph showed. Despite this 'deception', Kumar did not exit the BJP alliance, though his counterpart in Orissa, and a fellow member of the National Democratic Alliance, Naveen Patnaik, had set an example by doing so on the eve of the 2009 general election.

The BJP-Biju Janata Dal alliance had been dazzlingly successful. Between 1998 and 2009, the alliance won two state elections in a row besides picking up the majority of seats in three consecutive elections to the Lok Sabha. The alliance had reduced the once dominant Congress to a marginal player. So to most onlookers, Patnaik's daring had seemed suicidal. But Patnaik proved that voters respected action grounded in principles. In the 2009 election, held simultaneously to the Lok Sabha and the assembly, the BJD increased its vote share by 7 percentage points in the Lok Sabha and by over 11 percentage points in the assembly. In terms of seats too, the BJD swept the elections, leaving its former ally with no seat in the Lok Sabha and only 7 in the assembly.

Kumar obviously had his own difficult background to consider. Unlike Patnaik who has never tasted failure in politics, Kumar had had a long, tiring wait to become the Chief Minister. In 2000, he was in office for all of nine days, not being able to prove his majority. Around this time, Kumar's opponents began to joke about his jinxed fate. An aide of Lalu Yadav would fondly tell journalists that he had read Kumar's horoscope and he saw no sign of fame or fortune there. The high office eluded Kumar even after the landmark February 2005 election, which saw the Lalu Yadav -Rabri Devi twosome exit the scene after holding sway for 15 long years.

So clearly Kumar's was a risk-averse position: if he fought the election on his own, he could lose the Chief Ministership which had come to him after a gruelling struggle. Thus Kumar embodied two opposite impulses: his happy cohabitation with the BJP and his abhorrence of Modi. In June 2010, Modi once again provoked Kumar by making an unsolicited contribution of Rs. 5 crore towards flood relief in Bihar. Not only this, he had his party plaster Patna with posters announcing this grand deed.

The appearance of the posters coincided with the BJP's decision to hold its national executive meet in Patna. Kumar was not in Patna at the time, and unaware of Modi's mischief, he had invited the BJP delegation for a dinner at home. As Thakur notes in his book, "When the morning's papers were brought to Nitish the next day, what he saw left him so irate he couldn't hold his cup of tea straight. Full-page advertisements had appeared in two of

Patna's largest circulated Hindi dailies – *Jagaran* and *Hindustan* – thanking Narendra Modi for the Rs. 5 crore flood relief money. “

To no one's surprise, Kumar cancelled the dinner invite and returned the Rs. 5 crore cheque, setting the stage for what appeared to be his certain exit from the alliance. But he pulled back from the brink once again to predictable lampooning of his 'bravado' in newspaper columns. The impression at this point was that Kumar was all sound effects and nothing more ¹ .

Nonetheless, Modi's widening ambitions were soon to force Kumar's hand. The BJP, pushed by the RSS, looked set to nominate Modi as its Prime Ministerial candidate. The process was a gradual one, and Kumar had hoped against hope that the BJP would eventually weigh against going with Modi deterred by his track record of arrogance and authoritarianism. Unfortunately for Kumar, the Sangh had concluded that Modi was the BJP's best bet in the 2014 general election.

The break came on June 17, 2013, two months before Modi officially became the BJP's Prime-ministerial candidate. Having taken the decision, Kumar did not once look back though the prevailing view at the time was that he had shot himself in the foot. Addressing the Bihar assembly soon after calling off the alliance, Kumar presented the rupture as a clash of ideas, arguing that Modi's vision of India was an assault on the Constitutional values of pluralism, inclusion and egalitarianism.

The Hindu commented thus in its editorial: “In a reasoned speech that deliberately transcended the secular-communal debate, he pitched into Narendra Modi, accusing him of envisioning a model of India that conflicted with the egalitarian, inclusive spirit of the Constitution. The picture he painted of the Gujarat Chief Minister was of a man driven by corporate interests, focused on the well-being of the already well-to-do. Mr. Kumar said while Gujarat had always been an economic and corporate success, Bihar had done the impossible in lifting the poorest of the poor from poverty. The theme of Mr. Kumar's speech was that he was not in a personality clash with Mr. Modi but was fighting him for the survival of India.”

Kumar spoke as if a dam had burst. He named no names but it was clear who the object of his scorn was: “We said the person who leads the country should be secular, should have a vision of inclusive growth. This country was constituted under a Constitution whose basic values, egalitarianism, pluralism and inclusiveness, together form what we call *Bharat ka darshan* or the idea of India. The question before us is: will the constitutional vision triumph or will we surrender to the ideology of division and polarisation? But let me promise you: we will never allow the politics of division to destroy this country. The people of this country will not tolerate it.

“There is only one idea that can go forward in this country and that is the Idea of India. If the other vision succeeds, the country will disintegrate and the Idea of India will collapse. India cannot be destroyed; we will not allow it to be destroyed.”

Not many took Kumar's demagoguery seriously. Among the English language newspapers, only *The Hindu* translated his full speech, giving the text pride of place on its op-ed page. There was a reason for the lack of applause for Kumar. The media lens was trained on Modi, the man of the moment. There was an aura around Modi that was heightened by his own awareness of it. He had crowds panting after him wherever he went – within the BJP his mere appearance set off a commotion, with the rank and file giving him a standing ovation; on college campuses and at industry meets, people stampeded to meet him.

The Bihar Chief Minister was completely overshadowed by his *bête noir*. I remember attending a lecture by Kumar in Delhi in the days that his Gujarat counterpart was attracting iconic crowds. Expecting a rush at the venue, the organisers had installed closed circuit TV screens at various points. To the Bihar Chief Minister's mortification, the hall was almost empty though he delivered a rousing speech centred on his ideas and values as opposed to those of Modi.

This is where Kumar's guts comes in. He took on Modi at a time the latter was at his peak popularity. The post-break up speech he delivered to the assembly was stunningly courageous because to oppose Modi at the time and so openly was to risk antagonising not just the middle class and intelligentsia that once feted Kumar but his own voters, many of whom were swept off their feet by the Modi promise and charisma. That this was so was borne out by the JD(U)'s performance in the 2014 general election. The JD(U) won only two of 40 Lok Sabha seats from Bihar.

The 2014 general election was a personal blow to Kumar with Modi singlehandedly defeating him on his own turf. Modi showed that he didn't need the crutch of an alliance with the JD(U). Fighting on its own, the BJP, which had for 17 years been the junior partner in the alliance, decimated the Kumar-led JD(U) and Lalu Yadav's RJD. The sceptics seemed to have won the day. Worse things followed when Kumar propped up Jiten Ram Manjhi as Chief Minister, mistaking that to be a grand gesture towards the Mahadalit community. As often happens in such a condescending arrangement, Manjhi soon began to assert himself. The tussle climaxed in Kumar ousting Manjhi to return as Bihar's Chief Minister.

For all outward appearances, Kumar had finished himself. His attempts to ingratiate himself with the Madadalits, a constituency he had assiduously built, had boomeranged on him. He looked certain to pay a price for the summary removal of a Mahadalit Chief Minister.

Two things happened that acted as a combined game-changer in the 2015 assembly election. First, in a completely counterintuitive move, Kumar reached out to Lalu Yadav, once his closest friend but a bitter rival since last many years. With the Congress joining in, the MGB began to take shape. The strategy was to present a combined opposition to Modi. Secondly, and coinciding with the emergence of the MGB, was the gradual erosion in Modi's popular appeal. In February 2015, only months after Modi's election as Prime Minister, the Modi-led BJP was trounced in the Delhi assembly election by the Arvind Kejriwal-led Aam Aadmi party.

Modi's frequent and apparently successful visits abroad appeared to inversely affect his popularity at home. He was not able to walk the talk. Indeed, if the Modi of 2014 made speeches that stirred the young and old alike, the same speeches began to grate in the absence of actual and visible delivery of promises. Increasingly, Modi's image was of a man who was all words and little more.

When the MGB pulled off a superlative victory, the BJP immediately dismissed it as a triumph of arithmetic. But arithmetic, as has been noted by analysts, cannot work without chemistry. The constituencies of the MGB were mutually incompatible. However, when the time arrived, the MGB members seamlessly transferred votes to one another. The BJP alliance, on the other hand, was riven with rivalries with no sign of the chemistry that brilliantly held the NDA together in 2014.

So Kumar had the last victory. His 'Idea of India' speech, which had few takers in 2013, proved spectacularly effective in 2015. Kumar spoke of development and inclusion while a desperate Modi became progressively more communal. He targeted the minorities, made beef-eating an issue, and his acolyte and the BJP chief Amit Shah,

spoke of crackers going off in Pakistan in the event of an MGB victory. The RSS muddied the matters further by proposing a review of affirmative action.

"Will you celebrate a double Diwali?"

Prime Minister Narendra Modi taunted and mocked the Mahaghatbandhan only to have his words recoil on him.

Heard in retrospect, Narendra Modi's 2015 election speeches in Bihar have an ironic ring to them. In the aftermath of the drubbing the National Democratic Alliance received on verdict day, the Prime Minister comes off sounding as if he is mocking himself.

On November 1, just a week before the results, Modi told crowds in Forbesganj that the Bihar outcome would prove all calculations wrong and would be so emphatic that it would be remembered as a turning point in the way Indian States voted.

He was right – except it was the Mahaghatbandhan (MGB) that proved all punditry as well as opinion and exit polls wrong by comprehensively defeating the Modi-led NDA. The election might prove to be a turning point too – not for reasons Modi cited but in triggering Mahaghatbandhan-like experiments in other States.

Modi said Bihar's voters were watching the campaign minutely because this election was about 'development'. Again Modi turned out to have spoken the truth. The people of Bihar voted for development – but it was for a more genteel, everyday kind of development that Nitish Kumar had brought about by reaching electricity to rural homes, incentivising girl child education and providing a safer environment for urban women.

In an October 12, 2015 article in The Mint newspaper, titled, 'How Bihar has fared under Nitish Kumar,' ¹Manas Chakravarty described as "commendable" the State's development under Kumar. Chakravarty presented six charts that showed that while Bihar continued to be among India's poorest States, the last decade had been one of improvement in all indicators for the State - not just measured by its own previously dismal record but even compared to other States.

Significantly, Chakravarty noted that the Bihar government's development spending had been focused on the social sector and capital expenditure.

A 2012 report of the Institute of Human Development, sponsored by the United Nations Development Programme, expressed cautious optimism for Bihar's future. ²

To quote:

"There is widespread perception of improvements in income, employment and living conditions over the last decade, similar for all caste and class groups except for housing where the sense of improvement is stronger among better off groups. The perception of this improvement is much stronger than 10 years ago, and especially compared with the early 1980s when the majority of people perceived deterioration rather than improvement. There is much less agreement about improvements in health conditions, reported negatively by a substantial minority.

“Some innovative programmes for girls have worked rather well, although still the coverage is small because of their introduction in recent years. In particular the girls’ cycle scheme seems to have helped in increasing the enrolment of girls in secondary schools.

“There has been considerable expansion in literacy over the years with now over 60 per cent of the population being literate, although Bihar still remains the least literate State in the country. School infrastructure has expanded considerably with all villages (except one) having a primary school. The enrolments in lower grades for both boys and girls have increased to significantly high levels. Consequently, literacy rates of the lower age groups have sharply improved even for backward castes, lower classes and women.”

In all his rallies, Modi threw questions at his audience, forcing them to give the answers he wanted. This Q & A format had worked brilliantly in the 2014 general election. He thundered and they roared back. But in the State election, the same format looked frayed from overuse and the response was invariably tepid. For instance, Modi would remind people of Kumar’s promise that he would bring electricity to rural homes failing which he would not campaign in the State election. “*Bijli Aayee? Bijli Aayee?*” (Did you get electricity?), Modi would ask in a half-mocking, half- theatrical style, that has come to be identified with him.. But despite the coaxing and cues, the audience would either not respond or reply with a feeble “no”.

In truth, the electricity situation in Bihar had improved under the Kumar Government.

A November 3, 2015 pre-result report in The Financial Express argued that regardless of which way the verdict went, Bihar’s achievements under Kumar would remain noteworthy: [3](#)

“Results of the fiercely fought Assembly elections in Bihar will be out on November 8. Whatever that may be, it can’t be gainsaid that with Nitish Kumar at the helm, the State, for long synonymous with backwardness and maladministration, has forged ahead. (However) Under Kumar’s leadership, the State has seen stronger GDP growth; it has consistently beaten national growth in more recent years, more immune than the nation as a whole to the persistent demand slump in the post-global crisis period. While physical and social infrastructure improvement has lately been visible, the State’s power deficit has reduced sharply in the last two years as the peak availability of power has grown from 1,500 MW in 2010 to about 2,700 MW now.

“Of course, per capita electricity consumption remains much lower at 144 kWh compared to the national average of 927 kWh, underlining the need for accelerated capacity augmentation. Though the State’s network of national and State highways have significantly expanded, it continues to be well below national average at 175 km per lakh population compared with national average of 388 km. Despite such weak physical infrastructure, the State has shown some progress in social indicators. There’s a steady decline in infant mortality rate, which is now almost in line with the national average and maternal mortality ratio too has declined considerably, although it still needs to catch with the pan-India average...”

Unsurprisingly, pre-election polls and surveys, though they fluffed the final results, uniformly reported high appreciation for Kumar who was also most people’s choice for Chief Minister. Modi of course failed completely to see which way the wind was blowing. A November 10, 2015 report based on post-poll surveys by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and featured in The Indian Express captured this failure [4](#). Headlined “Voters had better image of Bihar than Modi painted,” the report attributed the MGB’s victory to a

combination of development delivery, Kumar's image and chemistry among the MGB allies. The report said Modi continued to be popular in Bihar but "... the outcome has been in spite of Modi's popularity and that could happen only because Nitish and his GA met Modi halfway through on Modi's own turf — governance and development."

Further:

"Modi did everything initially to project BJP as a party of promise and hope. That line did not work much. Both in subjective terms — voter perceptions — and in terms of a more formal economic and performance-related data, the 10 years of Nitish government were years of performance fuelling more expectations. To the question whether their household economic condition has improved or deteriorated during last five years, nearly two-thirds of the respondents said it had improved while less than one in every ten said it had deteriorated (with another one-fourth saying that it remained the same). This positive assessment is further underscored by the fact that against one in every ten respondents who said that there was "no development at all" in last five years, one in every four felt that there was a "lot of development."

"And then there is the perception also that Bihar is doing well. In 2014, much was said about aspirations. Generating aspirations and an expectation that those aspirations would be fulfilled is an important part of the politics of development. How does Nitish fare on this aspect? Asked to place Bihar on a ladder of 1 to 10 where 10 represents least developed States and 1 represents most developed States, a large number of Bihar's voters saw Bihar moving clearly towards the category of developed States — a large number of respondents saw Bihar either on fifth step or above that."

In other words, Modi got it completely wrong when he sold himself as a man of 'development' as against the MGB which he said remained stuck on caste and communal issues. From a Bihar perspective, the vikas purush (development man) was Nitish Kumar.

If anyone consciously brought caste and communalism into the campaign, it was Modi and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat asked for a review of affirmative action to sharp reaction from Kumar and Lalu Prasad. It was the most impolitic thing to say in the middle of elections and at that about a State that needed affirmative action for uplift. Modi attempted to neutralise Bhagwat by communalising quota benefits. He accused Kumar of wanting to slice off reservation from Dalits and OBCs and hand it over to minorities. "*Nitishji, Laluji Jawab do, jawab do,*" (Nitish and Lalu answer me) he said.

When this failed, he brought cow and beef into the campaign. Speaking in Begusarai on October 8, he said that in Gujarat people worshipped the cow and that is how it had become India's top State in milk production. But in Bihar, Lalu Yadav had insulted his own people, the Yadhuvanshis (Lord Krishna is believed to have been a Yadhuvanshi or Yadav) by suggesting that they ate "something" distasteful to them. "*Woh kya khaate hain? (what do they eat?), Laluji mere Yadhuvanshiyon ka aisa apmaan mat karo*" (Laluji don't insult my Yadhuvanshis). Anything Modi said worked inversely to the MGB's advantage. Addressing a rally in Purnea on November 2, he surveyed the crowds and said they had come in such large numbers from a district which until recently had been "naxal-affected". It obviously did not strike the Prime Minister that he was suggesting an improvement in the "naxal" situation which was actually a compliment to Kumar.

Modi's taunts and assumptions backfired on him. In Forbesganj, he predicted that voters would punish those seen as 'Arrogant': "*Bhaiyion Aur Bahnon, Bihar Ke Log Ahankaar Sahan Nahi Karte*" (My Brothers and Sisters, the people of Bihar do not tolerate arrogance).

Well, the people of Bihar did punish those they saw as arrogant.

In the Purnea rally, he declared that this time Bihar would celebrate a double Diwali. One on November 8, the day of results, and another three days later on actual Diwali day.

"Will you celebrate two Diwalis or not?" he asked. It was indeed a double Diwali but for the MGB.

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4. ^ The Financial Express. 2015. Bihar Assembly elections: [Will electricity power Nitish Kumar?](#) November 3. Last Accessed November 21, 2015.

The people of Bihar showed which vision of India they wanted by voting with their feet.

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1. ^ Subrahmaniam, Vidya (2010) [Nitish Kumar's elusive 'Patnaik' moment](#), *The Hindu*, July 7. Last accessed: November 23, 2015.
(This article was last updated on November 26, 2015, incorporating additional material and correcting typographical errors.)

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