**When lonely Lalu misses gentleman Sonia,and a Muslim calls Nitish sher ka bachcha | The Indian Express**

Related. Until the very untimely death of her husband (Digvijay Singh of the JD-U),Putul Kumari Singh was just a traditional Thakur wife. But there was also an inevitability to her being pitchforked into politics,as her husbands successor,and now she is contesting as an independent in the Lok Sabha by-election at Banka which,she tells you,has been ranked the third most backward district in India. And you can see some evidence of that as you drive so gratefully into the abandoned cinema hall,now converted into some kind of election office. Gratefully,because she has offered to feed us all lunch,a luxury in a countryside where dhaba entrepreneurship has not yet caught up with the new highways. She went to Delhis Hans Raj College,says she knows nothing about politics,and could she rather answer our questions in Hindi? But as conversation picks up,you figure she has no problem with either the English language or politics. She is in it,she says,only because of dada,as her husband was popularly known. And it is widespread affection for him,despite his feudal origins in parts where zamindari still reigns,that makes her contest a cakewalk. She talks about what her late husband did for the poor,but also graciously acknowledges Nitishs wisdom. People talk only of the roads,she says,but you have to go deep into the villages to see the value of small bridges and culverts he has built all over a state that becomes an archipelago every monsoon. In the past,people had no way of taking a sick person or a woman in labour to a hospital in the monsoon. Now that is changing,and people are happy. Chatting with her and her supporters,many of them incorrigible Lohiaites and JNU alumni like their dada,you think about the irony of Digvijay and now his Rani sahiba defying feudalism with their stone-poor voters. Povertarians and their maths. Digvijay left Banka early to study at JNU where socialism is the default syllabus. He ended up a Lohiaite and a minister. He was chosen to be minister-in-waiting for Musharraf when he came for the Agra summit and would regale you with accounts of their conversations. One that sticks to my memory: driving past central Delhis Tees January Marg,Musharraf asked him why did it have such an unusual name. Because Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated here on this date,in that building, Digvijay said,pointing to Birla House. A president of Pakistan,one who rose to be its chief of staff through the finest training colleges,staff college,NDC,etc,etc,does not even know simple facts about the subcontinents history? And here a feudal from Indias third most backward district reached JNU to become a socialist and is the democratic link between Bharat and India. That should teach us a little humility and gratitude the next time we begin to badmouth our politics. His followers,working with Putul,are still wedded to their original ideology. Nitish,they say,has done well so far,but will fail in the long run. Why? Because,his model of fighting poverty is that of Dr Manmohan Singh,with growth and investment,aur Bihar mein,bade bhai,yeh nahin chalega… You soon get a chance to put that to the Writings on the Wall test. At Sangrampur,a picturesque,winding 40-odd km drive from Banka,at a halwai shop called Gupta Hotel where flies in millions endorse the quality of mithai,I conduct a quick census of how many of the 29 people hanging around there rickshaw-pullers and casual labourers lounging on the rickshaws while they wait for work have cellphones. Can you guess the result? All 29. Now,all of them are very very poor people,all of them could do with better nourishment. But starving they arent. And while they will fall below any reasonably defined poverty line,they are not living on less than Rs 20 a day,as many of our Great Establishment Povertarians claim 83.6 crore Indians do. In fact,if you see this purely anecdotal score of 29 out of 29 in such a poor region,the telecom industrys figure of 75 crore phones looks totally real. So where are the 80 per cent Indians living on less than Rs 20 a day? The wisdom thrown up by the cellphone census is affirmed later as we stop at an IndianOil petrol pump near the Barauni refinery that has a well-stocked grocery store which even sells oodles of branded ice-cream. I stand in the queue to pay,behind four customers who do not look like they would come to buy ice-cream,and they havent. Each one,a local labourer or casual worker,has come to buy recharge for his mobile phone prepaid card. Banka is very very poor,for sure. Parts of the district,particularly those bordering Jharkhand,we are told,are Naxal-infested. We drive all the way up to the bazaar of Katoria,the heart of a Scheduled Tribe constituency,and ask if anybody had seen a Maoist. At many villages on the way back,notably Belhar,allegedly deeper in Naxal zone,some of us got desperate enough to conduct almost a straw poll. Maoists,you want to see? Weve heard there are some in tribal villages. But just the landscape on the way back compensates you for not seeing any Naxals. As the road winds through dried watercourses and degraded forest,you see the most stunning sunset in a sky that is a million shades of crimson,over a shallow but sprawling reservoir created by a British-built dam. This water gives this district its only privilege: irrigation. Which,in turn,gives it the one thing it is proud of,its wonderfully fragrant katrani rice,a small-grain,sweet cousin of the basmati family. I brought home some and it is delicious. Somebody at Katoria says they want to apply for a GI certification. Dreams of GI certification in Banka,one of Indias poorest districts,where,if you follow the NAC-Povertarian definition,100 per cent should be living at less than ten rupees a day? You have to admit even Bharat is changing. How Rahuls Congresss got talent has flopped. Most Indian cities are now in a state of deep rot,with garbage spilling into streets,stray cattle,encroachments and killer smoke from gen-sets. But,as you would expect,Bhagalpur could be one of the worst,despite the Ganga in such a vast expanse,with a tourist bounty of dolphins,and the riches traditionally generated by its tassar silk weavers. Two generations of Indians identify this unfortunate town with the blindings of petty but chronic criminals by its police,originally exposed by this newspaper in 1980. But you see change in Bhagalpur too. There are a couple of mini-malls and showrooms,and,right in front of our hotel,in a street packed with pavement shopkeepers by day and herds of amorous cows and the biggest bulls (maybe Mumbais brokers should hire them) by night,you see a brand new shop selling equities,mutual funds,derivatives,fixed deposits,commodities. You also know you are not far from Jharkhand when you see Dhoni smiling down at you from every other hoarding. Seems he can convince people here to buy anything. I counted at least six: apartments,cement,saria (iron rods),suiting,satellite TV and,inevitably,mobile phones. Dhonis rising stock,meanwhile,is only matched by the fall from grace of the Bihari superstar,Lalu. At his meeting in Munger,his jokes,including the familiar Lalu-aloo ones,draw a groan. He does draw a crowd,but there is no electricity,as in much of the state he ran into the ground for 18 years. As his helicopter departs,Mohammed Anwar Hussain,a young Urdu teacher in a college in nearby Ghazipur,walks along with me and asks if we are from the media (amazing how no one says journalist or patrakar any more). Lalu kehte hain,hum khayenge bhaat-aloo,aapko khayega mota bhaalu, he,a three-time Lalu voter,says,disdain spilling out from this really awful rhyme scheme. But arent you afraid of the BJP? I ask. Why? We have been fine for five years under Nitish. And look at this sher ka bachcha. He has kept Modi out of Bihar. Has anybody ever been able to keep Modi out of an entire election campaign? Not all Muslims would vote for Nitish,for sure. But he may have done just enough to rock the M in Lalus winning M-Y (Muslim-Yadav) formula. Lalu,of course,would not agree. But the usual bluster is gone. Sarkar to jod-tod ke hamaari hi banegi, he taps me on the arm and whispers,almost apologetically,after he has fed us a sizeable high tea. Indian politicians minds,actually,are quite easy to read when they are in trouble. For example,when a leader starts discussing his strategic errors in the middle of a campaign,you know he thinks his time is up. Lalu says his big mistake was insisting on the imposition of presidents rule after Nitish failed to secure a vote of confidence in the first,inconclusive election of 2005. Then,he would imply,Buta Singh as governor messed up everything. If only I had listened to Soniaji, he says. She pleaded so many times with me not to insist on presidents rule,but I did not listen. And then he tells you what he is missing,the comforting embrace of the Congress party,a share of power at the Centre. Soniaji,hum aapse kehte hain,is very good,noble,gentleman lady. Humne unki nahin suni. Of course,his other regret is alienating the upper castes. I was never against them. I only talk. Lalu is like the two-headed snake. He only hisses,but cannot bite, he says,and promises that the next time he comes to power,he will go out of his way to make up to the upper castes. When that will happen,who knows. But one thing you can say for sure,Lalu himself will be the most surprised if it were to happen this time. One look at his face,and you know he has read the writing on the wall. And while he misses the Congress,you wonder if the feeling will be mutual. Sonia and Rahul both draw much better crowds than you have seen at Congress rallies in the past in Bihar,but it is difficult to see these translating into votes,as their message of Nitishs ineptitude and corruption,or hypocrisy on communalism,does not yet wash. At Sonias really large rally at Begusarai,a group of schoolboys in uniform snigger as they mimic her delivery of the word chintajanak with one vowel compressed and the other stretched. But her rapidly-improving Hindi diction is not the problem. The problem could,in fact,be the kind of talent Rahuls hunt has thrown up,at least in Bihar. His newly-elected Youth Congress chief Lallan Kumar was caught that very morning in an EC raid with nearly Rs 6 lakh in cash,and was now a most disastrous crowd-warmer until Sonia arrived. Look at Nitishs raj, he said,where milk has dried up in all of Bihars mothers breasts,but ministers are feeding milk to their dogs in Patna. Now,you may love or hate dogs,but if this is the kind of genius Rahuls talent-hunt is finding,you might be better off even with the idiots of the past. The quiet smile on Nitishs face. The man smiling through all of this is one you rarely ever see smiling. Or frowning,or displaying any emotion at all. But Nitish Kumar thinks he has got it in the bag. We tell him Lalu tells us even JD-U MPs are not campaigning for him. Our party, he says,smirking for once,has the most remarkable MPs. And goes on to repeat what Lalu had just told us,that one has taken a ticket from Lalu for his wife,the other for his brother. But he is understadedly nonchalant. He gets chirpy only when talking of his bicycle scheme and underlines the fact that he did not let his government buy these but gave Rs 2,000 to each student to buy one,thereby making it a direct cash transfer. His biggest challenge now is electricity. By the way,do you know how much electricity Bihar consumes? Just 900 megawatts,less than what our suburb of Gurgaon burns. And how much power does Bihar produce? Just about 150 megawatts. On a flight to Mumbai last week,BJP President Nitin Gadkari,on his way back from Bihar,tells me how embarrassed he is to realise that his own companys power generation is more than that of the entire state of Bihar. Nitish also has complaints about the Centre. He respects the prime minister,he says,and finds,sometimes,a meeting with him is like a UPSC interview. The PM sounds like he means well,but Bihar is squeezed in every way possible,from coal linkages (none in the Eleventh Plan) to disbursals under Central schemes. But he has the air of somebody who does not worry much about anything for now,or for that matter,about his BJP allies. At a very generous dinner of ghee-soaked Bihari litti at the home of the BJPs very familiar and friendly spokesman Ravi Shankar Prasad,he arrives and sits quietly,unobtrusively. Almost on cue,BJPs ever-sulking state president C.P. Thakur tiptoes out,without a hi or bye. The only BJP man Nitish has time for is Deputy Chief Minister Sushil Kumar Modi and,for his national ally,it is good enough that the two get along. It knows the value of this alliance,and that is the reason they have indulged Nitish in a way you would never expect the Congress to indulge a regional ally. They have agreed to keep Narendra Modi out of the campaign. Would the Congress ever agree to keep a Gandhi out of a state campaign just to please a regional ally,howsoever important? Now you know why the Congresss second hope,that,even if Nitish wins a big one here,he might be a prospective ally for the future,is premature. Postscript: I must conclude any notes from the road,as usual,with something interesting and colourful I spotted on a wall. This time,it was Kids Conventt at Rupasu on N.H. 31,and youd hope those kids would learn to spell somehow. And,of course,a liquor shop near Barauni named Pyaasa Sawan (the thirsty monsoon). Now doesnt that sound like fun?