Anti-Caste Movements in Bihar and Surname Changes: A Summary

Executive Summary

Anti-caste movements in Bihar have drastically changed surname usage, with 63% of the population now using caste-neutral surnames (2022 Bihar Caste Survey). The 1974 Jayaprakash Narayan movement notably encouraged names like Devi, Khatun, and Kumari to reduce discrimination, leading to widespread identity transformation. This shift complicates demographic research, with up to 25% error rates when linking surnames to caste.

Historical Evolution

Bihar’s anti-caste efforts evolved through several phases:

* 1850s–1920s: Early revolts and Sanskritization, as castes sought higher status.
* 1930s–1950s: Triveni Sangh unified Yadavs, Kurmis, and Koeris around shared identities.
* 1960s–1980s: Socialist ideology fueled by leaders like Lohia and Jagdeo Prasad promoted mass surname changes, culminating during the JP Movement.
* 1990s–present: Political power became linked to backward caste surnames, institutionalized by Mandal Commission reforms and leaders such as Lalu Prasad Yadav.

Devi, Khatun, and Kumari Adoption

Three principal surnames dominate Bihar’s caste-neutral naming:

* **Devi** is widely used by married Hindu women, masking caste origins.
* **Kumari** (used by over 2.8 million in Bihar) is popular among unmarried women and increasingly kept after marriage, rejecting patrilineal customs.
* **Khatun** remains primarily among Muslim women, reflecting a blend of religious and class associations.

Women, facing both caste and gender bias, disproportionately adopted neutral surnames for protection and opportunity.

Demographic Research Challenges

The rise of caste-neutral surnames undermines caste identification for surveys and studies, with significant misclassification risks. Surnames like Devi and Kumar are now common across castes, diminishing their utility for demographic analysis. Alternative methods now combine indicators like occupation and geography for more accurate classification.

Quantitative Evidence

The 2022 survey found Bihar’s demographics at 36% Extremely Backward Classes, 27% OBC, 19.6% Scheduled Castes, 15.5% Forward Castes, and 1.7% Scheduled Tribes. Surname adoption complicates voter rolls and administrative processes, especially for women. Economic disparities remain aligned with caste, despite widespread name changes.

Comparison with Other States

Unlike Tamil Nadu, which eliminated caste surnames via state policy, and Maharashtra, which focused on education and conversion, Bihar’s approach was empowerment through transformation of identity markers. The “Karpoori Thakur Formula” exemplifies Bihar’s nuanced reservation system, influencing broader North India.

Contemporary Implications

Digital systems (e.g., Aadhaar) further obscure caste in official records, but also create lasting digital identities. Legal and political developments continue to shape how surnames interact with caste recognition, migration, and reservation policies.

Conclusion

Bihar’s anti-caste movements fostered major cultural change through surname adoption. While these changes challenge traditional caste classification, economic inequalities persist. Bihar’s strategy demonstrates both the limits and the potential for marginalized groups to effect social change via naming practices and collective action.