

# CASTE DYNAMICS AND POLITICAL PROCESS IN BIHAR

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*Over last six decades, politics in Bihar has undergone a tremendous change. This change is often attributed to deeper structural cleavages along the axis of castes, although little, if any, attempt has been done to support or contest such oversimplified formulations with theoretical and empirical underpinnings. Even if some studies have tried to use empirical evidence, the analytical domain remains too narrow to understand larger socio-political reality in the state. This paper attempts to fill the gaps by going beyond overly generalised notions of caste induced politics. It is argued in this paper that the politics of Bihar has, indeed, been informed by dynamics of social relations chiefly manifested in assertion of caste identity, but it is not as simple as it appears to be, for the dynamics of caste and political preference operate in multiple layers of socio-political structures and get influenced by processes that are multi-dimensional.*

## INTRODUCTION

The worldview of society and politics in Bihar is essentially about castes, which are in constant conflicts for social dominance and political power. Observers of Bihar tend to see socio-political division along forward-backward axis and the political development into two straight-jacketed phases, that is, pre and post 1990s. The 1990s marked out complete breakdown of the Congress System in the state on the one hand and witnessed major transformation in the social basis of political power on the other.<sup>1</sup> There are many explanations to this tectonic shift in social bases of political power. Some observers hold both the processes complementary to each other, while others argue that it was less about internal contradictions in the Congress Party but more about rising caste consciousness amongst the numerically strong backward castes and Dalits against the forward castes. However, it is generally argued that the political mobilisation of backward castes and creation of forward-backward axis to contest for power was a result of marginalisation of these castes within the Congress Party, which was dominated by

upper castes, and the reluctance of Congress leaders to share power with the numerically strong backward castes along with the Dalits [Frankel, 1989; Jafferlot, 2003]. In other words, the politics that followed since 1990 is largely the politics of reassertion and reaffirmation of old caste cleavages, deepened further to capture political power. People now tended to vote more for identity (of caste) than for non-parochial issues such as good governance, improvement in the material conditions of people, betterment of and universal access to health and educational facilities and universal provisions of basic amenities. However, these propositions remain largely unsubstantiated. There is little, if any, empirical evidence in the existing body of literature to support or contest such an argument. Even if some studies have tried to use empirical evidence, they have used it so poorly that they contribute virtually nothing to our understanding of larger socio-political reality in the state. The analytical domain too remains very narrow. As a result, the reasoning that the people of Bihar, as in many other states of the Hindi Heartland, now vote only on caste lines, or only as castes as an

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expression of larger social realities, which gets reflected and reinforced in the form of political cleavages, remains simplistic.

This paper attempts to go beyond existing literature and explores multiple layers of voting behaviour and to interrogate the prevailing understanding of caste consciousness and political change in Bihar. The first section of the paper presents an overview of political demography of Bihar in order to provide an understanding of the dynamics that have an important bearing on electoral politics. The following section discusses, though in brief, political history of Bihar since Independence. This section focuses on political processes unfolded during last six decades, which helps understand the context of political transformation in Bihar. Third section presents an analysis of voting behaviour and brings caste dynamics of voting in sharp focus with the help of time series<sup>2</sup> data from the CSDS Data Archive. This section also tries to account for fall of RJD from power. Fourth and final section summarises the study and presents broader conclusions.

### I. POLITICAL DEMOGRAPHY OF BIHAR

A number of scholarly studies have established that the social context in which voters live shapes their electoral behaviour and political preferences. Social class, gender, race, religion and other social identities have been found to affect electoral behaviour of the voters in both old and new democracies [Anderson and Heath 2003, Pp. 301-27; Butler and Stokes, 1974; Kelley and McAllister, 1985; Lipset and Rokkan, 1967, Pp. 1-64.; Hout, et al. 1999, Pp. 83-96]. The underlying assumption for this relationship is that the differences in social positions are associated with different concerns that in turn encourage support for parties that represent these concerns [Kelley and Evans, 1995, Pp. 157-178; Weakliem, 1993, Pp. 382-397]. Thus electoral politics of a given political unit (nation or its parts) in a given point of time is assumed to reflect social

dynamics of that unit and time. Seen in this context, it would be worthwhile to cast a glance at the political demography of Bihar.

Bihar, as it stands today,<sup>3</sup> accounts for about 8.7 per cent of total population of the country and ranks third among the states of India. The social life in Bihar heavily gravitates around the villages.<sup>4</sup> Vast majority of them are illiterate.<sup>5</sup> Over three-fourths of people secure their livelihood in agriculture and allied activities.<sup>6</sup> Even as people of Bihar are excessively dependent on agriculture compared to other states, agriculture is not in good shape. Over the years there has been stagnation in the agricultural sector [Sharma, 1995, Pp. 2587-2602]. Land still remains the measure of family's prestige and social standing in rural areas. However, distribution of operational landholdings is extremely skewed. In 2003-04, about 46.4 per cent of the rural households had less than .001 hectare to cultivate (less than .001 hectare). Again, 38.3 per cent of the rural households had cultivated land which was more than .001 hectare but less than a hectare (marginal holdings) and rest 14.8 per cent households cultivated land above one hectare each (Table 2). Bihar ranks the second highest amongst Indian states in terms of population below the poverty line. About 42 per cent of population was identified as living below poverty line in 2004-05 as against 28 per cent for the whole country.

Structurally, the population of Bihar comprises thousands of individual castes. Caste is the most durable mode of social identity and has become the basis of socio-political organisations. Based on the 1931 Census, upper caste Hindus constituted about 13 per cent of total population of undivided Bihar. Though upper or forward-caste Hindus, estimated to be 21.5 per cent of the population in 2001,<sup>7</sup> are numerically small compared to OBCs, they are the ones who have dominated social, economic and political

life of the state until recently. Traditionally, they constituted the most powerful section of society, and until recently political power [Blair, 1980, Pp. 64-74; Jafferlot, 1995].

Table 1. Bihar: Socio-Economic Profile

Indicators	Ref. Year	Bihar	India	Maximum Value**
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
<b>Demographic</b>				
% Share of total population of India	2001 <sup>a</sup>	8.1	100	16.2 (U.P)
Population density	2001 <sup>a</sup>	880	314	904 (West Bengal)
Sex ratio (female/male x 1000)	2001 <sup>a</sup>	921	933	1058 (Kerala)
Decadal growth rate (1991-2001)	2001 <sup>a</sup>	28.4	21.3	28.4 (Bihar)
% Urban	2001 <sup>a</sup>	10.0	27.7	43.1 (Tamil Nadu)
Literacy rate	2001 <sup>a</sup>	47.5	65.3	90.9 (Kerala)
<b>Economic</b>				
Net sown area (as % total reported area)	1999-00 <sup>1</sup>	42.9	46.1	84.2 (Punjab)
Gross irrigated area (as % of gross cropped area)	1999-00 <sup>1</sup>	48.1	40.2	90.8 (Punjab)
% of marginal holdings (of all operational holdings)	2002-03 <sup>2</sup>	69.8	82.6	91.8 (Kerala)
Per hectare yield of cereals (in quintal)	2001-02 <sup>1</sup>	17.8	-	40.7 (Punjab)
% Share in net value added by manufacture (as% of total value added by manufacture in the country)	2002-03 <sup>3</sup>	0.50	100	20.2 (Maharashtra)
% of workers engaged in agriculture	2001 <sup>a</sup>	77.3	58.4	77.3 (Bihar)
% of workers engaged in HHI	2001 <sup>a</sup>	3.8	4.0	7.3 (W.B)
% of other workers	2001 <sup>a</sup>	18.7	37.5	73.1 (Kerala)
Per capita Net State Domestic Product (at current prices)	2003-04 <sup>3</sup>	5362	21142	29504 (Haryana)
Poverty Ratio (Rural)*	2004-05 <sup>4</sup>	42.1	28.3	46.8 (Orissa)
Poverty Ratio (Urban)*	2004-05 <sup>4</sup>	34.6	25.7	44.3 (Orissa)
Poverty Ratio (Total)*	2004-05 <sup>4</sup>	41.4	27.5	46.4 Orissa
<b>Amenities</b>				
% Villages electrified	2002 <sup>5</sup>	51.8	85.0	100 (Kerala)
% Villages having primary schools within village	2002 <sup>5</sup>	56.8	72.3	98.7 (Maharashtra)
% Villages having all weather road within village	2002 <sup>5</sup>	35.7	57.4	99.3 (Kerala)

Note:

\* The estimates are based on uniform recall period (URP) consumption in which the consumer expenditure data for all the items collected from 30 - day recall period (for methodological details, see **Poverty estimates for 2004-05**, Planning Commission of India)

\*\* Maximum value has been taken from amongst 16 major states of the country

Sources:

a. *Census of India*, 2001, Office of Registrar General, Government of India

1 *Statistical Abstract of India*, Central Statistical Organisation

2 National Sample Survey, 59<sup>th</sup> round, Report No. 492, 2002-03

3 Central Statistical Organisations, Government of India

4 Planning Commission of India, Government of India

5 National Sample Survey, 58<sup>th</sup> round, Report No. 487, Report on Village Facilities.

Backward castes, now known as OBCs, constitute the largest chunk of population. According to the 1931 population census, backward caste (Hindus) accounted for about 51 per cent of total population.<sup>8</sup> Amongst the backward castes Yadav, Koeri and Kurmi are quite important both numerically and socio-economic mobility. Yadavas with 11 per cent of total population were the single largest backward castes in Bihar and they continue to be

so in present day Bihar. Koeri and Kurmi put together constituted about 7.7 per cent of total population in Bihar. Although the OBCs do not suffer social disabilities as the Dalits do, they seem to have been enjoying lower socio-economic status compared to the upper castes (Table 2). Traditionally, they have largely been engaged in agriculture either as cultivators or labourers. In urban areas most of them have been engaged in unorganised sectors.

Educationally, they have been much behind the forward castes [NSSO, 2004-05; also see table 2 below]. Although their access to socio-economic resources has improved because of affirmative actions in recent years, they continue to lag behind forward castes in many of social and economic indicators.

The Scheduled Castes - the ex-untouchables, account for about 16 per cent of the total population. About 93.3 per cent of them reside in rural areas [Census, 2001]. They are unevenly distributed across the state, though their concentration is quite high in some districts such as Gaya, Nawada, Kaimur, Vaishali, Aurangabad

and Nalanda. Of the twenty-three Scheduled Castes listed in the Census, Chamars constitute about 31.3 per cent of total SC population in the state. *Dusadhs*, accounting for about 30 per cent, are the second largest group among SCs. Other numerically significant SC groups are Mushar, Pashi, Dhobi and Bhuia. Overall, the SCs or Dalits stand at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy and thus form the most disadvantaged segment of society. Literacy rate among them is abysmally low. Vast majority of them is landless and poor (Table 2). Their living conditions are pathetic. However, in recent decades, there has been growing consciousness among them of their rights and entitlements.

**Table 2. Socio-economic Profile of Major Social Groups in Bihar (2004-05)**

Indicators	All	SC	OBC	Others
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
<b>Size Class of Cultivated Land</b>				
.000	46.4	67.9	40.0	35.3
.001 - .40 hectare	21.3	17.3	23.7	18.5
.41-1.00 hectare	17.5	10.6	19.1	22.4
1.01- 2.00 hectare	9.7	3.0	12.0	12.5
Above 2.00 hectare	5.1	1.2	5.2	11.3
<b>Educational Levels (% Persons)</b>				
Not literate	51.6	71.2	51.2	27.5
Literate and up to Primary	19.8	14.2	21.9	20.1
Middle	11.8	6.9	12.2	16.6
Secondary	9.2	4.3	8.6	17.6
Higher secondary	4.4	2.1	3.3	9.9
Diploma/certificate	2.0	0.1	0.2	0.2
Graduate and above	3.3	1.1	2.5	8.8
<b>Rural Occupation (%households)</b>				
Self-employed in agriculture	35.5	16.8	40.0	49.8
Self-employed in non-agriculture	18.2	13.8	19.6	19.8
Agricultural labourer	31.7	55.8	26.1	13.3
Non-agricultural labourer	3.2	3.5	3.6	0.5
Others	11.4	10.2	10.7	16.6
<b>Urban</b>				
Self-employed	47.0	38.2	51.8	41.6
Wage/salary earners	21.4	18.7	22.4	19.8
Casual labourer	11.9	30.2	11.9	3.3
Others	19.6	12.8	13.9	34.5
<b>Rural Monthly per capita consumer expenditure (in rupees) by household</b>				
Up to 320	19.3	28.4	18.2	8.6
320-455	36.9	43.1	37.1	26.7
455-690	34.7	25.2	36.2	44.4
690 and above	9.1	3.3	8.5	20.3
<b>Urban Monthly per capita consumer expenditure (in rupees) by household</b>				
Up to Rs. 580	30.6	63.9	21.1	16.2
Rs 485-790	33.0	19.4	38.0	28.3
Rs 790-1380	15.7	5.2	16.2	18.7
Rs 1380 and above	20.7	11.3	14.9	36.8

Source: Employment and Unemployment Situation among Major Social Groups in India, 2004-2005, NSS, Report No. 516.

Religion is also one of the important axes of social organisation. Although Hindus constitute the dominant religious group, Muslims with 17 per cent of the total population of the state also constitute a significant part of society. While they are not uniformly distributed, there are certain pockets where they are in majority or constitute a number that could be critically important for electoral outcomes. Based on CSDS estimates, there are about 26 assembly constituencies where the Muslim population exceeds 30 per cent. There are another 20 assembly constituencies where the Muslim population ranges between 20 and 30 per cent. Muslims also constitute the poorest of society and experience lower access to socio-economic resources in the state [NSSO, 2004-05; Sachar, 2006]. In the recent decades, religion has re-activated as a political force and as a basis of collective action through the assertion of separate Hindu and Muslim identities. It is generally assumed that Muslims vote *en-bloc* and thereby determine the electoral outcome in the state to a significant extent.

In brief, the society in Bihar reflects a great deal of diversity. The society is divided along several axes. Seen through the lens of social and economic development, Bihar depicts a dismal picture. There exist huge socio-economic disparities among different segments of the population, especially among different social groups (Table 2). These differences and cleavages often form the basis of social and political mobilisation and demobilisation.

## II. POLITICAL PROCESSES IN BIHAR: OF CASTE, PARTY AND POLITICAL POWER

A cursory review of political history of Bihar in the post-Independence period unfolds three distinctive phases. The first phase (1947-1967) is marked by complete dominance of the Congress Party with Upper Castes at the apex of the power structure. The second phase (1967-1990) could be designated as a transition period with gradually declining dominance of the Congress Party as

well as of the Upper castes and slowly but steadily emerging influence of the middle castes in the political arena. The third phase (1990 and after) is marked by complete reversal of the first phase, that is, marginalisation of the Congress Party and the upper castes in the politics of state. Let us glance through each phase so as to understand the political transformation in Bihar. We treat it as a separate section as it denotes a paradigm shift in the political equations in Bihar.

### *The First Phase (1947-67): Dominance of Congress*

As the Indian National Congress was the dominant player in the freedom struggle, eventually liberating the country from the colonial power, the party became the natural political heir of the British in the state, as elsewhere in India. Other parties, namely the left parties, which had some pockets of support in the districts such as Begusarai, Muzaffarpur, Madhubani, Gaya and Sitamarhi, could not consolidate their mass base. Thus, the Congress Party was, in effect, without political rivals. It occupied almost the entire political space of the state. Until 1962, the Party, in the absence of organised opposition groups, combined with the towering leadership of Srikrishna Sinha, the first Chief Minister of Bihar, and a low voter turnout, enjoyed monopoly of political space.

While the Congress Party was dominated by the upper castes - *brahmans*, *rajputs*, *bhumihars* and *kayastha* and drew support from them, yet other castes/communities also supported the party. The Scheduled Castes (ex-untouchables) were loyal to the Congress, because for them it was the Congress under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi that had fought for their dignity and incorporated many provisions in the Constitution to liberate them from atrocities. The practice of untouchability was made a punishable offence. In order to ensure their fair representation in the Central and State Legislatures, reservation

was granted to them. Provisions of reservation in other public sphere such as educational institutions and public employment were also embodied in the Constitution. Various laws relating to discrimination against them also followed. All these measures were seen and propagated as a gift of the Congress to the dalits and they rallied behind the Congress. [Frankel, 1989]

Large chunk of Muslims also supported the Congress, though their representation in the party organisation as well as in the ministry was not adequate. After partition of India, Muslims carried the burden of being disloyal to the country. Their loyalty was suspect to many Hindus. Further, there were no major and viable political formations that could have been an alternative to the Congress. In brief, they had no option but to go with the Congress and vote for it.

Even as the Congress was a party dominated by the forward castes and landed aristocrats as well, it took a reformist path despite the fact that some of its policies would go against the interests of the upper castes. Abolition of Zamindari system and passing Land Reforms Act could be cited as an example in this regard.<sup>9</sup> According to NSSO 1953-54, top 10 per cent of rural households owned 52.36 per cent of land and bottom 40 per cent households owned mere 1.25 per cent of land. And most of the top 10 per cent households that owned about half the land in the state belonged to the upper castes [Prasad, 1987, Pp. 847-852], except for some Muslims. As, during this period, forward castes held most of lands and there was a patron-client voting system in which tenants and agricultural labourers used to vote at the behest of landlords, any legislation on land reforms was, therefore, bound to hurt the interests of the forward castes and to jeopardise the prospect of Congress.

Though Bihar was one of the leading states to enforce 'Abolition of Zamindari Act' in 1949, the enforcement of the Act was riddled with strings of hindrance. Its validity was challenged in the court and the zamindars secured injunctions. Besides, the Zamindari Act had many loopholes including exemption of private lands, privileged lands and lands used for agricultural and horticultural purposes, which were in khas (self) possession of the proprietor or tenure holder. Thus, the zamindars claimed huge tracts of land under the provision of 'exemption'. Zamindars were helped through legal exemption because, "the state itself - as represented by legislature and bureaucracy - was overwhelmingly dominated by zamindars themselves" [Sinha, 1978; p. 1759]. In order to overcome the loopholes in the Zamindari Abolition Act, Bihar Land Reforms Act, 1950, was passed. However, when it was sought to be executed, the state apparatus stood the zamindars in good stead [Sharma, 1987]. For over ten years, a tension between the *Zamindars* and the Congress government continued, until the Bihar Land Reforms (Ceiling, Land Allocation and Surplus Land Acquisition) Act was enacted in 1961. In this act, any 'person' (not the family) was given the right to keep 20 to 30 acres of land depending upon the category of the land. In the early 1960s, the government aggressively acquired land from the surplus landholders and a redistribution policy was enforced under the direct supervision of the then Chief Minister (CM) Binodanand Jha. In 1972-73, Ceiling on Landholding (Amendment) Act was enacted to prevent transfer of surplus lands. Further, it included homestead, orchard, pastures etc in the ceiling area prescribed in the Act. With these Acts in place, the state by 1970-72 controlled about 22 per cent of the land. The former *Zamindars* however, found a number of ways to retain large proportions of their land, which were to be acquired as surplus land. The most popular way was that of holding *benami* land besides transforming land into ponds, gardens and cold

storages, or by opening libraries and temples on their land [Sinha, 1978, Pp. 1758-1760; Nedumpara, 2004].

Most of *Zamindars* were either from the Hindu forward castes or were 'ashraf' Muslims. The main caste groups were the Rajputs and the Bhumihars, besides the Brahmins in North and Western Bihar. The biggest land owner in the village wielded enormous authority on the everyday life of the villagers. Though it was an unwritten rule, villagers had to consult the biggest land owner on issues like local agricultural wages, rights in land and other matters relating to the conduct of community's business [Sharma, 2005, Pp. 960-972]. The land owners had developed such an exploitative agrarian system that placed vast majority of peasants in debt trap. This led to a system of informal bondage that ensured the big land owning class tremendous power to control the peasantry [Prasad, 1975, Pp. 931-937]. In brief, a large section of people belonging to bottom strata of rural society in Bihar had to mortgage their freedom and dignity to the landlords because of indebtedness, poverty and dependence for employment on landlords [Sinha, 1996, Pp. 3287-3289].

The first ten years of Zamindari Abolition did bring about some change in the social life in the countryside. The former *Zamindars* were in the process of losing their extra economic feudal powers. This was a process complementary to the spread of democracy. On the other hand, abolition of zamindari coupled with vesting of ownership in tenants and land redistribution policies gave rise to a new class of peasant proprietors. The main beneficiaries were the middle peasantry and protected tenants. The landless labourers and the bataidars (share croppers) did not benefit much from the first two waves of land reforms in the Hindi Heartland. In terms of caste, the main beneficiaries were the middle castes. In Bihar, it

was the Yadavs, Kurmis and Koeris who gained most from the reforms [Prasad, 1980, Pp. 215-219].

In sum, during this phase, land reform was a major political initiative. Despite all its limitations, the Land Reform Laws since 1948 transferred ownership right in vast areas of land to the upper OBCs, mainly Yadavs and Koeri-kurmis. This gave them the strength to ask for a larger share in political power [Prasad, 1979, Pp. 481,483-484]. By the late 1960s, they seemed to have started asserting themselves politically, which is reflected in slow but gradual rise in their representation in the Vidhan Sabha. Nonetheless, upper castes continued to dominate (Table 3). However, the lower OBCs and the SCs were in a relatively weaker position since they remained largely landless and at most tenants-at-will, depending on the erstwhile Zamindars as well as the new Yadav Land owners. While the struggle for power was between the land owning forward castes and the new land owning class of Yadavs (they have Thakur Sena, Bhumihar Sena and Yadav Sena), these were united against the lower OBCs and the BCs.

The abolition of zamindari and vesting land ownership in the hands of the tenants created a class of rural populace that would wish for better life as well as better conditions for their enterprise, through roads, education, health care, farm extension which it turn depended on better roads and communications. But there was no plan for wide spread provision of these in the rural areas. The central plan was mainly concerned with greater farm production and concentrated on areas that had irrigation for the purpose. Education was heavily concentrated on technical education at a higher level for the new industries under the plan. If this was the central plan, it was the plan of the states, which were approved in detail by the Planning Commission. And the central plan was also the plan of the central Congress authority. The provincial parties only

followed the lead. To the forward caste leadership, this approach was also useful since their children could go into these new educational institutions to finally enter into the new jobs. This was where the failure of the state party leadership

originated from<sup>10</sup> and remained unchanged, as we will see later in the following section, until the Congress was dislodged from power and even afterwards.

**Table 3. Caste Composition of Bihar Assembly, 1961-77 (General Seats)**

Caste Group	1962	1967	1975	1977
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Brahmin	17.2	13.2	12.3	7.6
Bhumihar	12.6	14.8	14.8	14.8
Rajput	23.8	22.2	23.5	21.7
Kayastha	5.4	4.9	3.3	4.4
<b>Upper/Forward</b>	<b>59.0</b>	<b>55.1</b>	<b>53.9</b>	<b>48.6</b>
Baniya	3.3	5.3	6.2	3.2
Yadav	11.7	15.2	18.5	20.5
Kurmi	7.1	5.3	3.3	4.8
Koeri	6.7	5.8	4.1	6.4
<b>Upper BCs</b>	<b>28.8</b>	<b>31.6</b>	<b>32.1</b>	<b>34.9</b>
Lower BCs	1.7	2.9	2.5	3.6
<b>Total BCs</b>	<b>30.5</b>	<b>34.5</b>	<b>34.6</b>	<b>38.5</b>
Muslims	8.8	7.4	7.8	10.0
Bengalis	1.7	2.9	3.7	2.8
Number of General Seats	242 <sup>1</sup>	243 <sup>2</sup>	242 <sup>3</sup>	249

Notes:

1. Excludes 3 MLAs for whom caste was not available and 1 Adivasi MLA who was elected from a general seat.

2. Excludes 1 Adivasi MLA, elected from general seat

3. Excludes 2 MLAs for whom caste was not available

Source: Blair, [1980]: 'Rising Kulaks and Backward Classes in Bihar', *Economic and Political Weekly*.

### *The Second Phase (1967-89): Depleting Support Base of Congress*

The period from 1967 to the Emergency in 1975 was a period of serious political turmoil in Bihar. The changes in agrarian relations, however small due to lacklustre attitude of the Congress government, taken place up until early 1960s had loosened the hold of traditional land owning forward castes and increased the capacity of new land owning class mainly consisting of upper OBCs (Yadavs, Koeris, Kurmis) to articulate the need for change and become the agents for change. By 1968, the consolidation of these backward castes enabled them to cry out against the conditions that denied them emerging socioeconomic opportunities [Junnuzi, 1974]. Now they were up for their share in political power. The forward castes that dominated Congress, on the other hand did not seem to be comfortable with the idea of sharing power [Jha,

1970, Pp. 341,343-344]. The socialist strategy of demanding reservation in public employment for the backward castes gave further impetus to mobilisation of these castes under the umbrella of 'backwards'. The lower OBCs and the SCs were in a relatively weaker position since they remained largely landless and at most tenants-at-will, depending on the erstwhile Zamindars as well as the new Yadav Land owners. While the struggle for power was between the land owning upper castes and the new land owning class of Yadavs (they have Thakur Sena, Bhumihar Sena and Yadav Sena), these were united against the lower OBCs and the BCs.

After the 1967 Assembly elections, all the opposition parties including the Communists, Jan Sangh and the Samyukta Socialist Party (SSP) formed a grand coalition called the Samyukta Vidhayak Dal (SVD) and a former Congressman Mahamaya Prasad Sinha was sworn in as the first



non-Congress CM of Bihar with Karpoori Thakur as his Deputy. The SVD was an experiment that worked in Uttar Pradesh as well and Choudhury Charan Singh after splitting the Congress was working at a larger project of peasant politics, which later formed the basis of the OBC mobilisation. However, in Bihar the SVD government did not last long and, using the factionalism within the coalition, Satish Prasad Sinha became the CM for 3 days. He was overthrown by the former Congressman and sitting SVD Minister Bindeshwari Prasad Mandal who along with 40 lower caste MLAs formed the Shoshit Dal (SD). Within a few weeks, the former Congress CM Binodanand Jha along with a group of Dalit MLAs split the Congress to form the Loktantrik Congress Dal (LTC). He made Bhola Paswan Shastri the first Dalit CM of Bihar. Shastri also had an unstable government and within less than 100 days of his becoming the CM, Governor's Rule was promulgated.

The 1969 Assembly elections also resulted in a hung Assembly. The first OBC CM of the Congress, Harihar Prasad Singh, the first ever Chief Minister belonging to OBC, was sworn in but his government lasted less than 4 months. Bhola Paswan Shastri again formed the government but his government also fell in less than 2 weeks. Bihar was under President's Rule once again. In 1970, Congress brought Daroga Prasad Rai, a Yadav, as the CM. However, the forward caste faction in the Congress rallied behind the powerful and senior Congressman Lalit Narayan Mishra who lobbied to remove Rai in favour of a forward caste CM. But after Rai's resignation, all opposition parties got together and Karpoori Thakur became the CM for the first time. Equations within the coalition changed and within 6 months Bhola Paswan Shastri became the CM for the third time. But Shastri's government also fell within 6 months paving way for Governor's Rule.

While the account presented above indicates that consolidation of backward castes was not compact but the political topsy-turvy signalled that backward castes could actually lead the state and that the dominance of forward castes could be dismantled. The undercurrents of political change in Bihar placed the Congress regime into non-comfort zone. The Centre's nervousness can be best understood in the frequent implementation of Governor's Rule and the frequent change of Congress Chief Ministers.

The political instability in late 1960s, however, tilted the political balance in favour of the Congress. In the assembly election held in 1972, the Congress was back to power under the leadership of Kedar Pandey. Nonetheless, Congress was no more the 'catch-all' party with an 'umbrella organisation'. Anti-Congressism was now gaining ground under the leadership of Jay Prakash Narayan (JP). Historically, the JP movement had been crucial to the process of OBC mobilisation. It was the first consolidated effort to mobilise backward castes under one umbrella organisation. However, the movement was under siege during the Emergency and most leaders were either jailed or were underground. Also, JP did not see the movement as anti-forward caste. While the JP movement channelled the backward caste aspirations, it did not ideologically encapsulate the moment.

As soon as Emergency was lifted in 1977 and elections were held, Congress was wiped out in the elections and the Janata Party swept all Parliamentary seats of the Hindi Heartland. It also won the Assembly elections in all Hindi states including Bihar. Karpoori Thakur became the CM of Bihar. There was a noticeable decline in the representation of forward castes in Bihar Legislative Assembly. The proportion of forward caste MLAs to MLAs elected from general seats came down from 55.1 per cent in 1967 to 48.6 per cent in 1977. On the other hand, the proportion of Backward Castes surged from 34.5 per cent to 38.

5 per cent, during the same period. Though upper castes still continued to dominate the Bihar Vidhan Sabha, yet this phenomenon was quite important in a sense that backward castes were making inroads into electoral power politics. However, a closer look at caste composition of MLAs within the forward castes suggests that it was basically the Brahmins who suffered the loss, otherwise other forward castes namely Bhumihaar, Rajput and Kayastha gained a bit compared to the earlier election. One reason for the decline of Brahmin is that Jagannath Misra was the Chief Minister of Bihar during Emergency and the voters in some sense held Brahmins generally responsible for the excesses committed under the Emergency [Blair, 1980]. The loss of Brahmins was the gain of Yadavs and Koiris. In fact, by 1977 Yadavs had become the second largest group in the Assembly.

The political ascendancy of backward castes, mainly the upper backwards, could be seen in terms of their increasing share in the Cabinet. There were about 42 (38 upper backwards + 4 lower backwards) ministers in Karpoori Thakur's Cabinet as against 29 belonging to forward castes (Table 4). It was for the first time after independence that ministers belonging to backward castes outnumbered those coming from forward castes, though forward castes comprised about 40 per cent of the Janata MLAs. This was a classic example of 'one who controls the party controls the power equation within it'. Obviously, the Janata Party in the state was under the command of backward caste leaders like Karpoori Thakur and Ram Sundar Das. This implied that forward castes were not to carry undue weight.

There were many issues and challenges to take up for the Janata Party government. Land reform was obviously the most daunting challenge before the government. However, the government chose to implement controversial Backward Classes Commission's Report prepared under the

chairmanship of Mungheri Lal. The decision of the government met with stiff resistance by forward castes. The entire administration was brought to halt. The state was gripped under rioting situations. The widespread violence had disrupted the state.

Unhappy with the share in the power structure under the Karpoori dispensation and reservation policy of the government, the forward caste MLAs started militating against Karpoori Thakur and finally Ram Sunder Das replaced Thakur in less than two years. Added to this was the political development within the Janata Party. Deep internal contradiction within the party led to fall of the non- Congress government at the Centre. It followed the fall of the state governments where they also were in power. Fresh elections were called in late 1980 in the state

Karpoori Thakur led Lok Dal in Bihar and during election campaign he found it extremely difficult to combine Backward Classes into one. Individual leaders from backward castes asserted their own claim to power and competed against each other with utter disregard to its effect on the strength of backwards as a group [Frankel, 1989]. Lok Dal also found it difficult to make inroads into the dalit voters as they were not only scattered across the state and divided into a large number of sub castes but also enmeshed in patron-client relationship with the landlords. On the other hand, the Congress harped on the benefits accrued to landless under 20 point programme and also reminded them of atrocities perpetrated by upper backward classes against the dalits. Also, the Lok Dal could not impress the Muslims. Muslims were yet connect themselves with Lok Dal for their betterment. In tribal areas, the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha did not let the Lok Dal make inroads into tribal voters. All this impacted on the prospect of Lok Dal led by Karpoori Thakur negatively and eventually resulted in Congress back to power and Jagannath Mishra became the CM of Bihar for the second time.

Table 4. Caste Composition of Major Cabinet Ministries in Bihar: 1962-77

Caste/Community	B.N. Jha (1962)	M.P. Sinha (1967)	Kedar Pande (1972)	Karpoori Thakur (1977)
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Forward	58	67	38	29
Backwards	8	27	23	42
SC and STs	25	20	23	17
Muslims and Others	8	7	15	13
Number of ministers	12	10	13	24

Note: Figures are in percentages and pertain to full ministers only.

Source: Blair, [1980]: 'Rising Kulaks and Backward Classes in Bihar: Social Change in the Late 1970s', *Economic and Political Weekly*.

Though the Janata government at the Centre survived for a short period, the one decision it pioneered, which later transformed politics across the country, was the setting up of the Mandal Commission. In 1979 Morarji Desai's government at the Centre had established the Commission to investigate the educational and social level of what was now called the Backward Classes. It was led by former Bihar CM Bindeshwari Prasad Mandal. In 1980, the Mandal Commission Report was released and it recommended strong affirmative action and reservation for OBCs in jobs and educational institutions. Each state was to have its own list of OBCs. All through the 1980s, this report drew intense debate in academic and political circles and the general public at large. Although the recommendations of the Commission could not be implemented, the Mandal Commission Report had already done its job that is, making caste consciousness intense and further deepening politicisation of castes.

Even as Congress continued to be in power in the 1980s, it was faced with two problems. One, it was losing mass support it once commanded. It lost the confidence of the Muslims following the communal riots in Bhagalpur towards the end of 1980s. The emerging Mandal-Masjid episode on the political horizon further weakened the support base of Congress. While on the one hand, forward castes voters now started looking upon other parties such as BJP that seemed to articulate the

interest of forward castes, on the other hand, an alliance of Muslims, OBCs and Dalits was in the offing. Secondly, factionalism amongst forward castes within the Congress reached its peak. As a result of this, CMs replaced one another in quick succession. Former Bihar CM Satendra Narayan Sinha's account indicates that beyond Caste even *gotra* became a divisive variable within the Congress. Stories of Jagannath Mishra leading the *Maithili* Brahmin faction often in conflict with Bindeshwari Dube's *Kanyakubj* Brahmin faction are well known [Sinha, 2005]. In 1985, the Jagannath Mishra faction supported Dube against Chandrashekhar Singh, a Rajput who replaced Mishra as CM in 1983. However, in 1987, Mishra turned against Dube in favour of Bhagwad Jha Azad, a *Maithili* Brahmin who became CM in 1988 [Frankel, 1989]. All this political development during the 1980s was signalling complete rout of Congress and emergence of a new socio-political formation that was to replace Congress as well as the existing set of power elites in the state.

On the development front, the 1980s witnessed retrogression in employment structure, stagnation of agricultural sector, closure of many agro-based industries, rise of unemployment, etc. The share of agriculture in employment went up from 81.5 per cent in 1981 to 82.3 per cent in 1991. There was a sharp decline in secondary sector. It declined from 7.1 per cent in 1981 to 4.6 per cent in 1991. In 1960-61, Bihar's per capita

income was two-third of national average but it declined to less than half in 1980s [Mathur, 1994]. In 1960s, the growth rate of food grain production in Bihar was higher than the national average. It was 3.05 per cent in Bihar as against 2.5 per cent for India as a whole. During 1980-83 - 1990-93, the compound growth rate of food grain production fell down to 2.3 per cent.

To sum up, the second phase (1967-1989) was a period of political volatility compared to the preceding phase. It signalled the undercurrents of rising caste consciousness accompanied by change in socio-political mobilisation and contours of political power. Seemingly indomitable Congress Party with forward castes at the helm of affairs for the first time after independence appeared vulnerable. After the poll defeat, the Congress could have focussed on stability in leadership within the party and the agenda of development to consolidate its traditional support base but it failed on both counts. Congress managed to remain in power all through 1980s largely due to lack of unity among the opposition parties than some damage control measures for its failure all through these years.

### *Third Phase (The 1990s): Political Ascendancy of Backward Castes and Rout of Congress*

The politics in Bihar till the 1980s, as discussed in the preceding sections, was dominated by the Congress, except for a brief interlude on two occasions during 1967-71 and 1977-79. Before the 1980s, there was hardly any meaningful role for the opposition to play in the politics of state. The Congress party was dominated by upper castes both in the party organisation and elected members to legislature [Jafferlot, 2003]. Thus, the power sharing of different social groups was disproportionately in favour of the upper castes. But, the end of the 1980s ushered in a new era in the politics of Bihar with the doors shut for the Congress, a party so far being the darling of people. Yet another important thing that took

place was the mobilisation of marginalised section of the society [Yadav, 1999, Pp. 2393-2399].

The Lok Sabha Election held in 1989, in fact, signalled who would not rule the state in future. The Congress suffered a major setback. Not only did the Congress lose most of the parliamentary seats, but also lost its traditional support base - the upper castes, the dalits and the Muslims. Muslims had started drifting away from the Congress following the Bhagalpur communal riots. The demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992 under the Congress regime at the Centre made the drift complete.

On the other hand, the '*Mandal Wave*' in the late 'eighties was sweeping over the country. The '*Mandal Tangle*' took a serious political turn in Bihar as in most part of north India. It led to polarisation of masses along forward-backward line. The Congress was not ready to give in to the demand of implementation of Mandal Commission Report, which had recommended reservation for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in public employment and educational institutions. The handling of Shahbano Case in late 1980s was seen as Congress' attempt to appease Muslims. This gave the Ram Mandir movement fresh impetus and momentum. BJP's aggressive campaign was getting into the psyche of certain section of masses, namely the upper castes. Disenchanted with the Congress, the upper castes started tilting toward the BJP. Thus, while '*mandalisation*' of politics offered the backward castes a rare opportunity to get united and capture power, the Ram Mandir movement broke the upper castes away from the Congress to fall into the lap of the BJP. Added to Mandal-Mandir-Masjid factors that contributed to fast losing popularity of the Congress was the charge of corruption against Rajiv Gandhi, which boiled into famous 'Bofors Scandal'. V.P Singh who had recently drifted away from the Congress made it a poll issue. Though there is no standard

literature explaining how far and where Bofors Deal played part in the defeat of the Congress, it can be reasonably assumed particularly in the context of Bihar that it was one of the contributory factors.

Apart from these macro factors, the Congress, as discussed in the preceding section, was a divided house. Internal factionalism had reached its nadir and the party was in shambles. Muslims had deserted Congress following the Bhagalpur riots. Dalits and OBCs were getting mobilised under the umbrella of JD with leaders like Ram Sunder Das, Lalu Prasad Yadav, Nitish Kumar, Ram Vilas Pasvan, to name a few, at the helm of party affairs. In South Bihar, movement for separate state for tribals had grown too intense to suppress it. The Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM) that spearheaded the movement has by now established its own pocket of influence. It short, given these materials ready for political transformation in Bihar or reversal of power elites, what was awaiting was the rituals to complete, that is, Lok Sabha elections 1989. Congress lagged much behind non- Congress parties both in terms of vote and seat shares in the state. The Congress secured 28 per cent of valid votes and won mere 4 Lok Sabha seats out of 54. As against this, the JD got 37.6 per cent of valid votes and 32 seats.

Consequent upon the decline of the Congress Party, there emerged different political formations. However, the Janata Dal (JD) emerged not only as a party of prominence but also managed to snatch power from the Congress in the assembly election held in 1990. The support base of JD constituted the overwhelming proportion of backward castes, the Muslims and the Dalits. The BJP also made inroads into the electoral scene in Bihar. The BJP drew major support from the upper castes. However, it was not able to bring the entire upper caste bloc into its fold; a significant part of the upper caste was still with the Congress.

The JD under the leadership of Lalu Prasad in Bihar continued its impressive performance in the Lok Sabha Elections of May-June 1991. The JD alone won 32 out of 54 Lok Sabha seats in the state. Surprisingly, the Left Front managed to win 9 seats. The BJP could win only five seats in that election. However, soon after the regime change in Bihar, it appeared that the consolidation of backward castes was not so compact nor was the upper-lower castes divide a durable feature of politics in the state. The internal squabbles among the ambitious champions of backward castes finally led to the division of JD. The backward castes got divided into two blocs - one represented by Lalu Prasad Yadav under the JD and other by Nitish Kumar under Samata Party [Kumar, 1999, Pp. 2472-2480]. Both the leaders, in fact, represented the two dominant backward castes, namely the Yadavas and the Koeri-Kurmi. The rift between the Lalu Prasad and Nitish Kumar largely on the issue of selective favouritism practised by Lalu Prasad, finally led to the split of the grand coalition of backward castes. This led to the decline in the vote share of the JD. Nonetheless, Lalu managed to win the 1995 assembly election with comfortable majority (165 seats in an assembly of 324) and the Samata Party (led by Nitish Kumar) was yet to consolidate its support base and hence could win merely 5 seats. With 41 seats, the BJP trailed far behind. Congress could manage to win just 30. The election results, in short, confirmed the dominance of JD and above all the leadership of Lalu Prasad Yadav. The victory of JD in Bihar under the leadership of Lalu Prasad Yadav made him one of the tallest leaders within the Party. In January 1996, he became the national president of JD. However, as fate would have it, the first report on fodder scam appeared in public and the name of Lalu Prasad also figured in the list of those involved in the scam. This unexpected development brought him under intense political pressure. There were demands for his resignation both from within his party and outside, including the Left Front, one of the credible electoral allies

of the JD in Bihar. Eventually, he resigned from the post of national president of JD president and formed his own party called 'Rashtriya Janata Dal' (RJD).

While various combinations and recombination of castes and communities kept the JD as well as Lalu Prasad in power during the period between 1990 and 2000, the political change ushered in 1990 was not bereft of tangible issues. Though social justice, however vaguely understood, and self-respect of hitherto politically and socially marginalised sections formed the populist electoral slogans, rural development and law and order had also figured prominently in the campaign of these two assembly elections. After winning the 1995 Assembly election, Lalu Prasad declared that his second term would not only focus on social justice for the poor, stability and communal harmony but also on economic development [Hauser, 1997, Pp. 2599-2607]. His trips to many Southeast Asian nations, to the United States and a conference of NRIs in Patna were seen as serious move towards economic development in the state. Let us briefly discuss what changed for better or worse in Bihar during a decade long regime of Lalu Prasad.

To begin with, the assembly election of 1990 brought about reconfiguration of political class and power elites as well. As we have noticed earlier, until 1990 forward castes despite their smaller numerical strength compared to the backward castes, were disproportionately represented in the Bihar Legislative Assembly, largely due to disunity among the opposition parties and relative lack of consolidation of backward castes as compared to towards the end of 1980. But, now they were pushed to the corner. In 1995 assembly elections, only 61 forward caste candidates returned to Bihar Vidhan Sabha as against 165 backward caste members. It was thus a situation of 'role reversal'. As the numerical strength of forward caste members in the

Legislative Assembly came down drastically and only a few of them in the ruling JD, caste composition of ministers also got altered. For example, in the Chandra Sekhar Singh's ministry [1983], about 44 per cent of ministers belonged to forward castes, which reduced to 27 per cent in the ministry of Lalu Yadav in 1990-95. As opposed to this, the share of ministers belonging to the backward castes increased from 24 per cent to 47 per cent in the two ministries respectively (Table 5). The changed pattern of political elite was the outcome of dismantling the patron-client system of voting (in which the ryots and near bonded labourers had to vote to the call of their masters (the landlords). The reversal of power elite in Bihar in early 1990 and consequent break down of patron-client system brought about political freedom to a large section of people, though they were yet to stand on the fringe of larger social and economic life of the state. One might discount this political emancipation of lower castes and dalits as 'tokenism' or 'symbolism' but it is difficult to deny that once they became able to cast their vote against the will of their masters, they were free from several chains of constraints and able to assert self-respect and dignity and Lalu Prasad was the symbol of *izzat* (self-respect). One wonders why this political change took about two decades even as the upper OBCs had become land owners way back in 1960s. At the risk of slight repetition, it may be pointed out that the political mobilisation of backward castes was weak because of divided leadership. There was a kind of leadership rivalry between Karpoori Thakur and Ramsunder Das. Secondly, Congress was still enjoying support of Muslims and large section of Dalit voters. But political events in Bihar (viz., Bhagalpur communal riots and massacres of Dalits in many parts of the state) and larger socio-political movements so unfolded in the late 1980s that the odds were completely against the Congress. The desertion of Muslims, Dalits and forward castes from the Congress inflicted irreparable damage to the political prospects of the party.

In his first stint, Lalu not only provided political stability but also kept the state away from communal riots, which occurred during the Congress regime at almost regular intervals. Undisputedly, security of life and property happens to be major concerns for minorities and marginalised section. Other priorities like bijli, sadak, pani (electricity, road, drinking water)

come up only after this. Lalu was able to ensure that there would be no communal riots; the houses of backward castes and dalits would not be burnt; there would be no violence against the underprivileged. This instilled confidence among the minorities and marginalised communities and they hoped that a new Bihar of prosperity and social harmony was in the offing.

**Table 5. Caste Composition of Ministries in Bihar (Percentages)**

Caste/Community	Chandra Shekhar Singh (1983) <sup>1</sup>	Lalu Prasad Yadav (1994) <sup>2</sup>
(1)	(2)	(3)
Upper Castes	44	27.0
OBC	24	46.5
Dalits and Adivasis	13	15.5
Muslims	19	11.3
Number of ministers	-	71.0

Notes: 1. Frankel, [1989]

2. Choudhary, [1999]

While structural changes in political representation, providing stable government, ensuring communal harmony and bringing the hitherto marginalised groups into political mainstream were major achievements of Lalu Prasad, he failed to keep other promises such as better roads, electricity, pensions, pukka houses and the subsidised saris and dhotis for those below the poverty line. Towards the end of his second term, there were growing number of incidences of kidnapping and extortion. Besides, there was also the rise of what Hauser calls 'phenomenon of yadavisation' [Hauser, 1997, p. 2,602], whereby Lalu himself involved in widespread transfers and postings to the narrow interests of his caste fellows and party supporters.<sup>11</sup> In 1996, his name figured in the multi-millions fodder scam. All this had led political watchers to believe that his messianic image, which he had earned many years ago, was denuded. His populist caste

and social justice rhetoric had reached its limit. The stage was set where his status would now be reduced to only yet another Yadav leader from being the messiah of the poor and downtrodden. How far were these statements true? To answer this question, let us look at the poll performance of JD in the general election to Lok Sabha held in 1996 and 1999.

General elections to Lok Sabha held in 1996 and 1999 seemed to reflect declining popularity of Lalu Prasad and his party. While the vote share of RJD declined in successive elections, that of BJP and Samata/JDU (NDA) increased substantially (Table 6). RJD suffered even major loss in terms of seat. At this stage, it may, though tentatively, be argued that Lalu's messianic image was fast losing its charisma and bound to be outlived shortly unless miracles happen.

Table 6. Electoral Performance of Political Parties in Bihar- 1996 -2004

Major Political Parties	Lok Sabha (1996)		Lok Sabha (1999)		Assembly (2000)		Lok Sabha (2004)	
	Vote (%)	Seats Won	Vote (%)	Seats Won	Vote (%)	Seats Won	Vote (%)	Seats Won
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)
BJP	20.5	18	23.1	23	14.6	67	14.6	5
Congress	12.9	2	8.8	4	11.0	23	4.5	3
RJD (JD in 1996)	31.8	22	28.2	7	28.3	124	30.7	22
Samata (JDU in 2000 onwards)	14.4	3	20.7	18	8.5	34	22.4	6
Others	20.6	9	19.2	2	37.6	92	27.8	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>324</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>40</b>

Source: Election Commission of India.

As there was a widely held perception across the state that Lalu failed to keep his promises to the vast masses of the poor, who by and large constituted his core support base, and also failed even badly to take the agenda of development forward, political observers felt that the 2000 assembly election was going to be a litmus test for his popularity as a messiah of the poor, downtrodden and marginalised and his politics of poverty and social justice.

In the election held in 2000, the RJD suffered a setback. It lost 43 seats compared to 1995 election. However, the RJD emerged as the single largest party, though falling short of the number of seats required for formation of the government. Major support for the RJD again came from Lalu's captive vote bank, namely Muslims and Yadavas. As per the findings of the CSDS Bihar Assembly Election Study - 2000, the M-Y (Muslims and Yadavs) alliance accounted for 60 per cent of the total votes secured by the RJD. A significant proportion of Dalits and other OBCs also voted for the RJD though the wide social base of the party had somewhat shrunk (also see Table 7). One obvious reason for this loss or relatively shrunk support base was the drifting away of koeris and kurmis under the leadership of Nitish Kumar who had differences with Lalu Yadav and eventually separated to form his own party.

Nitish Kumar's Samata party, though it failed to make a deeper impact in 1995 assembly

election, had already begun to break the ground in Lok Sabha elections held in 1996 by winning 6 seats and continued to improve its seat tallies in the subsequent Lok Sabha elections held in 1998 and 1999. It forged a pre-poll alliance with the BJP in the wake of the assembly election of 2000. The NDA alliance bagged 121 seats. Major support for the Samata-BJP alliance came from the upper castes and Koeri-Kurmi. Upper castes alone contributed one-third of the total votes polled by the Samata-BJP alliance [Bihar Election Study, 2000]. Although the alliance fell short of the majority mark, taking advantage of NDA in power at the centre, Nitish Kumar was sworn in as the Chief Minister of Bihar. Not surprisingly, his government survived only for a week, as he could not prove majority on the floor of the house. Following the exit of Nitish Kumar due to his failure to muster support from smaller parties and independents, Lalu Prasad Yadav was given a chance to form the government. Lalu Prasad Yadav managed to secure support from the Congress, the Left and a few independents and eventually proved majority on the floor of the House. However, very soon after he became the Chief Minister of Bihar for the third time, he was charged with being one of the accused in the 'fodder scam' the biggest ever scam in the history of Bihar. Under mounting pressure, he resigned and got his wife Rabri Devi installed as the Chief Minister of Bihar, a classical example of familism.



How could one interpret the outcomes of assembly elections held in 2000? In most general formulations, the results were expected but also surprising. Expected in a sense that the mood of people, as explained by experts, political commentators and media, was against Lalu and he was sure to pay for his negligence towards development and maintenance of law and order in the state, which among other things, he had promised when he became the chief minister second time in a row. The results were surprising because though Lalu was down, yet not completely out. RJD emerged as the single largest party after elections and had a stake in the formation of new government.

The questions that arise here are: Were the media and political pundits biased and wrongly assessed the mood of people? Or the 'mood of people' as described in media was the mood of those people who actually did not constitute the support base of Lalu Prasad? Metropolitan media and arm-chair impressionist political commentators might have gone wrong; but why did a large section of voters still vote for Lalu? Was it that, while he failed on several counts, he did something substantial for his core constituency of support or was it that the symbolism of self-respect or political power still mattered for the neglected lot? We attempt to explore below answers to these puzzles.

Even a casual look at the policies/programmes meant for the poor and their implementation suggests that nothing substantial happened during 1990-2000 that would have ensured a measure of economic betterment of the toiling masses, leave alone overall socio-economic development of the state. For example, acquisition of surplus land and its redistribution would certainly have given a measure of empowerment to those having no land at all. Though data pertaining to how much surplus land was acquired and redistributed in the 1990s are not easily available, one can make an assessment of the situation indirectly with the

help of other data sources. In 1991-1992, about 14.19 per cent of the rural households had no operational holdings [NSSO, 1991-92]. The proportion of the landless households increased to about 30 per cent in 2002-03 [NSSO, 2002-03]. It can be assumed that land reform, a major political agenda in the state in pre 1960s and 80s and what still could be a pro-poor policy, took a back seat.

On the economic front too, Bihar appeared to paint a dismal picture during the 1990s. For example, the annual growth rate of Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP) was 4.66 per cent during the period between 1980-81 and 1990-91. It fell to 2.69 per cent during the period between 1990-91 and 1999-2000. Similarly, annual growth rate of per capita GSDP fell from 2.45 per cent to 1.12 per cent during the same periods [Ahluwalia, 2000].

During the 1990s, the law and order situation worsened and as a result crime rates increased considerably. In 1990, about 4166 cases of murder, 2138 cases of kidnapping and abductions and 3164 cases of dacoity were reported in the state. With this, the percentage share of Bihar in total cases of murder, kidnappings and dacoity reported for India, as a whole was 11.9 per cent, 11.6 per cent and 28.5, respectively. In 1999, Bihar accounted for 14.0 per cent of murder, 11.2 per cent of kidnappings and 30.9 per cent of dacoity of total cases of murder, kidnapping and dacoity reported for India as a whole [Crime in India, 1990, 1999]. In short, macro level statistics suggest that things rather worsened in the 1990s in Bihar.

Declining popularity of Lalu's regime and loss of many seats in the election could in part be attributed to declining socio-economic conditions of people in the state. However, by and large, the supporters of Lalu Prasad still had confidence in him and voted for him (Tables 7). It can be argued here that development means differently to

different people. Common people may not see development the way development economists do. It is more likely to be the case where social structure restricts socio-economic mobility of those at lower rungs or those that constitute the bulk of social 'others'. For them, the issues of being 'social/political equals' may be more important than being 'economic equals' until socio-political processes aimed at offering social justice/self dignity get saturated. If this was the case, it could be argued the rhetoric of social justice/self dignity had not reached its saturation point until now.

Though RJD did not have majority in the Legislative Assembly, it formed the government with the support of Congress, Left Front and others. In a sense, it was a rare occasion for the RJD led government to learn from the mistakes and to improve its image and poll prospects by paying heed to administration, deteriorating and law and order and developmental issues. But reports of kidnapping, atrocities against dalits perpetrated by upper backward castes including yadavs and landlord senas, dismal records of economic and infrastructure conditions dominated the newspaper headlines. However, despite the alleged ills of the RJD regime, the party performed well in the Lok Sabha election held in 2004. One of the reasons for the electoral success of the RJD could be attributed to the grand alliance that the party led. Ramvilas Paswan's breaking away from the NDA in the backdrop of the Gujarat riots of 2002 had weakened the NDA, and Lalu Prasad Yadav succeeded in getting Paswan's newly formed Lok Janashakti Party (LJSP) and the Congress in his fold. The alliance paid dividends in the election battlefield and the RJD-LJSP-Congress combine swept the state. Muslims and Yadavs voted *en-bloc* for the alliance and even though the NDA managed to retain its traditional upper caste and Kurmi-Koeri votes, a decisive lead of 19 percentage points among Dalits along with a lead among other caste groups as well gave the RJD led alliance an edge

against its competitors. Though coalition calculus brought spectacular success to the RJD, there was simmering consternation within the party, especially keeping in view the up coming assembly election, for the issues in its political arsenals had already been exhausted.

Amidst hopes and despair; confidence and consternation in the rival camps, came the Assembly election in the month of February 2005. A crucial political event between May 2004 and February 2005 was the tussle between Lalu Prasad Yadav and Ramvilas Paswan over the Railway Ministry at the Centre. This along with a general personality clash on who is the popular leader of dalits and other marginalised sections in Bihar led to the drift in the popular alliance of the 2004 Lok Sabha election. Ramvilas Paswan decided to go alone in the electoral battlefield. This created a complicated situation both for the political parties and the voters; for Paswan was banking on the same voters who constituted the support base of RJD and to some extent of JD (U).

As expected, the poll results created a complicated situation. The poll verdict was even further splintered compared to that in 2000. The seat tally of RJD came down to 75 from 115 in 2000. On the other hand, while the BJP increased only 2 seats compared to what it had won in 2000 (35), the JD (U) made a spectacular success - a gain of 37 seats by improving its seat tally from 18 in 2000 to 55 in February 2005. However, even putting together their seats, both JD (U) and BJP were far from the majority mark. RJD and Congress combine too was unable to form the government; for the two parties together had only 85 seats. The key to power, however, was in the hands of Paswan, even as his party LJSP had won only 29 seats.

Thus, the undisputed gainer from this election was Ramvilas Paswan and his party; the LJSP, which succeeded in creating a niche in the state's electoral space by pushing the party above the

threshold of viability. The Paswan factor made a deeper impact on the electoral outcomes as his LJSP played spoiler for all its former allies and caused a huge loss to the RJD. Without the support of the LJSP, no party or alliance could have proved majority on the floor of the house. Although the election results put the major actors in the dock, the situation was even more difficult for Ramvilas Paswan. If he wanted to see a popular government in place, he had to join either the NDA or the RJD led alliance. The dilemma of Ramvilas Paswan emanated much more from his personal relationship with the chieftains of the two grand coalitions and his self-interest rather than his ideological stand for which he was regarded by people. While, on the one hand, he had to settle personal scores with Lalu Prasad, he had embittered his relationship with the NDA before the 2004 Lok Sabha election. Further, he was a Cabinet minister in the UPA government at the Centre. Being part of the government of the rival coalition at the Centre, he could not have supported the NDA in the state to form the government at the same time. However, he argued that he would not support RJD either to form the government because the party had led the state to darkness and people wanted to get rid of it. It was, therefore, his duty not to alter people's verdict. With regard to support to the NDA, the argument invoked was: since the NDA led government was a mute spectator of Gujarat massacre and for which he had deserted the NDA, it would be a joke and go against his principled political stand if he supported NDA.

As a result of no party/coalition being able to prove majority in the assembly, President's rule was imposed. Even during the President's rule no compromise between RJD and LJSP became feasible, nor could NDA manage the requisite number of MLAs so as to stake claim to form a popular government. It implied that only fresh election, due in October, would solve the crisis. It certainly did when the election results were out. Though political equations remained intact, the

results of October 2005 assembly elections were decisive and did give a clear mandate to the JD (U)- BJP coalition. With this the 15-year rule of RJD finally came to an end. Out of the 243 seats, JD (U) and BJP bagged 88 and 55 seats, respectively. The RJD with 54 seats was placed third. LJSP was punished and its seat tally reduced to 10 from 29 in the February election. In short, the political landscape in the state underwent remarkable modifications.

### III. END OF LALU'S 15-YEAR RULE: TOWARDS AN EXPLANATION

Even as the political processes that began in 1990 offered a window of studying political reconfiguration marked by end of hegemonic politics in Bihar, there did not appear any serious studies capturing the dynamics underlying this long awaited political change. Nor did there appear any scholarly work explaining how far the political change or political reconfiguration beginning in 1990 kept its promises; how it did impact on corresponding changes in other aspects of life and why even the newly reconfigured politics was giving way to yet another political reconfiguration. However, these issues were occasionally debated in electronic and print media. There were many explanations, some using empirical evidence and others simply based on impression or personal acquaintance with the state affairs. However, broadly two explanations appeared to be more important than others. One hypothesis is that Lalu Prasad, the leading light of political upsurge that took place in 1990, could fruitfully mobilised hitherto neglected, marginalised and not-so-marginalised communities. The politics of symbolism combined with Lalu's rhetoric skill gave these masses a sense of proud and dignity, though in reality they remained on the same social and economical terrain where they were. But politics of symbolism has its own limitations and cannot last for long. Along with *izzat* (dignity), people wanted *roti* and *dhoti* too. Deteriorating law and order situation, threadbare economic and

infrastructure conditions over a decade and other issues of governance weaned away the voters from the RJD. As a result of this the so-called caste-community combination, particularly, the M-Y-D (Muslim, Yadav and Dalit), who voted for RJD for so long, weakened in assembly elections of 2000 and finally disintegrated in the assembly elections held in 2005. Thus, the issues of governance and development rather than politics of symbolism were the crucial factors that led to the fall of RJD's 15-year rule.

The other explanation is that caste-community factor continues to play a crucial role in voting and expression of political preferences. The RJD was voted out of power not because of pre-eminence of concerns for development but because of shift in caste alliances. Yadavs and Muslims still overwhelmingly voted for RJD and the upper castes for NDA. The 2005 elections were no different from previous elections in the 1990s, except that Ramvilas Paswan, the most popular dalit leader, was no longer on Lalu's side, but fighting against him. He took away large section of dalits with him. RJD failed to strike a compromise and form a strategic alliance with Paswan that cost RJD the loss of power. Had RJD and LJSP come together, an RJD led government might have been in place and hence yet another extension of RJD rule in the state.

Before we delve deep into the discussion of caste versus development as major political issues that kept RJD in power and led to ouster of it respectively, let us first briefly examine the social basis of voting in the 1990s. As discussed earlier, the Mandal/Mandir issues in the late 1980s brought about significant changes in electoral politics of Hindi Heartland. The prevailing understanding of politics in the post-Mandal era is that politics in this part of the country is all about caste, reflecting deep-rooted social and political inequalities and competing interests. There is no gainsaying the fact that there is social and economic disparity between different caste

groups, which at one level act as cleavages in politics and at another level also determine the share in political power. However, these claims often remain unsubstantiated and therefore, need to be examined empirically.

Table 7 and 8 provide social bases of support in the 1990s.<sup>12</sup> Reading two tables together, it is clear that while the popularity of RJD declined in 1996, it continued to draw large support from its core constituency, that is, Yadavs, Muslims and other lower socio-economic strata. In 1999 Lok Sabha elections, the vote share of RJD further declined which could be attributed to shift of other OBCs and very poor people in general from RJD to NDA. It is because the support of Yadavs and Muslims to RJD remained almost intact (Table 7). Similarly, while RJD lost its support in rural areas, it could manage to increase support base in urban areas. It is possible to argue that having consolidated its support base in rural areas, the RJD reached out to the urban voters. It can be explained other way round too. Having seen that RJD is deeply entrenched in power, urban voters including the rich began tilting towards RJD, though at slower pace.

In the assembly elections held in 2000, there was a further decline by one percentage point in the vote share of RJD. The pattern of support to RJD remained more or less same as in general elections to Lok Sabha held in 1996 and 1999, except that it lost significant portion of Muslim votes. However, the RJD improved its electoral performance both in terms of vote share and seats in the general elections to Lok Sabha held in 2004. As it can be seen in table 6, the RJD won back Muslims and Dalits as well as illiterate masses. It can be explained, though tentatively, by its striking an alliance with the Congress and LJSP of Ram Vilas Paswan and the Gujarat communal riots in 2002. While alliance with LJSP helped RJD to get dalit votes, Gujarat communal riots and aftermath might have forced Muslims to vote for the RJD.

Nevertheless, the electoral conditions changed in less than a year. The vote share of RJD again declined in the assembly elections held within months in February 2005 so much so that it lost the electoral edge to remain in power. It lost support in all sections of society but more spectacularly in its core constituency. Yadavas still supported RJD overwhelmingly, but it lost significantly among Muslims, Dalits and poor sections as a whole. At the slight risk of repetition, it must be noted here that the coalition crystallised in 2004, fell apart in 2005. Ram Vilas Paswan fell out with Lalu, reportedly over ministerial birth at the Centre and he went to the polls on his own. It

cost RJD dalit and Muslim votes. However, there were growing dissatisfactions among Muslims in general. While during RJD regime Bihar was free from communal riots, it was felt that nothing substantial was done to improve socioeconomic conditions of the community. Added to this, Nitish Kumar was able to make a dent into *pasmanda* (backward) Muslims by taking along with him *pasmanda* Muslim leaders like Ali Anwar, Manazir Hasan, Aijazul Haq and others. The RJD further lost its traditional constituency in the assembly election held after six months, that is, in the month of October.

**Table 7. Social Bases of Voting in Bihar: Lok Sabha Elections 1996-2004**

Categories	RJD			NDA@			Others		
	1996#	1999	2004	1996	1999	2004	1996	1999	2004
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)
<b>All</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>33</b>
<b>Locality</b>									
Rural	33	27	32	34	46	35	33	27	33
Urban	26	39	24	51	29	47	23	32	29
<b>Gender</b>									
Male	31	28	31	33	44	36	36	28	33
Female	33	29	31	37	42	38	30	29	31
<b>Education</b>									
Illiterate	32	30	36	33	40	28	35	30	36
Up to primary	43	28	33	30	46	35	27	26	32
Up to Matric	27	25	26	40	52	42	33	23	32
Graduate and above	22	25	26	50	45	46	28	30	28
<b>Caste/Community</b>									
Upper Castes	5	2	17	85	75	64	10	23	19
Yadav	59	55	52	24	21	14	17	24	34
Koeri-Kurmi	20	10	10	60	75	68	20	15	22
Other OBCs	37	19	25	37	48	36	26	33	39
Dalits	27	35	36	22	41	45	51	33	19
Muslims	58	64	52	4	13	8	38	23	40
<b>Economic Class</b>									
Very Poor	34	29	32	30	37	33	36	34	35
Poor	33	31	34	32	52	34	35	17	32
Middle	28	25	26	40	58	43	32	17	31
Rich	22	25	25	41	45	47	37	30	28

Notes:

1. Figures are as percentages of those who voted in the elections

2. @NDA includes BJP and Samata in 1996; BJP and JD (U) in 1999 and 2004

3. # JD in 1996

Table 8. Social Bases of Voting in Bihar: Assembly Elections 2000-2005

Categories	RJD			NDA			LJSP			Others		
	2000	2005 Feb.	2005 Oct.	2000	2005 Feb.	2005 Oct.	2000	2005 Feb.	2005 Oct.	2000	2005 Feb.	2005 Oct.
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)	(13)
<b>All</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Locality</b>												
Rural	28	24	25	22	26	36	-	13	12	50	38	27
Urban	30	33	13	38	25	40	-	7	5	32	35	42
<b>Gender</b>												
Men	28	24	23	21	28	37	-	13	11	11	35	29
Women	29	27	24	22	22	36	-	12	12	11	39	28
<b>Education</b>												
Illiterate	30	33	28	21	23	28	-	13	13	49	31	31
Up to primary	29	25	26	18	26	33	-	13	13	53	36	28
Up to Matric	26	19	22	25	29	41	-	12	10	49	40	27
Graduate and above	22	18	13	38	30	51	-	11	6	40	41	30
<b>Caste/Community</b>							-					
Upper Castes	10	7	5	42	51	64	-	12	6	48	30	25
Koeri-Kurmi	21	9	12	39	49	61	-	21	6	40	21	21
Yadavs	75	79	61	6	3	12	-	3	4	19	15	23
Other OBC	24	22	17	27	24	47	-	14	8	49	40	28
Dalits	27	23	17	24	20	17	-	14	28	49	43	38
Muslims	48	35	36	3	5	8	-	10	15	49	50	41
<b>Economic Class</b>												
Rich	-	14	17	-	48	54	-	14	5	-	24	24
Middle	-	23	22	-	27	40	-	12	9	-	38	29
Poor	-	30	25	-	18	34	-	14	12	-	38	29
Very Poor	-	26	27	-	25	24	-	14	16	-	35	33

Note:

1. Figures are as percentages of those who voted in the elections;

2. NDA includes BJP and Samata for 2000 and BJP and JD (U) for 2005

Source: Bihar Election Studies, relevant years, CSDS, Delhi.

From the above analysis it appears that the political parties in Bihar had their well defined voting constituency, that is, social bases of support for them. While RJD largely drew its support from Yadavs, Muslims and to some extent from Dalits and poorer segments as a whole, the NDA's support base constituted by forward castes, non-yadav backward castes, educated and middle and upper middle strata of society. RJD seems to have lost due to glaring shift in its core constituency in 2005. On the other hand, the NDA not only managed to consolidate its core constituency but also gained though marginally among other voters.

However, the above analysis does not clarify which of several social identities has been crucial for mobilisation of voters. In the context of Bihar, though caste and class to a large extent overlap

each other, yet popular impression is that it is rather the caste identity that influences and informs political choice. Simply put, it is not known as to how likely an illiterate and poor voter was likely to vote for the RJD regardless of his/her caste affiliation, locality, etc. In order to test this question, we use binary logistic regressions<sup>13</sup> for a number of elections (both parliamentary and assembly) and identify the key determinants for voting for RJD and the NDA. We focus on voting for RJD alone and not its allies because the party has not been consistent in its coalitions. On the other hand, NDA has been a consistent alliance; therefore, the ensuing analysis is for NDA rather than different constituents of it. Our list of independent variables includes caste/communities, education, gender, locality and economic class<sup>14</sup> (Table 9).

Table 9. Odds Ratios of Predictor Variables for Votes to RJD

Predictor Variables Caste/Community	1999 (Lok Sabha) Odds Ratio	2000 (Assembly) Odds Ratio	2004 (Lok Sabha) Odds Ratio
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Other castes (ref.)			-
Upper castes	0.093**	0.363*	0.6318*
Yadav	6.157**	7.119*	3.109*
Kurmi-Koeri	0.731	0.898	0.3092*
Other OBC	2.078	0.940	0.8342
Dalits	3.411	1.218	1.255
Muslim	8.926**	3.100*	3.222*
<b>Class</b>			
Very poor (ref.)			
Poor	1.280	1.305*	0.959
Middle	0.814	0.766***	1.163
Rich	1.008	0.883	1.040
<b>Gender</b>			
Male (ref.)			
Female	0.825**	0.945	0.8007**
<b>Locality</b>			
Rural (ref.)			
Urban	1.705*	0.857	0.795**
<b>Education</b>			
Illiterate (ref.)			
Primary/middle	0.665	0.778	1.205
Upto Matric	1.106	0.905	0.779**
Graduate and above	1.106	1.839	0.835
<b>N</b>	<b>880</b>	<b>2225</b>	<b>1191</b>

Notes:

1. Ref. denotes reference category; for example, the reference category for caste is castes other than ones being considered here.

2. \* statistically significant at 1 per cent level; \*\* statistically significant at 5 per cent level; \*\*\* statistically significant at 10 per cent level. The odds ratios printed in Tables 9 and 13 are, as defined in footnote 13, obtained by raising  $e$  to the power of the coefficient of the corresponding variable in the logistic regression shown in that footnote. The statistical significance reported is of  $b_1$ ,  $b_2$ . Since odds ratio, say, for the group with  $(X_1 = 1)$  = odds for the group with  $(X_1 = 1)$  / odds for the reference category =  $e^{b_1}$ , if  $b_1$  is statistically significantly different from zero, then the odds ratio for voters with characteristic  $X_1$  ( $X_1 = 1$ ), is statistically significantly different from the odds ratio for the reference category.

Source: National/State Election Study relevant years, Post poll, CSDS, Delhi.

A look at the results of logistic regression presented in table 9 suggests that the impact of variables on propensity to vote for JD/RJD varied in the three elections taken for analysis. Education and class help very much in explaining the vote for JD/RJD (except that the poor have shown a preference for the RJD in the 2000 assembly election). It is probably due to very high correlation between caste, class and educational attainment in Bihar. The impact of gender and locality seems to be volatile and not consistent across three elections. However, caste-community and voting choice nexus

appears to be consistent in the three elections chosen for analysis. As expected, controlling for other background variables, Yadavs were far more likely to have voted for RJD/JD than other castes.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Muslims continued to show strong preference for RJD/JD compared to other castes during these elections. As expected, forward castes and Koeri-kurmils were least likely to have voted for RJD/JD compared to other castes.

From the above discussion it is clear that despite the claims of failure of Lalu regime on

developmental fronts towards the end of 1990s, political mobilisation based itself on caste-community identities. The solid support of Muslims and Yadavs (popularly known as MY alliance) and to some extent support of dalits kept Lalu and his party in power. If this were not to be the case, RJD would have been wiped out way back in 2000 as it failed on all counts ranging from law and order to development of state, which political observers always made the basis for predicting RJD's ouster and each time they failed.

Let us now examine the popular explanations for RJD's ouster in the assembly elections held in 2005. At the outset of this section, two hypotheses seeking to explain regime change in Bihar after 15 years were discussed. The first hypothesis was

that in the 2005 elections, development and related issues of governance such as law and order were the major concern for the voter and as a consequence, caste/community alliance did not work for RJD. The ultimate result was dislodging of RJD from power. Was development an issue in this election? Did the caste-community alliance disintegrate?

It is evident from table 10 that overall people had now negative opinions on issues of development. Only a few were of the opinion that security of common people, condition of roads and supply of electricity had improved during Lalu/Rabri regime. Majority of the voters across the board felt that the situation had worsened.

**Table 10. Voters Opinion on Different Issues: Bihar Assembly Elections 2005 (February)**

Issues	Those saying.....		
	<i>Worsened</i>	<i>Did Not Change</i>	<i>Improved</i>
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>a. Security of Common People</i>			
All	45	28	20
Rural	45	27	20
Urban	43	36	21
<i>b. Condition of Roads</i>			
All	63	20	11
Rural	64	18	11
Urban	56	29	14
<i>c. Supply of Electricity</i>			
All	63	22	7
Rural	62	23	7
Urban	69	22	7

Note: Figures indicate percentages of the response to respective question. Row figures do not add up to 1000 because 'no opinion' has not been reported.

Source: Bihar Election Studies, Post-poll, 2005 (Feb), CSDS, Delhi.

**Question wording:** Now I will read out a few issues. For each one, tell me whether it has improved, worsened or remained same as before under JD/RJD government during last 15 years?

However, it is significant to note that the opinion of people on the issue of dignity (izzat) of the poor was not as polarised as on other issues such as condition of roads and security of common people. The proportion of poor people themselves who held that dignity of the poor worsened was significantly lesser than that of those who thought otherwise (Table 11).<sup>16</sup> What is even more significant to note is that though

people discounted RJD regime on developmental fronts, yet most of them accepted that the *taaqat* (strength) of backward castes increased. Not surprisingly, Yadavas were more likely to feel the strength than others. However, dalits do not seem to have a perception that their strength increased, rather the larger section among them felt that for them situation remained unchanged.



**Table 11. Voters' Opinion on Different Issues: Bihar Assembly Elections 2005 (February)**

Issues/Social Groups	Those saying.....		
	<i>Declined</i>	<i>Did Not Change</i>	<i>Improved</i>
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
<i>a. Dignity of Poor</i>			
All	25	32	37
Very Poor	25	38	37
Poor	24	33	39
Middle	25	34	37
Rich	44	28	26
<i>b. Strength of Backward Castes</i>			
All	22	24	46
Yadavs	7	24	60
Koeri-Kurmis	27	23	44
Other OBCs	18	27	46
Dalits	19	32	40
Muslims	26	22	46
Forward Castes	32	17	46

Note: Figures are percentages of the response to respective question. The row figures do not add up to 100 because 'no opinion' has not been reported.

Source: Bihar Election Studies, Post-poll, 2005 (Feb), CSDS, Delhi.

**Question wording:** Now I will read out a few issues. For each one, tell me whether it has improved, worsened or remained same as before under JD/RJD government during last 15 years?

**Table 12. Issues that Influenced the Voters for Selection of Party**

Social Groups	Issues			
	Development of State	Employment	Good Candidate	Dignity of Caste-Community
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
All	58	19	11	5
Forward castes	66	13	12	4
Yadavs	55	16	14	6
Koeri-Kurmis	56	21	10	6
Other backward castes	58	16	13	5
Dalits	62	22	4	6
Muslims	52	24	10	3

Note: Figures are percentages of those who responded to the respective question; Row figures do not add up to 100 because other considerations have not been responded.

Source: Bihar Election Studies, 2005 (Feb), CSDS, Delhi.

**Question wording:** Out of the issues mentioned to you, which was the most important for you while casting your vote?

How these issues mediated with propensity of voters along with their caste and other identities to accept/reject RJD as their political choice is difficult to measure directly. A direct question was asked: what was the main consideration while voting for a candidate or a party as well. Again, it appears that a large majority of voters across caste-communities were driven by issues of development when they did cast their vote (Table 12). Taking the two tables (10 and 12) together,

following observations could be made. One, a good majority of voters poorly rated RJD's rule on issues of security and safety and development. Two, development was the most powerful driving force for majority of voters in terms of selection of party to vote for in the assembly election held in the month of February 2005. The logical corollary is that development was an important factor that caused the downfall of RJD government in that election.

If development was really an issue that mobilised people to vote against the RJD, it can be surmised then that caste-community coalition that used to vote for the RJD either must have fallen apart and charted out an independent course or even if the bond of coalition was there, it was not as compact as used to be earlier. The results of logistic regression presented in table 13 enable us to examine the proposition at hand.

It can be seen in table 13 that predictor variables like gender, location of voters in terms of rural/urban do not appear to be statistically significant as far as their propensity to vote for RJD is concerned. However, caste variables demonstrate stronger association with support for particular political parties. In the assembly elections held in February 2005, Yadavs stood solidly behind RJD regardless of their education, residence and class location and were more likely to have voted for RJD than for other parties (high odds ratio and statistically significant - see the comment on footnote 2 of Table 9 above). However, Muslims and Dalits did no longer constitute the core support base of RJD as they used to be. They were likely to vote for RJD with more or less same propensity as other castes (the referent category) did, when controlling for other variables. Hence, RJD lost its formidable Muslim-Yadav alliance. Why yadavs still voted for RJD when the electoral tide was against Lalu Prasad is understandable. Lalu was still a symbol of power for yadavs and it is natural in a situation where caste identity is linked with access to scarce resource. Also, as political observers commented, there was a phenomenon of 'yadavisation' whereby Lalu delivered to the interests of his fellow castes by giving important administrative posts and contracts [Hauser, 1997; Das, 1997]. But, others had no choice other than sulking or going against him. This could be one of the reasons why Muslims and Dalits drifted away from the RJD. In short, the caste-community

combination that kept RJD in power for 15 long years did not work in the assembly election held in February 2005.

Yadavs as a whole or some sections among them might still be willing to invest in symbolism, but how did a large majority of voters see this election? What might have loosened the social coalition (Muslim - Yadav) as it appeared to be the case in preceding section? Was development an issue that drove a large majority of RJD supporters, leave alone others? It is clearly seen in table 12 that development of the state including employment was the most preferred consideration while the voters cast their vote. However, it is not known how those for whom development was an important issue voted. In order to examine this we clubbed the preferred considerations of voting such as the issues of corruption, employment and development of state together and entered the same in the regression. When controlling for all other variables, it appears that compared to those for whom dignity of caste-community being the most important consideration, voters for whom development was an issue were much less likely to vote for RJD and more likely to vote for the NDA. The impact of this issue was further crystallised in the election held six months later and led to exit of RJD from power finally. Thus it can be reasonably argued that the issues of development mattered in the election and many of the core supporters of RJD would have drifted apart.

Now let us examine, what contributed to the rise of NDA. In a sense, what works against a position, might be favouring the opposition straightaway. In other words, what acted against RJD's electoral prospect, must have favoured the NDA, the largest opposition political formation. But in competitive electoral politics where there are more than one opposition parties, it is possible that the dividends of anti-incumbency waves may

get divided among several actors and also may not harm the incumbent party in terms of seat tally, as it would seem to appear.

Broadly speaking, NDA kept its core constituency (i.e., forward castes, Koeri-Kurmi and highly educated section) intact in the assembly elections held in 2005. Those concerned about governance and development of state were more likely to have voted for the NDA when all other variables are controlled for. This

relationship emerged stronger in the October election and it added to relative advantage of NDA other than split in MY alliance of RJD. In sum, it can be stated that the defeat of RJD was due to the combined effects of split of MY alliance and development of state emerging as major issue rather than effect of either alone. It is because had development been the driving factor, large section of those who drifted from RJD (namely Muslims and dalits) would have voted for JD (U) but this does not seem to be the case.

**Table 13. Odds Ratios of Predictor Variables for RJD Votes: Assembly Elections 2005**

Predictor Variables	Odds Ratios (2005 February)		Odds Ratios (2005 October)	
	RJD	NDA	RJD	NDA
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
<b>Locality</b>				
Rural (ref.)	-			
Urban	1.810	0.825	0.775*	0.921
<b>Gender</b>				
Male (ref.)				
Female	1.019	0.744***	0.946	1.043
<b>Education</b>				
Illiterate (ref.)				
Primary/middle	0.866	1.094	1.128***	0.961
Matric	0.9484	1.185	0.989	1.046
Graduate	1.086	0.591**	0.746*	1.194**
<b>Caste/Community</b>				
Other castes (ref.)	-			
Upper castes	0.249*	8.666*	0.231*	3.237*
Yadav	9.654*	0.075*	5.798*	0.297*
Kurmi-Koeri	0.299*	4.177*	0.613*	3.223*
Other OBCs	1.061	1.648***	0.8514	2.049*
Dalits	1.029	1.305	0.811**	0.568*
Muslim	1.311	0.1122*	2.445	0.2091*
<b>Class</b>				
Rich (ref.)				
Middle	1.314	0.587**	0.9358	1.089
Poor	1.508***	0.640***	0.9543	0.984
Very poor	0.786	1.580***	1.116	0.664*
<b>Most Preferred Consideration for voting</b>				
Dignity of caste-community (ref.)				
Governance and development of the state	0.665***	1.192	0.810*	1.391*

Total Sample = 887 for 2005 February and 7695 for 2005 October elections.

Notes:

1. ref. denotes reference category;

2. \* statistically significant at 1 per cent level; \*\* statistically significant at 5 per cent level and \*\*\* statistically significant at 10 per cent level.

Source: Bihar Election Study, 2005, CSDS, Delhi.

Now let us take up the 'alliance hypothesis'. There is hardly any doubt that the break-up of the Lok Sabha alliance damaged the prospects of both the RJD and the Congress. The RJD allies (UPA) in the Lok Sabha elections had polled 44.3 per cent of votes polled. In the 2005 assembly elections, the combined vote share of all these parties that now fought the elections separately was about the same at 43.7 per cent. In simple arithmetic terms, had the UPA contested the February 2005 assembly elections while maintaining the alliance of 2004 Lok Sabha elections, the alliance could have been in majority in the 243 member Bihar state assembly. Even an alliance between the RJD and the Congress would have brought some dividends and the combine could have won 102 seats. In 31 seats won by the NDA, the Congress and the LJSP emerged as the spoiler and directly harmed the RJD, as their vote share in these seats was larger than the difference between the NDA and the RJD's votes. Though splitting of the UPA votes caused some harm to the RJD, yet it is not correct to say that this election verdict was the reflection of making or unmaking of alliances. If Ramvilas Paswan's LJSP secured 12.0 per cent votes and won 29 seats, it probably could be possible because he fought against the RJD and provided an alternative window to a large section of voters who would not like either RJD or NDA. In other words, even if Paswan were with RJD, it could have done marginally better in the polls, for part of Paswan's votes might have gone to parties other than RJD.

#### IV. SUMMING UP

The politics in Bihar in the post-independence period, as in many states of India, has gone through several transformational processes. These processes seem to have dialectical relationship between failure of long established national party in power and rising political consciousness among hitherto backward segments of society. Thus, at one level, Bihar has moved from single national party dominance to

fragmented polity with many regional parties having their distinctive support bases. Until 1990, except for a brief period of 1977-79, the Congress dominated the politics in the state. At the other level, the polity has seen a kind of 'role reversal' in a sense that the forward caste dominated polity gave way to the backward castes led polity. In the pre-1990s period, forward castes were disproportionately over represented in the assembly and so also in other public spheres. On the other hand, the backward castes, despite their numerical superiority over forward castes, remained under represented in almost all public spheres and political institutions in particular. The year 1990 reversed the dice of politics and political representation. Now the backward castes were in majority in the assembly.

A closer look at the caste dynamics in Bihar polity seems to suggest that the forward-backward divide has never been neat and compact. While in the pre -1990s, upper castes dominated the Congress as well as the assembly; there were deep-rooted conflicts amongst various constituents of the so-called forward castes within the Congress, which led to acute factionalism in the party. Similarly, consolidation of backward castes was also not compact. The consolidation of backward castes under the banner of Janata Dal in 1990 developed fissures within a period of five years. The backward castes split into two camps led by Lalu Prasad Yadav and Nitish Kumar. Now, the two major backward caste formations Koeri-Kurmi and Yadav became political rivals. Again, Ram Vilas Paswan, the most popular Dalit leader, formed his own party and supposedly broke Dalit voters away from RJD. Furthermore, while Nitish Kumar led Samata/JD(U) formed an alliance with the BJP - a party seen as largely supported by forward castes, RJD struck alliance with the Congress still having its root in forward caste voters and more importantly it was traditionally the bete noire of backward caste interests.

Though the rout of Congress was hailed as a mark of change and Lalu led JD/RJD in power in the 1990s an epitome of social justice and dignity of poor, little did change on the ground except enhancement of voting rights and choices of the lower and marginalised social groups. For most part, Lalu could not move beyond politics of symbolism if one goes by macro level developmental statistics. However, in a context of age-long restrictive social and economic opportunities, perhaps issues of development or wider provisions of basic necessities as drivers of mass mobilisation take back seat for a while and the question of self-dignity becomes the prime mover for the voters. This is why the vulnerable communities continued to support RJD despite widely held view that the state under the regime of Lalu Prasad was characterised by anarchy, non-development, sagged economy and patronising fellow caste men.

The politics of 'populism' and 'symbolism' has its own limits and so has the empty sense of self-pride. Self-dignity alone cannot appeal to the voters for long. Along with self-dignity, people have other aspirations and necessities as well. Lalu Prasad failed to realise this and continued to play the same political trick and eventually was voted out of power after 15 years. In the assembly election held in February 2005, political rivals of RJD attacked it for neglecting development of the state. The issue of development appealed to the voter. Majority of voters held that development of the state was a major consideration when they voted for a party. As RJD had been in power during last 15 years, obviously it was to be blamed for neglecting development of the state. Thus, the verdict of 2005 assembly elections was largely the rejection of politics of symbolism, though caste identity of political leadership still mattered for a significant section of voters. On balance, it could be said that exit of RJD was a combined effect of loosening caste-community alliance and urge for better governance among the voters across the board. Later developments have shown

that the politics in Bihar has now moved from symbolism to development to a significant extent. It is both a challenge and an opportunity for the incumbent government. It is a challenge because people have great expectation and want to see change on the ground. But, it is not as easy a task as people may think, for it has to start almost from the scratch. It is an opportunity because even if it is able to sow the seeds of development and demonstrates strong determination for the cause of development rather than relying on rhetoric, it may re-orient the politics in the state for the welfare of the masses.

#### NOTES

1. Around this time, in fact, entire North India underwent major political transformation with declining political influence of upper castes and rising political prominence of the Backward Castes and Dalits. This resulted in shrinking of political space for national parties still dominated by upper castes and gaining salience regional parties, often dominated by one caste or the other. Also see, [Yogendra Yadav, 1999; Jafferlot, 2003].

2. The data sources for the analysis are post-poll surveys conducted by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), Delhi. All the data sets were collected after voting ended during the 2000 Assembly election, 2004 Parliamentary election, and both the Assembly elections held in 2005. A standard structured questionnaire was used in all the surveys, and a secret dummy ballot was used for asking voting preference. A Multi-stage stratified random sample was employed in all the surveys, and Probability Proportionate to Size (PPS) and Systematic Random Sampling (SRS) techniques were used at different strata. The samples are representative of the political and demographic diversity of Bihar.

3. Under Bihar Reorganisation Act 2000, Bihar was divided and a new state of Jharkhand came into being on November 15, 2000, the birth anniversary of legendary Bhagwan Birsa Munda.

4. Bihar is one of the least urbanised states of India. Only one-tenth of total population of the state resides in urban centres [Census of India, 2001].

5. According to the Census 2001, only 48 per cent of population (7 years and above) returned as literate as against 65.3 per cent for the country. Bihar is the lowest literate state in the country. There exists huge disparity in terms of gender, caste, religion and residence. As against 60.3 per cent male

literacy rates, the female literacy rate was just 33.5 per cent. Similarly, rural literacy rate is much lower (44.4 per cent) than that of urban (72.7 per cent). The literacy rate of Scheduled Castes is much lower than that of the general population.

6. About 80 per cent of workers are engaged in agriculture and allied activities. About two-fifths of workers are cultivators and another two-fifths agricultural labourers [Census, 2001]. About 90 per cent of rural labourers are agricultural labourers.

7. It is to be noted that Indian Census stopped the practice of collecting and compiling information on individual castes, other than SCs, in the post-independence period. However, the NSS (1999-00) in its 55th round gave information on certain socio-economic parameters by social groups. It divided social groups into SC/ST, OBC and others. From this, one can estimate the proportion of broad caste groups such as OBCs and forward castes for recent years. According to 2001 census, the total population of Bihar was 82.2 million of which 13.7 and 0.8 million were Muslims and STs, respectively. If we subtract Muslim and tribal population from total population, we get 67.7 million who were Hindus. As per NSSO (1999-00), OBCs accounted for 54.4 per cent of total Hindu population. If we consider this to be a near realistic figure, the population of OBC (Hindu) should number around 37 million. According to 2001 census, there were 13 million persons belonging to the Scheduled Castes. Now, if we subtract the population of OBCs and SCs (37 + 13 millions) from total Hindu population, we get 17.7 million as others who could be described as forward castes. From this calculation, we have 37 million OBCs (Hindus), 17.7 million forward caste Hindus, 13 million SCs, 13.7 million Muslims and 0.8 million STs adding up to 82.2 millions, the total population of state. Based on the figures arrived at, the percentage share of different caste/communities in total population is as follows: OBCs (Hindu) - 45.2 per cent; upper castes 21.5 per cent; Scheduled Castes 15.8 per cent; Muslims 16.6 per cent and tribes 0.8 per cent. When compared to 1931 census, the estimate for upper caste population appears to be much higher, however.

8. According to NSS [1999-2000] estimates, OBCs accounted for 54 per cent of total Hindu population in Bihar. It can be assumed that the proportion of individual castes such as Yadavs, Kurmis remains more or less same as in 1931 census.

9. Bihar became the first state to bring out a law against *Zamindari* immediately after Independence. The state government was quick at enacting the Zamindari Abolition Act in 1948. The government issued notices to *Zamindars* asking them to surrender the documents of their estates. However, most *Zamindars* did not respond to the government's demand and no major change took place. One of the reasons for this was that many politicians and bureaucrats came from affluent *Zamindar* families. In 1950,

the Bihar Land Reforms Act was passed and was upheld by the Supreme Court after being challenged by the Bihar Landlords Association under the leadership of the Maharaja of Darbhanga. The refusal by the *Zamindars* to surrender the land records of their erstwhile *Zamindaris* was challenged in the courts. But the Supreme Court of India in a brief judgement upheld the *Zamindars'* stand. The result was the state was without any records of land holding in the *Zamindari* areas. Whatever the land-owners could produce became the documents accepted by the courts. The pace of Survey Settlement operations was so slow that they virtually were non-existent. By 1983, only six out of Bihar's 50 districts had been surveyed and settled, with new land records.

10. Thanks are due to Professor N. Rath for this point.

11. Some observers having their eyes set on Bihar politics commented that it was the yadavisation phenomenon that angered upward mobile koeris and kurmis among whom there were more professionals and bureaucrats than among yadavas. And finally it caused the split between Lalu Prasad and Nitish Kumar (who formed Samata Party in 1994). Also see, Das, A.N. [1997].

12. Lokniti has survey data since 1991. However, we concentrate here on post 1996 Lok Sabha elections. The reason is that the government of Lalu Prasad Yadav had replaced the Congress only recently, that is, in 1990 and it was the rejection of the Congress rather than the charismatic leadership of Lalu that worked in that election. One of the arguments in this paper is that Lalu created an image among voters, symbolic though it was, during his first stint as a chief minister and messiah of backward castes and minorities as well. Whether he was or he was not could be assessed only in the context of post 1991 elections and we, therefore, selected 1996 Lok Sabha Elections as our starting point. As far as post poll of Bihar assembly elections are concerned, we do not have data sets for 1990 and 1995.

13. Logistic regression, in brief, estimates the probability of an event to occur. It is a generalised linear model used for binomial regression. It makes use of several predictor variables, which may be either numerical or categorical. For example, the probability that a person will vote for 'X' or 'Y' party might be predicted from knowing his caste, religion, educational and occupational background.

Logistic regression predicts the log odds of the dependent variable which could be written in the following form:

$$z = b_0 + b_1X_1 + b_2X_2 + \dots + b_kX_k$$

Where  $z$  is the log odds of dependent variable;  $b_0$  is the constant and there are  $k$  independent ( $X$ ) variables, in the present instance giving the characteristics of the  $i^{\text{th}}$  voter. If  $X_1$  is a binary (0,1) variable, as is the present case, then  $z = X_0$  (that is, the constant) for the "0" group on  $X_1$  and equals the constant plus the  $b$  coefficient for the "1" group. To convert the log

odds (which is  $z$ , which is the logit) back into an odds ratio, the natural logarithmic base  $e$  is raised to the  $z$ th power: odds (event) =  $\exp(z)$  = odds the binary dependent is 1 rather than 0. Thus, if  $b_1$  is statistically significantly different from zero, then the odds ratio for voters with characteristic  $X_1$  ( $X_1 = 1$ ), are statistically significantly different from the odds for the reference category. The odds ratio for voters with characteristic  $X_1$  ( $X_1 = 1$ ) is the ratio of odds for voters with characteristic  $X_1$  to the odds for the reference category.

To illustrate, the dependent variable in the present analysis is dichotomous and coded 1, if voted, say for RJD and 0 otherwise. The  $\exp(z)$  is the odds ratio. Odds or the odds ratio is the ratio of the probability an event occurs (e.g., the vote is for RJD) divided by the probability of the corresponding non-event (the vote is not for RJD). When odds are 1.0 for a group, a person in that group is equally likely to experience the event (voting for RJD, in the present case) as to experience the non-event (voting for other parties, in the present case). The odds ratio of an independent variable is the ratio of the odds for voters with characteristic denoted by that independent variable to the odds for the reference category. In other words, an odds ratio of 1.0 means the independent variable has no effect on the dependent variable; that is to say, the two variables are statistically independent. If odds ratio is greater than 1.0, it indicates that the independent variable increases the probability of the event (probability of voting for RJD or party of interest in the analysis). Larger the positive difference between observed odds ratio and 1.0, the stronger the relationship. When an odds ratio is below 1.0, it indicates that the independent variable decreases the probability of the event (in the present case probability of voting for, say, RJD).

We also reiterate the following points here. The selected sample is representative as has been mentioned elsewhere in the paper. The responses are for those who actually voted for the party. Further, we believe that information is reliable because we had used dummy ballot box to ensure that the investigator does not know the preference of the respondent and the respondent does not need to hesitate. In the foot note 2, we have already mentioned how we got the respondents to be interviewed.

14. Economic class is defined by using a composite index of monthly household income, household assets and the type of house the respondent resides in. Scores were assigned (in accordance of the precedence of the variable in the scheme of construction of class) to each individual variable related to income/household assets. The scores were summed up for each respondent. Then the entire sample was divided in quintiles and designated as lowest, lower, middle, upper middle and highest corresponding with very poor, poor, middle, upper middle and rich. The index for all the elections is based on the same criteria.

15. Other castes are those other than forward castes, Koeri-kurmi, Yadav, Other OBC and Dalits and taken as reference category for comparing likelihood of voting of castes/community reported in the table.

16. A question may be raised about interpreting the response "did not change". It refers to a situation of status quo with reference to what existed before regardless of what it was (good or bad). In a sense, did not change is a reference point for the assessment of prevailing situation compared to past.

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