

Bihar election results - a political renaissance in India

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Bihar and caste-based politics were two sides of the same coin until perhaps yesterday. Bihar, among the poorest and most backward of states in India, has just re-elected the ruling Government back to power in what must be labelled as a landslide and epochal win in the history of state elections.

Political jokes in India center on the maverick politician Lalu Prasad Yadav and his homespun brand of caste-based politics. In fact, caste-based politics is as deep-rooted to Bihar as perhaps winemaking is to France. And Lalu made a fine art of it, molding it to ensure it became his elixir of power, before he was forced to step down in 1997 after ruling Bihar since 1990. From 1997 his wife ruled Bihar up to 2005 - basically as his proxy before she lost the elections in 2005 to the current winner and incumbent Nitish Kumar, an ex-Bhartiya Janata Party member, now heading the NDA Alliance.

Together, the NDA Alliance partners are ahead in 205 seats, 62 more than the 143 they had in 2005. The Lalu-Yadav-led RJD-LJP combine has been routed, leading in only 21 seats, down 40 from 64 last time. The ignominy has been doubled by Lalu's wife and former chief minister Rabri Devi trailing in both the seats she contested. The Rahul Gandhi magic notwithstanding, the Congress is almost irrelevant with only six seats, down from only nine last time.

Among the most interesting voting trends was the fact that more women turned out to vote than men did - Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's campaign overtly wooed women voters. This is part of Nitish Kumar formula as the leader of the modern Bihar - better law and order, improved administration and a new influx of industry. The state's growth rate in the last five years has improved immensely and is now superior to that of the country. Nitish Kumar's agenda of putting progress and development ahead of petty politics has paid him just rewards in terms of the electorate giving him a second term.

The Election Commission (EC) has stated that these were the most peaceful elections in Bihar ever. The EC reported no election-related deaths or any incidents of booth capturing during the elections. This seems incredible to anyone familiar with Bihar politics.

Bihar's development suffered immeasurably during the fifteen years of caste-based rule. Elections in Bihar were synonymous with booth capturing, vote rigging and violence. Power flowed through the barrel of the gun, was the oft-repeated cliché. The state was the epitome of India's archaic political system based on sectarian and caste-based politics. Progress and development were words absent from the lexicon of local politicians. As a result, Bihar suffered from abject poverty, had the poorest track record of law and order and ranked close to or at the bottom of the pile on every metric of social and economic development.

Nitish Kumar's win is therefore more newsworthy and significant because it's the 15th occasion out of the last 20 state elections held since 2007 that the incumbent state government has been voted for a second successive term. This has sent an ear-splitting message to all political parties that there is a tectonic shift happening in voting patterns across the country. Politicians who used issues based on religious sentiments, caste and tribal affinities to create vote banks for themselves are being rejected. People are voting for development and are demanding that political parties pay heed to their basic needs for a better life in the form of water, electricity, education, jobs and health care, better infrastructure in the form of roads and irrigation.

The big deal is that this feat has been repeated in the most backward of states of Bihar. The Congress Party (the senior and largest member of the ruling coalition in the country) has been an incumbent in just six of the fifteen wins by incumbents - also sending a loud message that it must get its act together in the states where it holds power or risk being voted out. The shift in voting trends have become all too clear now and it would be foolish for any political party and politicians to take the electorate lightly any more. It won't be too long before the voting pattern of the entire country will shift towards thinking in this fashion when it comes to voting at the General Elections to elect the Government of the country.

This poses a big potential upside risk to India's growth in the future. These results will now incentivize politicians to focus more on issues of development of their constituencies and the larger good of society rather than only on their vote banks. This could manifest itself in faster decision-making at the state and central level and better governance.

The irony is inescapable to us. The freshest breath of air today in Indian politics is wafting from a state known for the murkiest of political environs. This at a time when scandal, political and corporate skulduggery and corruption have hogged national headlines for the past month is both refreshing and energizing.

