

# Bihar Elections: Heading for Mandal Mark-II?

Thursday 15 December 2005, by [BIDWAI Praful](#) (Date first published: 8 December 2005).

Contrary to the triumphalist conservative spin, the Bihar results herald not a **post-Mandal 'political era, but a continuation of social justice'** politics. Lalu Prasad's defeat is indeed a setback for progressive forces, although not a grave one.

The banner headlines and editorial captions could not have been louder or more opinionated, at times tendentiously: **Lalu loses, Bihar wins', 'Lalu's Voterloo', 'Lalu is out, Bihar is in', 'Vote of anger', 'Congrats Bihar', 'MY defeat', 'Bihar rescued'...** . The bulk of the national-level English-language newspapers reported the election results with glee and smug satisfaction. Many announced that **Lalu-Rabri Raj** - an object of much loathing tainted by colossal corruption, monumental ineptitude, non-performance, widespread crime and deception - had ended. Some papers declared that Bihar has moved into **"post-Mandalism"** - a new paradigm or framework which makes a clean break with the politics of **"social justice"**, based on the self-assertion of underprivileged social layers. Now that Lalu Prasad, the arch-enemy of the people, and usurper of power, has been sent packing, Bihar's **"nightmare"** can end, and the State can discard the **"medieval"** burden of caste and **"identity politics"**, embrace **"modernity"**, and resume **"development"** under the dynamic Nitish Kumar's Janata Dal (United) in alliance with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Some of this may be no more than wishful thinking. For one, the Bihar verdict is a forceful rejection of Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) rule, but by no means an anti-Mandalist vote that repudiates the primacy of the underprivileged. For another, Nitish Kumar is not about to annihilate caste. He has merely realigned existing caste forces, differently from the pattern under Lalu Prasad. And for a third, **"Lalu-Rabri Raj"** has not been the only obstacle to Bihar's development. A change at the top cannot guarantee that all or most of Bihar's myriad ills will quickly vanish. The headlines in question reflect a convergence between the mindsets of Bihar's savarna (upper-caste) elite and the globalised neoliberal free-market mission of the corporate media. Both groups hate Lalu Prasad with the same passion and for the same reason: not so much because he **"underdeveloped"** Bihar and brought it to a sorry pass - which his savarna predecessors did with considerably greater determination and panache for 30 years - , but because he represents (more accurately, once strongly represented) the aspirations of subaltern groups to dignity and self-respect. He has also been a crusader for secularism. He alone of all the politicians of northern India, mustered the courage to stop Lal Krishna Advani's provocatively communal rath yatra in 1990. During the last 30 years, no other leader has dominated the politics of any north Indian State as comprehensively and continuously as Lalu Prasad has over the last 15 years. He continued to win election after election despite the RJD's steadily declining vote-share and shrinking social base. The **"evil spell"** had to be somehow broken. That has now happened

through the election - rather fortuitously in some ways. The election's strangest aspect is that it inflicted a crushing defeat on the ruling RJD-Congress alliance when the election itself need not have happened at all. Had the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) allowed the J.D.(U)-BJP to form a government in February/March, and had Governor Buta Singh not scuttled the move while recommending President's Rule, it would have averted the November debacle. Nitish Kumar could not have stitched together a majority, if even that, except by splitting Ram Vilas Paswan's Lok Janashakti Party (LJP). His would have been a lame-duck government, dysfunctional, shaky and possibly unviable. It could well have paved the way for an honourable return to power of the RJD-Congress with other secular allies. Even if it did not, that would have been the right thing to do after Nitish Kumar had made a plausible, although ethically questionable, claim of majority support. In the event, President's Rule, exercised through a Governor widely seen to have been manipulated by Lalu Prasad, cost the UPA dear. "This was the most important factor that worked against the UPA after March and further eroded both its vote and credibility", says Shaibal Gupta, member-secretary of the Asian Development Research Institute (ADRI) in Patna. "The Supreme Court's October judgment confirmed the public's worst suspicions about Buta Singh and Lalu Prasad." President's Rule came on top of a steady decline in the RJD's vote-share - from 33 per cent in 2000 to 30.7 per cent in 2004 to 25.1 per cent in February - as well as cracks in the broad secular alliance including the LJP, which handsomely won 29 of 40 seats in the 2004 Lok Sabha elections. Says Shaibal Gupta: "The UPA did not rebuild the alliance and the Congress wrongly allied with the LJP." Meanwhile, the RJD was itself thrown into turmoil because Lalu Prasad developed an extremely arrogant, angular and authoritarian style of functioning after the 2004 victory. "It's as if the victory went to his head," says a seasoned civil servant in Bihar, who has worked closely with Lalu Prasad, who requested anonymity. "He just stopped listening to people and paying attention to the party." Lalu Prasad had never built the RJD as a structured party, with a well-defined organisational apparatus or cadre. This was a legacy of Bihar's Socialist movement that got organisationally liquidated thanks to Jayaprakash Narayan's influence, in particular ideas like "total revolution", or "ideology-free" and "party-less democracy". In the absence of a coherent party, Lalu Prasad relied on family structures, caste loyalties, money, personal favours and the civil service. "Criminals and bahubalis too became part of the nexus," says Shaibal Gupta. "They were useful in mobilising the right contacts' and crowds during election campaigns." "The story of the RJD's degeneration is a long one. But it does not start or peak with the much hyped-up "fodder scam". Rather, it lies in numerous processes: an inherited massive public finances crisis, aggravated in the 1990s, lack of investment, a vicious circle of backwardness leading to low productivity and incomes, changes in Central levies and rail freight equalisation schemes, as well as ineptitude, corruption, weakening of institutions, including Cabinet responsibility, and lack of public oversight or transparency in the State government's working.

These must be seen in the context of the larger changes in the Indian economy over 15 years, including growing regional disparities, adverse terms of trade for primary commodities, and a big slowdown in job generation. Lalu Prasad failed to provide real leadership to Bihar. But that failure is not the sole cause of its dismal state.

By early this year, the RJD was in serious trouble. A post-election survey by the Centre for the Study

of Developing Societies (CSDS) showed that a majority of Yadavs alone wanted to give the RJD another chance in government. (But 17 per cent did not). Sixty-four per cent of all voters said 'no' to the RJD, as did 85 per cent of Kurmis, 63 per cent of Dalits, and 56 per cent of Muslims. Only 13 per cent felt that the Lalu-Rabri regime was "good all the way". Thirty-five per cent felt it was "bad all the way" and 37 per cent said it began well, but deteriorated.

Contrary to what is often projected, the RJD is not an "M-Y" (Muslim-Yadav) party dependent primarily on the support of these two communities. (They together comprise a third of the population.) The RJD has never won a majority of Bihar's 120-odd constituencies where Muslims and Yadavs are numerous. It has found strong support among poor Yadavs and landless Muslims, but not the conservative upper-crust. Traditionally, a large chunk of its support has come from a broad coalition of underprivileged people, including Dalits and Most Backward Classes (who account for 30 per cent of the population, but are scattered and extremely under-represented in public life).

Recently, it is the RJD's MBC and Dalit bases that eroded the most. Its Dalit support has fallen by one-half over a decade. A CSDS survey mid-way through this election suggests that only a minority (28 to 38 per cent) of MBCs like Kevats and Mallahs back the RJD. Among Telis and Sahus, its support is even lower (22 per cent). By contrast, the J.D.(U)-BJP attracted substantial support from these groups.

The RJD's Muslim support has fluctuated. In the latest election, a good section of Pasmanda (backward) Muslims, such as a group led by Ali Anwar, voted against it. Many Muslims feel Lalu Prasad has ghettoised the community and offered it little, yet taken it for granted. There has been some erosion of the RJD's Yadav support-base too, from upwards of 85 per cent to under 80 per cent.

All this has brought about a small 1.8 percentage-point decrease in the RJD's vote-share (National Informatics Centre figures) down to 23.2 per cent. The swings in favour of the J.D.(U) (5.7 per cent) and the BJP (4.5 per cent) were much greater. One intriguing feature of the election - apart from compression of the vote polarisation process from years to months - is the size of the vote shifts despite a historically low voter turnout (just 45.9 per cent), lower than February's 46.5 per cent. (This suggests that many genuine electors from underprivileged groups may have been prevented from voting while the Election Commission's K.J. Rao remained preoccupied with preventing bogus voting and did a good job of it. This is not a flattering comment on the E.C. But let that pass.)

The only explanation for the differential sizes of the vote swings (even the LJP's share fell by only 1.7 percentage-points) and the number of seats won by contending alliances amidst a low turnout is that the smaller parties (Bahujan Samaj Party, Nationalist Congress Party, Samajwadi Party, CPI(ML)-Liberation) and Independents got squeezed under polarisation. Between 2000 and 2005 (February), their collective vote-share grew from 18.5 to 27.7 per cent. Now, it has fallen to 18.4 per cent. The steepest decline is in the vote of the "Independents", mostly dissident RJD, J.D.(U) and LJP candidates.

By all accounts, the MBCs voted for Nitish Kumar not because he articulates their interests better than Lalu Prasad, but because they want to "try him out". Nitish Kumar has been astute in his own "social engineering". Wherever possible, he tended to favour MBC candidates over Bhumihars, Yadavs, or Rajputs. A good instance is a constituency in Aurangabad, where he fielded a Chandravanshi MBC.

At the end of the day, the J.D.(U) built its own social coalition - of Kurmis, MBCs, Dalits like Jatavs and Pasis and some Yadav-Muslims too. Some of this support may be tentative. Yet, what Kumar is practising is not "post-Mandalist" politics, but "social justice" politics of the same kind as Lalu Prasad, itself rooted in the dual phenomena of OBC self-assertion and Delhi self-empowerment in the

Gangetic plains. It is not that the people of Bihar are through with identity politics. They are only exhausted with Lalu Prasad because of the growing arbitrariness of his rule, and his failure to translate "social justice" slogans into policies.

Other factors too counted, including Lalu Prasad's rule by proxy through his wife; his shift from an interrogator of blind faith to someone who is devoted to superstition, astrologers, havans, poojas and godmen; a sea-change in his personal habits (he drinks an extremely expensive brand of Scotch whisky); his growing alienation from the people; and his deep cynicism about being able to win elections with small margins without doing anything substantial for his constituency. Lalu Prasad's publicly expressed disdain for "development" (often voiced with rustic humour) testifies to that cynicism.

Nitish Kumar has the same political lineage as Lalu Prasad - Bihar's Lohia/Karpoori Thakur Socialists. They are both children of Mandalism. Nitish Kumar has a purely expedient relationship with the BJP, although that expediency must be criticised: it ensured his near-silence over the Gujarat violence. He did not even go as far as Mamata Banerjee in criticising the BJP.

The election result is a setback to the UPA and to the larger progressive agenda. But it is not a grave setback. The UPA's national-level stability is not threatened. After the November 21 "consensus" on the Iran issue, the Left will be inclined to back the UPA and ensure its survival. The result is emphatically not a victory of the BJP or Hindutva. The BJP's ideology was not an election issue. Nor did Uma Bharati & co appeal to Hindutva. The battle was fought along caste lines. The BJP rode piggy-back on the JD(U).

Nitish Kumar's triumph has one positive consequence: it will probably marginalise George Fernandes within the J.D.(U), thus weakening the BJP's staunchest ally in the NDA. The NDA would be wrong to regard the Bihar result as a sign of its revival and imminent rise. There are no electoral battles around the corner that it can win. It does not count in West Bengal, Kerala and Tamil Nadu.

Nitish Kumar will not find it easy to fulfil the promise of "good governance". Bihar's development backlog is Himalayan. Its administration is a shambles. Patna's writ does not run even in neighbouring districts (Jehanabad and Gaya), leave alone remote areas. Nitish Kumar will be under constant pressure from powerful groups like the Bhumihars. The BJP has made its political presence felt for the first time in Bihar. It is already snapping at Nitish Kumar's heels and could soon create trouble.

Nitish Kumar's biggest problem is to find resources for development. If Bihar is merely to catch up with the rest of India in 15 years, it will need capital investment of Rs.38,500 crores a year, says a memorandum submitted to the Twelfth Finance Commission by Bihar's political parties, and academic and commercial institutions. Nitish Kumar and Lalu Prasad are signatories to this. Bihar can currently make no worthwhile capital investment. Its internal revenue and Central grants cannot even pay for administrative expenses and debt servicing. Whether and from where Bihar can get the money remains a big question-mark.

One thing is certain, though. Bihar's politics is not about to pass into a wholly new mould, which neoliberal media commentators devoutly pray for. Upper caste-dominated coalition politics, with a socially conservative agenda, is not about to succeed there. Rather, Bihar is likely to witness a second phase of Mandalist politics, probably dominated by the MBCs. These scattered castes are now asserting themselves. Soon they could articulate specific demands or insist on political self-representation. That would give Mandalism its second wind - not the fatal illness its opponents crave for.

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**P.S.**

\* Frontline, 8 December 2005. Copyright 2005 Frontline.