

India: Grassroot presence and a 'natural' alliance — why the embattled Left did well in Bihar

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CPI, CPI(M) & CPI(ML) Liberation won 16 Bihar seats under RJD-led Mahagathbandhan, showing fight despite the Left's electoral marginalisation in recent years.

New Delhi: In winning 16 of the 29 seats they contested under the Mahagathbandhan umbrella in Bihar, the electorally marginalised Left parties have made a comeback of sorts. Though the alliance failed to dislodge the ruling NDA from power, the Communist Party of India, the CPI (Marxist) and the CPI (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation have emerged as some of the biggest gainers in the recently concluded assembly elections.

While the CPI and the CPI(M) have each won two seats out of the six and four they contested, respectively, it is the CPI(ML) Liberation's win in 12 of the 19 seats that has been the most stunning — it has a strike rate of 63 per cent, second only to the BJP's 67 per cent.

The explanations for these results have varied — some analysts and observers call it simply a result of piggybacking on the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), while others have argued that the Left is an ideologically-driven machine, whose relentless work despite electoral failures is bound to reap dividends eventually.

But at a time when the Left is only in power in Kerala, and has been a diminished force even in its old bastions like West Bengal and Tripura, ThePrint delves deep into the peculiar socio-political realities of Bihar that have made this result possible.

Not a new force in Bihar

Analysts argue that the performance of the Left in the Bihar elections has its roots in its long-lasting ideological presence in many pockets.

Badri Narayan, director of the G.B. Pant Social Science Institute in Prayagraj, said the results are a very important moment for the Left, since they have turned back the clock to a time when the parties used to have around two dozen MLAs in the assembly of undivided Bihar. In fact, even until 1995, the Left parties had 25-35 MLAs in the Bihar assembly, with the CPI winning 20-25 seats in every election.

Subsequently, the vote base of the CPI and the CPI(M) eroded, but CPI(ML) Liberation, which was formed in 1973 after the CPI(ML) split, continued to win five-six seats in each election. It never aligned with any mainstream party before, as it did with the RJD and the Congress this time.

The reason for this vote base erosion, experts say, was the grip of 'Mandal' politics on the state.

“The Mandalisation of Bihar politics hit the Left. With the rise of a plebeian leader in Lalu Prasad Yadav, caste became the biggest fault line,” argued Ashwini Kumar, professor at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. “But in Bihar, over the years, the Naxal movement became very rooted, becoming a quasi-Dalit movement.”

Dr Sanjay Paswan, BJP leader and an academic, concurred. “The Left were the central opposition in both the Centre and in Bihar until the 1960s. But with the emergence of anti-Congressism and socialism, they started becoming weak, and needed others to ally with.”

He added: “When Lohia said that in India caste is class, it hit the Left parties directly. And the final blow to the Left was, of course, the emergence of Lalu Prasad Yadav, who made caste identities the centre of politics in Bihar. But such is the nature of politics that while Lalu’s Mandal politics was the reason for the Left’s decline, his own son has resurrected the Left.”

A fortress of class struggle

Several analysts say that to simply dismiss the victory of the Left, particularly the CPI(ML) Liberation, because it was a part of the Mahagathbandhan would amount to an incomplete understanding of the parties’ consistent presence in the state, even if they did not perform well electorally.

Senior journalist Nalin Verma, who co-authored the book *Gopalganj to Raisina Road* on Lalu’s life, said a quick analysis of the seats where the Left, particularly Liberation (which has its roots in the Naxalbari movement of the 1960s), shows that these are all areas with a history of peasant and Naxal movements.

“If you see these areas, then you know they have always had a presence of the Left, because there has been a history of class struggle here. Politically, their presence may have gotten eclipsed by Mandal-Mandir politics, but ideologically, their presence has remained,” Verma said.

“The Left does its politics on issues of the peasants, farmers, working classes... These are movement-oriented parties, so even when they do not perform electorally, their space does not diminish because their cadres keep working in a society where feudalism endures,” he added.

This, analysts say, is particularly true for the CPI(ML) Liberation, which continues to raise issues of the working classes and class exploitation across Bihar.

“They have a dedicated supporter base among the Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs) and the Dalits in areas where class violence is particularly stark,” noted a professor working at the Jagjivan Ram Institute of Parliamentary Studies in Patna, who did not wish to be named.

“Of course, this is not to say that the Left represents all Dalits and EBCs, but there is a section among these communities which does not accept violence and exploitation as a fate accomplished, and that section votes for them,” this professor said.

The professor explained why the Left had done well in the western districts of Siwan, Bhojpur, Buxar, Rohtas, Jehanabad and even Patna, collectively known as the Bhojpur region.

“The Bhojpur region has been the fortress of class struggle since the times of (Communist leader) Charu Majumdar. So, it is not ‘out of nowhere’ that the Left has performed in these regions... In the 1960s, this area was fraught with bloodshed and violence,” the professor explained.

In fact, the first CPI(ML) MP in India, Rameshwar Prasad, won the election in 1989 from Bhojpur.

The CPI(ML), at the time, fought elections through the Indian People's Front, which was founded in 1982.

"The CPI(ML) has strong cadres here, even if they are small. They are dedicated cadres. That's why you see the margins of victory of the CPI(ML) candidates are huge," the professor said.

In fact, according to an analysis by ThePrint, the average margin of victory of the CPI(ML) Liberation is almost 23,000 in what was a close election, with the highest being 53,078 in the Balrampur assembly constituency for Mahboob Alam.

'Natural alliance with the RJD'

However, despite its strong ideological base in these areas, what the Left received by being part of the Mahagathbandhan was political fuel, the professor explained.

The CPI(ML) Liberation, as mentioned above, is closely associated with the Naxal movement, and is the most radical of the Left parties. It remained underground for several years before it joined mainstream politics in 1989, and never aligned itself with any mainstream party.

In the 1970s, for example, an armed squad of the party called the Lal Sena violently took on landowners in the districts of Bhojpur, Gaya, Chhapra, Siwan, Patna and Aurangabad — in several of which it has won seats this time. This is why organisations like the Ranvir Sena were formed — to fight fire with fire on behalf of the landowners.

Prof. Ashwini Kumar pointed out that the CPI(ML) had fought for a long time against the 'Yadav rule' that the RJD is alleged to have brought in.

But Narayan says it's a new Left that has emerged in this assembly election. "This Left is one that recognises that there is a need for flexibility in a democracy. That is why the CPI(ML) Liberation has gone ahead and forged an alliance even with the Congress, which it would not have done 20 years ago... This is what electoral politics teaches you," he said. "In that sense, it is an opportune moment for the Left to reinvent itself."

Narayan also said the RJD's own changing politics has contributed to this alliance. "An RJD trying to use caste to talk about larger economic issues like employment becomes an obvious ally to the Left," he said.

Nalin Verma agreed: "The Left has historically allied with Lalu till the 1990s after which he became too subsumed in identity politics. But now, when there is a space and need to transcend identity and create an anti-BJP alliance, the two came together again."

He added: "When RJD talks about *kamaai*, *padhaai*, *dawaai*, *sichai* (earning, studying, medicine and irrigation), it is essentially raising the issues that the Left has been raising. So the alliance works. It is like an alliance of the subaltern."

'Don't over-read'

Rahul Verma, fellow at the Centre for Policy Research, however, cautioned against over-reading into the results as a "resurgence" of the Left.

"They have won as many seats piggybacking on the RJD. Even the last time they allied with them, they won 20-odd seats. It would be wrong to read the results as the resurgence of the Left, since for the Left, it is a fight for survival, not resurgence," he said. "Tomorrow, if in West Bengal, the Left

allies with the Trinamool Congress, it will win, but that doesn't mean it has become a dominant force in Bengal's politics again."

Asked why the Left would be given so many seats to contest if it did not offer anything to the RJD, Rahul Verma said since the RJD was trying to expand its voter base and shed the 'Muslim-Yadav party' tag, the Left would bring in some Dalit and EBC voters.

Narayan, too, sounded a note of caution. "It would be a fallacy to assume that the Left would have gotten as many votes without the RJD. They have a very thin voter base. But it has the capacity to benefit from an alliance, unlike the Congress' base," he added.

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