

India: A comrade walks first past the post

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In Bihar, away from the clamour of the Grand Alliance's victory and the BJP's defeat, a communist (CPI-ML Liberation) candidate wins in Seemanchal by a massive margin with almost no publicity and campaign funds

For 25 Dalit Bahujan families in this quiet corner of Bihar, the recent assembly election was a fight for a rusty old tap at the railway station.

75-year-old Lucchki Devi moved to a small spot near the Barsoi railway station some 50 years ago, after her marriage to Keso Paswan, who worked as a coolie at the station. She has never been back to her home in Uttar Pradesh. She and Paswan were one of the first of the 25 families that now live in a small informal settlement called Kullipatti, Gandhinagar, in Katihar district in the Seemanchal region of Bihar.

Those who can work sell chai on the trains that move through the railway station, or migrate out as manual labour. They are compelled to pay a bribe of 1200-2000 rupees to the railway police every month in order to ply their trade on the trains, and they work as far as Kishanganj, some three hours away. The second generation never went to school, but their children today are all studying a kilometre away, where the smaller kids are asked to take their own plates to school for the mid-day meal.

The 25 families of Kullipatti live under the constant fear of eviction: in the history of state-sponsored caste violence, which is really just a reflection of social attitudes, their homes are routinely demolished twice every year, for seemingly no reason at all.

In a notice dated August 19, 2015, under the Eviction of Unauthorised Occupation Act, 1971, it was mentioned that the residents had to be evicted for it is 'required by the railways.' In violation of Supreme Court directives, no alternate sites are offered and no reason is given when residents question the government officials on why they want the land.

Lucchki Devi expects her home to be demolished again after the election. She has lost count of the number of times they've had to rebuild her small shanty.

Add to that, it is the water tap at the railway station that they are most agitated about.

Through an abandoned railway building, the residents used to climb through a small window to reach platform No.1 at Barsoi, to use the drinking water facilities on the platform. This had been their only source of water for years, until a railway engineer routed the supply in such a way that the residents now need to go past the railway police to access the tap.

'Nobody comes to our aid,' said Sanjeev Yadav, who lives in Kullipatti, and migrates to Punjab for work.

'Nobody but Babu Alam.'

Every adult in Kullipatti would mention that name, some would begin to speak of how they have no faith in the system, in the government, and then as an afterthought, they would say only Alam comes for them. In a meeting lasting an hour, they mentioned his name five times, and that of the incumbent MLA not even once. The 'maley' as they are called – from the Hindi acronym for Marxist-Leninist, or ML – are actively opposing displacement across the Barsoi railway station, the threats of eviction that concern all the shops across the station.

Google 'Mehboob Alam of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist)' and you will only find one article about the criminal cases on him. The law is often used as a weapon by the state to corner political opponents and the raw count of statistics never seems to help differentiate between these false or trumped up cases and those that actual criminals accumulate. For instance, Medha Patkar of all people has nine criminal cases to her name. In one of Alam's cases from 2010, a lifeless body was found on the tracks of Barsoi railway station that the authorities refused to pick up. When Alam and his party went to protest the inaction of the local government, the police filed a case against him.

In the 2015 assembly election, he secured 62,513 votes, defeating his nearest rival, the BJP's Barun Kumar Jha, by some 20,419 votes, for a seat, that had seventeen candidates.

He is one of three communist winners, and the one who has won with the largest margin. In the Tarari seat in Bhojpur, that saw the massacre of Bathani Tola and the acquittal of the alleged killers, Sudama Prasad of the CPI (ML) won by 272 votes and in Darauli, Siwan, Satyadeo Ram of the same party won by 9,584 seats.

The veteran

In the sparsely populated 'market' area in Barsoi, there were four campaigning offices for the assembly elections, a stone's throw away from each other. There was the the All India Majlis Ittehadul Muslimeen of Asaduddin Owaisi, Sharad Pawar's Nationalist Congress Party, the Shiv Sena, and then there was the CPI (ML) party office. Except for the Shiv Sena, all of them fielded Muslim candidates. Barsoi comes under the Balrampur constituency of Katihar district, literally on the edge of obscurity.

The Shiv Sena's Hansraj Yadav won more votes than the AIMIM's Adil Hasan, 9,473 votes against the 6,375 for AIMIM. The NCP's Habibur Rahman won 3,884 votes. Incumbent MLA Dulal Goswami of the JD(U) came third with 40,114 votes.

Once upon a time in Katihar, a communist was murdered. Many a time in Bihar, an alleged killer walks free and becomes a candidate in the elections. The infamous Pappu Yadav was initially jailed for the murder of CPI (M) leader Ajit Sarkar in 1998 but was acquitted in 2013. Today's CPI (ML) is mostly filled with dissidents from the CPI (M), including multiple time MLA Mehboob Alam.

In 2005, at Kajitola Chowk, Abadhpur, 12 kilometres from Barsoi, a few Dalit families were being forced off their homes by Muslim as well as Hindu landlords. Alam and his party actively supported the residents and were put into open conflict with the landlords. 'If we don't work with the Dalits who are being harassed by Muslim and Hindu landlords, then the RSS will,' said Alam in response to a question inquiring what had happened in 2005.

Of course, 58-year-old Alam, who has been in active politics since 1985, is not known as a 'Muslim' leader. When I caught up with him during the campaign, he was in fact surrounded by young Yadav, Paswan and Muslim boys, who raised slogans and followed him as he walked through the market in a kurta covered in sweat stains meeting prospective voters. There were no flags, no sound system.

There was only one boy distributing pamphlets but he had fallen behind. Alam walked with a calm demeanour, there was almost nobody above the age of 25 around him, yet he followed them and their instructions. The people he met reacted with familiarity, there was no surprise or outburst, some followed him as he moved along.

I was at Kullipatti when Alam arrived. Sanjeev Yadav instantly walked up to him, shook his hand and then joined his small campaign party, quietly following, but never raising slogans.

‘This is not a place that has feudalism, but it has many contradictions,’ said Prabhat Kumar, a Politburo member of the CPI(ML) who first came to Katihar in 1982. ‘We work on communal harmony, against police atrocities, we work with adivasis fighting for land rights,’ he says, ‘and even if a wife has a problem with her husband, they’d come to Alam rather than go to the police.’

‘There is a lot of social apartheid here, especially with how the railways treats the bastis around it,’ says Umesh Yadav, who was a student when he joined the CPI (ML) in 2001. He is one of the younger lieutenants of Alam’s campaign, vociferous, and open with his views. ‘The CPM will be finished in West Bengal, they still haven’t learned about caste. Why are there no Dalits in the communist leadership?’ he asked. ‘It is caste, you have to work with people, to ask where they are from, to know them.’

When I asked him how upper caste voters saw the ‘garibon ka party’, he says, ‘development work, hum sab sadak, bridge, panchayat aur bijli ka kaam karte hai.’

Uma Devi, who is a member of the panchayat took me around to show the development work done by the incumbent MLA Dulal Goswami of the JD(U). Through a settlement near the railway station, there were drains for rainwater, yet the final pipe is merely blocked off by cement, meaning all the water will percolate to merely flood everyone’s homes.

Javed Iqbal

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*<http://thewire.in/2015/11/10/a-comrade-walks-first-past-the-post-15366/>