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BJP gets a Drubbing in Bihar

The emphatic triumph of the grand alliance, led by Mr Nitish Kumar and Mr Lalu Prasad Yadav, in the recent Assembly elections in the eastern Indian State of Bihar marks a political setback for Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who had campaigned vigorously, thereby raising the stakes in the polls. The grand alliance was successful due to the formation of a formidable caste coalition and the personal popularity of Mr Nitish Kumar. Mr Modi will have to find ways of mitigating the impact of this defeat on his government's agenda at the centre as well as rethink his party's strategies in the coming Assembly elections.

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In a major blow to India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was routed in the recently-held Assembly elections in the eastern state of Bihar. Disproving the predictions of most opinion and exit polls, a grand alliance (*mahagatbandhan*) led by two rivals-turned allies, Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and Lalu Prasad Yadav, won what was the most eagerly-watched elections in India in 2015. The grand alliance, which also included the Congress, won 178 of 243 seats in the Bihar Assembly compared to only 58 for the BJP-

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led National Democratic Alliance (NDA). In terms of vote share, the grand alliance won 42% to the NDA's 34%.

While the BJP has sought to downplay the Bihar result as not representing a mid-term referendum on the central government and Prime Minister Modi, its impact will be felt nationally. A primary reason for this was the BJP's strategy of making Mr Modi the face of the party campaign in the month-long, five-phase Bihar election. Indeed no Indian Prime Minister has campaigned so extensively for an Assembly election, and it was Mr Modi and the BJP President Amit Shah who dominated election hoardings in Bihar. The aura of invincibility around Mr Modi, which had been punctured in the 2015 Delhi Assembly elections, has now taken a further beating. This will have ramifications for future Assembly elections in 2016 and later as well as the government's reform agenda.

Why the Grand Alliance Won

The grand alliance always had arithmetic in its favour. In the 2014 national elections, where Mr Nitish Kumar's Janata Dal (United) had contested alone after breaking with the BJP, the combined vote of the JD(U), Mr Lalu Prasad's Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and the Congress was 45% compared to the BJP-led alliance's 38%.

In the 2015 Assembly elections, the JD(U) and the RJD contested 101 seats each and the Congress 41. Despite predictions that the alliance between Mr Nitish Kumar and Mr Lalu Prasad would be unworkable, particularly at the ground level, because of their differing political ideologies and styles, in reality it worked extremely well. The tie-up not only resulted in a consolidation of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), who constitute 51% of Bihar's population, the vote transfer from one partner to the other worked remarkably smoothly. The Yadavs, the core constituency of Mr Lalu Prasad, who form 15% of Bihar's population, and the Kurmis and Koeris, a vote bank of Mr Nitish Kumar, who constitute 12% of Bihar's population, traditionally do not get along very well with each other. But they voted in large numbers for both the JD(U) and RJD candidates. According to a post-poll survey done by the CSDS-Lokniti team, 68% of Yadavs voted for the grand alliance as did 71% of Kurmis. The Koeri vote though was evenly split between the grand alliance and the NDA. In addition, the

Muslims, who make up 17% of Bihar's population, were always expected to vote against the NDA. They did so overwhelmingly, according to CSDS-Lokniti, with 69% voting for the grand alliance. New entrants to Bihar politics like the Hyderabad-based Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (MIM) failed to make a dent among the Muslim voters.

What was a real surprise, however, was the strong performance of Mr Lalu Prasad, who is currently barred from contesting elections due to a conviction in a corruption scam and whose tenure as Chief Minister of Bihar in the 1990s is often described as "jungle raj" (lawless government). In fact, the RJD ended up winning 80 seats, nine more than the JD(U), despite contesting the same number of seats. The CSDS-Lokniti survey shows that Mr Nitish Kumar's core support base backed Mr Lalu Prasad in greater numbers than the other way round. In addition, the Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs), those at the bottom of the OBC hierarchy, backed the RJD in greater numbers than the JD(U). The Congress too did better than expected, winning 27 of the 41 seats it contested. The Congress's success can, however, be ascribed to piggybacking on the JD(U) and the RJD and not to any real revival of the party.

Besides the caste arithmetic, Mr Nitish Kumar's positive image among the voters was the trump card for the grand alliance. Most surveys as well as observers were agreed on his remarkable popularity which was far greater than that of any other local leader including Mr Lalu Prasad. But what made a difference to the electoral outcome was the preference of voters for Mr Nitish Kumar over Mr Modi despite the Prime Minister pulling out all stops and addressing 30 rallies during the campaign period. According to CSDS-Lokniti, across a number of issues, including development of Bihar and checking crime, voters preferred Mr Nitish Kumar over Mr Modi by a significant margin. This was in contrast to the 2014 parliamentary elections where the BJP, despite Mr Nitish Kumar's personal popularity, won 22 of Bihar's 40 seats. The 2014 results could be seen, among other things, as a testimony to the impact that Mr Modi had on the national elections. The reversal for the BJP in 2015 is evidence that voters vote differently in the national and State elections.

How the BJP's Strategy Misfired

To counter the formidable voter base of the grand alliance and restrictions of its own upper-caste base, the BJP allied with parties such as the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP), Rashtriya Lok Samata Party (RSLP) and Hindustani Awam Morcha (HAM) whose primary support comes from the Dalits or former untouchables and OBC groups like the Kushwahas. The BJP contested 160 seats, while the LJP, RSLP and HAM contested 40, 23 and 20 seats respectively. The NDA tried to replicate the 'coalition of extremes', which had served it well during the 2014 elections. This strategy aimed at getting votes from the two extremes – the upper castes and those at the bottom of the caste hierarchy, namely the EBCs and the Dalits – and was successful in 2014. This plan, however, failed in 2015. According to CSDS-Lokniti, while the NDA won 84% of the upper-caste vote it could win only 43% of the EBC vote and 30% of the Mahadalit (the poorest among the Dalits) vote. The BJP thus ended up winning a lion's share of the NDA's seats – 53 of the 58 seats – while its three allies could only win five.

If the caste arithmetic and opposition unity adversely affected the NDA, controversial statements by Sangh Parivar (saffron brotherhood) leaders and incidents of intolerance elsewhere in India did not help matters. There were two in particular that were picked up by the grand alliance. The first was the lynching in end-September by a Hindu mob of a Muslim man in Uttar Pradesh for allegedly eating beef. This was followed by controversial remarks by BJP leaders who said the incident was an accident and that it was not the sole responsibility of the Hindu community to maintain peace. In fact, the BJP made cow protection a crucial part of its Bihar campaign, particularly during the final phases of the election. The second was the statement by Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat in September calling for a review of caste-based reservations. While the CSDS-Lokniti did not find any definitive evidence that these two events swayed the voters, the grand alliance leaders ensured that both these issues figured prominently in their election campaign.

To make things worse, the BJP leaders, including Mr Modi himself, did not get the tone of their campaign right. In speech after speech he talked of Bihar as one of the most backward States whereas the popular sentiment among voters was that Bihar had done quite well under Mr Nitish Kumar. During the course of the election campaign, Mr Modi changed tack and his speeches took on caste and religious overtones. The change in emphasis from an aspirational

message to caste- and communal-issues was rejected by Bihar's voters. Mr Shah, who was in charge of the party's campaign in Bihar, perhaps struck the most discordant note when in end-October he declared that "crackers will go off in Pakistan" if the grand alliance was voted to power. This was a gratuitous reference to the strong Muslim support for the grand alliance. Not only did the tenor of the BJP's campaign take the focus away from development, which was Mr Modi's calling card during the 2014 elections, it also signalled the desperation of the BJP. There was also an economic factor at play with soaring prices of pulses becoming an important electoral issue. The CSDS-Lokniti found that 40% of Bihar's voters felt that the central government was to blame for the price rise. There was a question mark too on the BJP's strategy of not naming a chief ministerial candidate for Bihar. This had worked in the states of Maharashtra, Haryana and Jharkhand where the BJP won in 2014 either on its own or in an alliance. A crucial difference from Bihar, however, was that the opposition in those states had not named a chief ministerial candidate. In contrast, from the time the grand alliance was formed, Mr Nitish Kumar was projected as the chief ministerial candidate.

Conclusion

The Bihar election verdict has made it clear that the BJP's strategy of banking on Prime Minister Modi, without the backing of strong local leadership and organisation, to win Assembly elections is unlikely to work. Bihar's impact will be felt in State elections in 2016 in Kerala, Assam, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu and in the Union Territory of Puducherry. In none of these States, with the exception of Assam, the BJP stands a realistic chance of doing well. The Bihar result will further affect the BJP's already slim prospects in these states. The real test for the BJP will be the 2017 Assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state and one where the party won a quarter of its seats in the 2014 national elections.

The rumblings within the BJP about the style of functioning of Mr Modi and Mr Shah are also going to get louder. Already four veteran BJP leaders, including former Deputy Prime Minister L K Advani, have in a joint statement said that they are dissatisfied with the manner in which the party is being run. A few BJP leaders from Bihar have also blamed the party's defeat on Mr Shah. There are no signs though that Mr Shah is going to pay the price of presiding over

two resounding electoral defeats in Delhi and Bihar, but the demands for his head might get louder when the BJP holds elections to the party president's post in January 2016.

In the immediate aftermath, the central government's economic and legislative agenda is likely to take a hit. The Bihar debacle has scotched the prospect in the near future of the BJP significantly increasing its tally in the upper house of parliament, where the party is in a minority. An energised opposition, which has a majority in the upper house, is unlikely to allow legislation such as the Goods and Services Tax (GST) Bill or amendments to land acquisition to be passed in a hurry in the coming winter session of parliament. It is also likely to bring up in parliament the incidents of intolerance that occurred in the run-up to the Bihar elections. The central government will attempt to find its way around parliament's intransigence by resorting to executive orders. Soon after the Bihar election results, Mr Modi sent a message to investors by opening up several sectors, including banking, construction, defence and the media, to foreign investment. But these measures might not be enough to satisfy voters who are holding the Prime Minister and his party to account on the huge expectations that they had generated in 2014.

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