

Bihar Assembly Elections: Politics in the times of COVID-19

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Summary

The Bihar assembly elections, when they are held, will be the first to electorally test the decisions taken by the Union government in India and Bihar state administration to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic and its related crisis. While recent trends have shown that the National Democratic Alliance will have an advantage, the opposition parties, with limited resources, are trying hard to attract the voters.

Introduction

Bihar's assembly elections at the time COVID-19 will be a major electoral test for Chief Minister Nitish Kumar-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the opposition parties. The NDA comprises the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), Janata Dal (United) [JD(U)] and Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) while the opposition, under the umbrella of *Mahagathbandhan* (major-coalition), has the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), Indian National Congress (INC), Hindustani Awam Morcha (HAM) (Secular), Vikasheel Insaan Party (VIP) and Rashtriya Lok Samta Party (RLSP). Besides deciding on the performance of the Bihar government, to an extent, the state assembly elections will also deliver the verdict on the central government's policies in dealing with the COVID-19 public health emergency and the crisis following the lockdown. There are talks of postponing the Bihar assembly elections until the COVID-19 pandemic situation subsides. While the RJD and the LJP are in favour of deferring the elections,¹ the BJP and JD(U) want elections to be held on time.² Legally, the Election Commission (EC) has the power to postpone the elections in extraordinary times. In 1991, due to the assassination of the then-Prime Minister and leader of the Congress party, Rajiv Gandhi, in 1991 in Tamil Nadu, the ongoing parliamentary elections were postponed for three weeks.³ However, in normal circumstances, the elections to the assembly or parliament have to be held within the six months of their dissolution. The term of the present Bihar assembly ends on 29 November 2020; hence, a new assembly has to be constituted by then. This paper looks at the pertinent issues in the Bihar assembly elections and also discusses the challenges in the conducting free and fair elections at the time of pandemics.

¹ Ritika Chopra, 'Explained: Is EC empowered to delay Bihar elections due to Covid-19?' *The Indian Express*, 12 July 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-is-ec-empowered-to-delay-bihar-elections-due-to-covid-19-6501317/>. Accessed on 15 July 2020.

² Manoj Chaurasia, 'Only BJP and JD-U want elections in Bihar at time of Corona pandemic', *The Statesman*, 12 July 2020. <https://www.thestatesman.com/india/bjp-jd-u-want-elections-bihar-time-corona-pandemic-1502908220.html>. Accessed on 15 July 2020.

³ Ritika Chopra, op cit.

COVID-19 and the State of Bihar

Like other parts of India, COVID-19 has severely affected Bihar which does not have good public health infrastructure. The state spends only about 4.1 per cent of its total budget on health.⁴ So far, Bihar has tested only 0.48 million people out of its total population of 123 million for COVID-19 infections. As of 28 July 2020, 43,591 people have been declared COVID-19 positive, with 29,220 recoveries and 269 deaths.⁵

To control the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, India imposed a lockdown on 25 March 2020. This halted economic activities across India. As a result, a large number of migrant workers have returned to Bihar. Many of them lost their jobs and were facing a tough situation in the cities due to lack of money and insufficient savings. According to an estimate, there are about 10 million intra-state and inter-state migrants in Bihar. Out of these, more than three million migrated to the other states to work.⁶ Due to the COVID-19 crisis, according to media reports, almost all of them (between 2.5 and 3 million) have returned to Bihar.⁷

To monitor the returnee migrants' health, drawing from the experiences of Kerala, in Bihar, *Mukhiyas* or village heads of the 8,600 *Gram Panchayat* (village-level local-self government) were deployed to prepare lists of returnees to ensure that they enter their village only after proper medical check-ups.⁸ In addition, the *Mukhiya* and ward members had to inform the local police of those returnees who reached the villages without registration, health check-up and serving the 14-day mandatory quarantine that has since been discontinued after Unlock 1.0 began.⁹

All such enforced measures were riddled with problems. For instance, many migrant workers skipped the screening at the transit camps at the border of the state. This created difficulty for the *Mukhiyas*. It was also difficult to convince the returnees to serve 14 days of quarantine. Many cases of missing migrants from quarantine centres were also reported.¹⁰ Due to the character of the COVID-19 disease, some of the returnees also faced social

⁴ Shaibal Gupta, 'Why Covid-19 poses a sharp challenge for Bihar', *The Hindustan Times*, 12 May 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/why-covid-19-poses-a-sharp-challenge-for-bihar-analysis/story-C7Lr22Ez5skaPtWfEhSlwN.html>. Accessed on 22 July 2020.

⁵ Bihar Health Dept twitter handle @BiharHealthDept #BiharFightsCorona, 29 July 2020. <https://twitter.com/BiharHealthDept/status/1288086432402141186/photo/1>. Accessed on 29 July 2020.

⁶ Pushpendra & Dilip Singh, 'A change in migrant policy', *The Hindu*, 20 April 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/a-change-in-migrant-policy/article313995a02.ece>. Accessed on 27 June 2020.

⁷ Santosh Mehrotra & Baikunth Roy, 'Will Bihar's Economy Rise to the Reverse Migration Challenge?', *The Wire*, 23 June 2020. <https://thewire.in/labour/bihar-economy-reverse-migration-challenge>. Accessed on 14 July 2020.

⁸ Santosh Singh, 'Home, alone', *The Indian Express*, 29 March 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/migrant-workers-coronavirus-outbreak-india-lockdown-covid-19-death-6336432/>. Accessed on 30 July 2020.

⁹ 'Coronavirus Outbreak: Bihar govt closes registration of migrant workers for mandatory 14-day institutional quarantine', *The Firstpost*, 2 June 2020. <https://www.firstpost.com/health/coronavirus-outbreak-no-more-mandatory-14-day-institutional-quarantine-for-migrant-workers-returning-to-bihar-8439541.html>. Accessed on 30 July 2020.

¹⁰ Amarnath Tewary, 'Migrant workers slip out of Bihar quarantine centres at night, return by day', *The Hindu*, 8 April 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/coronavirus-lockdown-many-quarantined-bihar-villagers-missing-from-centres-at-night/article>. Accessed on 10 July 2020.

ostracism. In some villages and towns, posters with 'Outsiders are not allowed' messages were put up. This created tensions among the residents.¹¹

Initially, as testing kits were unavailable, many returnees were not tested. For example, more than around 4,000 people who returned from the West Asian countries, especially in Gopalganj and Siwan districts, were not tested for COVID-19 due to the lack of testing facilities.¹²

Besides, creating a public health crisis, the pandemic has also severely affected economic activities and employment opportunities in Bihar. The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy survey puts unemployment rate in Bihar for April 2020 at 46.6 per cent (or 20 percentage points above the national rate).¹³ As the poor and the unemployed have been the hardest hit, the Bihar government, initially, announced the provision of free ration for one month to 16.8 million ration card holders and three months' pension (old age, widow and person with disability) to 8.7 million people.¹⁴ It has also provided monetary assistance of ₹1,000 (S\$20) to 9.5 million ration card holders.¹⁵

Political Tug of War

Expecting the assembly elections in Bihar, even amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the BJP has already started its electoral campaign. The party has organised a number of virtual rallies in the state. The BJP's central leadership has also accepted Nitish Kumar as the chief ministerial candidate and has announced it in virtual rallies. This has cleared the air on the future of BJP-JD(U) ties in Bihar, as there were speculations on the ground that either the BJP or Nitish Kumar would dump the other.¹⁶ Addressing the first virtual rally in Bihar on 7 June 2020, the Union Home Minister and BJP leader, Amit Shah, highlighted the achievements of the Nitish Kumar-led government in the last 15 years. Praising Nitish Kumar's administration, Shah said, "Bihar has moved from *jungle raj* (anarchy) to *janta raj* (democracy) under the NDA."¹⁷

¹¹ Parul Agrawal, 'Covid-19 lockdown: Bihar migrants who fled cities face ostracism at home', *Scroll.in*, 3 April 2020. <https://scroll.in/article/958010/covid-19-lockdown-bihar-migrants-who-fled-cities-face-ostracism-at-home>. Accessed on 10 July 2020.

¹² Santosh Singh, 'Bihar: Over 4000 returned from Gulf, only 500 tested for Covid-19', *The Indian Express*, 31 March 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/coronavirus/bihar-coronavirus-gulf-returnee-siwan-gopalganj-6343350/>. Accessed on 10 July 2020.

¹³ Santosh Mehrotra & Baikunth Roy, op cit.

¹⁴ Santosh Singh, 'Lack of coordination with Centre, Bihar govt wakes up to migrant crisis', *The Indian Express*, 30 March 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-lockdown-lack-of-coordination-with-centre-bihar-govt-wakes-up-to-migrant-crisis-6337985/>. Accessed on 10 July 2020.

¹⁵ Vijay Swaroop, 'Covid-19: Migrant workers in Bihar quarantine centres leave for', *The Hindustan Times*, 19 April 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/covid-19-migrants-in-bihar-quarantine-centres-leave-for-home/story-giFRtArFQj0L5f3OBccCKP.html>. Accessed on 10 July 2020.

¹⁶ Shivam Vij, 'The BJP should dump Nitish Kumar in Bihar, sooner the better', *The Print*, 9 June 2020. <https://theprint.in/opinion/the-bjp-should-dump-nitish-kumar-in-bihar-sooner-the-better/438372/>. Accessed on 23 July 2020.

¹⁷ Prerna Katiyar, 'With Amit Shah's virtual rally, the BJP has already sounded the poll bugle in Bihar', *The Economic Times*, 14 June 2020. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/with-amit-shahs-virtual-rally-the-bjp-has-already-sounded-the-poll-bugle-in-bihar/articleshow/76361403.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on 9 July 2020.

On the same day, the RJD organised a state-wide protest against the Nitish Kumar government and declared it '*Garib Adhikar Divas*' (Poor Rights Day).¹⁸ The protest was conspicuous by the absence of leaders from its alliance partners such as the INC, RLSP, HAM (Secular) and VIP. The opposition attacked the government over its handling of the COVID-19 pandemic in the state and the predicament of migrant workers returning to their hometowns. Initially, as the Union and state governments were not supportive of the movement of workers from their places of work back to their hometowns, due to the fear of spread of the virus in the villages, the RJD offered to bear the cost of 50 trains to bring back the migrants.¹⁹

India's Prime Minister Narendra Modi made his entrance on Bihar's electoral pitch with an announcement of *Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyaan* (Poor Welfare Employment Scheme) on 20 June 2020. This scheme aims to provide skill-based employment to the migrant workers for 125 days during the time of COVID-19. Modi virtually launched this scheme from Telihar village in Kagharia district of Bihar.²⁰ Khagaria recorded the highest number of returnee migrant workers in Bihar. This scheme encompasses 32 out of 38 districts of Bihar.²¹ Another scheme, *Garib Kalyan Ann Yojna* (Poor Welfare Food Scheme), which was announced by Modi on 26 March 2020 to help 800 million poor people by providing them food till June 2020, has been now extended to November 2020. While extending the scheme, Modi mentioned Chhat and Durga puja, the two most sacred and popular festivals of Bihar and West Bengal respectively.²² Notably, West Bengal, will go to polls after Bihar.

The crucial undercurrents of the Bihar's assembly elections would be the nature of campaign. The traditional campaigns were marked with mass rallies, door-to-door canvassing and use of banners, posters and leaflets. These are going to change if elections are held during the COVID-19 pandemic. This change in campaign is likely to affect the smaller regional parties, giving an edge to national and resourceful state-level parties. On the issue of the changed nature of campaigns, in an interview to an Indian television channel, *News 18*, Professor Sanjay Kumar of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in New Delhi spoke on the burgeoning role of social media wherein the national parties – both the BJP and Congress – will be at an advantageous position compared to the regional parties.²³

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Prakash Singh, 'Tejashwi Offers To Bear Cost Of 50 Trains To Bring Back Migrant Labourers; JDU Hits Back'. <https://www.republicworld.com/india-news/politics/tejashwi-yadav-offers-to-bear-cost-of-50-trains-to-bring-back-stranded.html>. Accessed on 15 July 2020.

²⁰ 'Prime Minister's Office Prime Minister Narendra Modi launches Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyaan on 20th June 2020 to boost employment and livelihood opportunities for migrant workers returning to villages, in the wake of COVID-19 outbreak', *Press Information Bureau*, 20 June 2020. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1632861>. Accessed on 30 July 2020.

²¹ This scheme is applicable in 116 districts in the six Indian states – Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and Jharkhand.

²² 'Text of PM's address to the nation on Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana', *Press Information Bureau*, 30 June 2020. <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1635346>. Accessed on 2 July 2020.

²³ Om Prakash, 'Bihar Vidhansabha Chunav 2020: Corona Ke Baad Kaise Chala Jayega Siyasi Daav, Kitna Alag Hoga', *NEWS18 Hindi*, 4 June 2020. <https://hindi.news18.com/news/nation/bihar-assembly-elections-2020-how-much-will-election-campaign-change-after-corona-migrant-workers-voting-behavior-csds-bjp-udu-rjd-dlop-3142042.html>. Accessed on 25 July 2020.

Spreading its virtual wings, the BJP has appointed 9,500 head cells at each *Shakti Kendra*²⁴ and created 50,000 WhatsApp groups aimed to cover all booths in Bihar.²⁵ Shah's virtual rally was also televised through live-streaming on LED television sets in 72,000 booths across the state.²⁶ Besides, to cover the polling booths *Saptarishi*, a group of seven party workers, has been envisaged by the BJP. Like the BJP, its partner, JD(U), has also started organising virtual rallies.

On the other hand, opposition parties lack both resources and manpower to hold virtual rallies and are demanding the postponement of elections till the pandemic subsides.²⁷ An RJD Member of the Legislative Assembly who wished to remain anonymous, said, "We do not have the resources and even workers to enable Tejashwi Yadav to address a large number of party workers. It is an uneven battle."²⁸ Some of the opposition leaders including, Tejashwi Yadav, are active on Twitter but the reach of social media is limited to middle class population in Bihar; many of whom live outside the state and do not cast their votes in the state elections.

For both the NDA and the *Mahagathbandhan*, seat sharing is difficult task. Bihar's assembly has 243 seats. Among the ruling NDA coalition, JD(U) has 70 seats, the BJP has 54 seats and the LJP has two seats. Five independent members have also extended their support to the NDA. On the other hand, the RJD, the main opposition party, has 80 seats, the Congress has 26 seats and HAM (Secular) has one seat.²⁹ In the NDA coalition, there is a tussle, especially, between the JD(U) and LJP, with the BJP acting as a balancer as well as a hard bargainer. The LJP's national president, Chirag Paswan, has been critical of Nitish Kumar on the state's law and order situation, his poor handling of the Coronavirus health crisis and his failure to promote industry and religious tourism.³⁰ His father and senior leader of the LJP, Ram Vilas Paswan, who is a Union minister in the Modi government, also irked Nitish Kumar on the issue of the non-procurement of foodgrains by the state government for its public distribution system.³¹

The BJP is also cautious about bargaining the number of seats with the JD(U). In the latest development, the Central Bureau of Investigation has filed a charge-sheet against the former Indian Administrative Service officer and former JD(U) leader, K P Ramaiah, among

²⁴ The BJP has divided the state into 5,500 mandals and 9,500 *Shakti Kendras*. Each *Shakti Kendra* will monitor the functioning of six to seven booths.

²⁵ Shanker Arnimesh, '9,500 IT cell heads, 72,000 WhatsApp groups-how BJP is preparing for Bihar poll battle', *The Print*, 1 July 2020. <https://theprint.in/politics/9500-it-cell-heads-72000-whatsapp-groups-how-bjp-is-preparing-for-bihar-poll-battle/451740/>. Accessed on 3 July 2020.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Dipak Mishra, 'Can't match BJP's e-rallies, so Bihar opposition now wants EC to allow traditional rallies', *The Print*, 27 June 2020. <https://theprint.in/politics/cant-match-bjps-e-rallies-so-bihar-opposition-now-wants-ec-to-allow-traditional-rallies/449835/>. Accessed on 15 July 2020.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Bihar Vidhan Sabha, 'Partywise Strength', <http://vidhansabha.bih.nic.in/>. Accessed on 30 July 2020.

³⁰ Dipak Mishra, 'Chirag Paswan, Nitish-Ram Vilas history, seats — why JD(U)-LJP rift is only growing', *The Print*, 3 July, 2020, <https://theprint.in/politics/chirag-paswan-nitish-ram-vilas-history-seats-why-jdu-ljp-rift-is-only-growing/453062/> Accessed on 25 July 2020.

³¹ Santosh Singh, 'Explained: Why NDA allies LJP, JD (U) are in a tussle; what stops BJP from taking a side', *The Indian Express*, 9 July, 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/bihar-assembly-elections-nda-ljp-dju-bjp-6493534/>. Accessed on 13 July 2020.

59 others, in connection with the ₹2,000-crore (S\$3.67 billion) Srijan scam, which happened under the Nitish Kumar rule. It is being interpreted as a “BJP’s strategy to tighten the noose around him.”³² Despite all such rifts, the NDA partners are likely to contest together.

On the *Mahagathbandhan* side, the RJD desires to contest more number of seats than it contested in 2015 and has been pressurising its allies to declare Tejashwi Yadav as the chief minister of the coalition. The INC is staking its claim for 100 seats and has asserted that the chief ministerial candidate of the *Mahagathbandhan* would be decided by consensus. HAM (Secular), led by Jitan Ram Manjhi, is asking for a sizeable number of seats and a coordination panel to resolve the issue of seat sharing among the partners.³³

The politics of Bihar cannot be comprehended without discussing caste matrix and its evolving dynamics. Sudha Pai, a political commentator and former professor at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, says that the caste calculus in the state has not changed much from past.³⁴ Since 1980s, with an advent of the Mandal politics,³⁵ the political leadership in Bihar has been alternatively moving from one Other Backward Classes (OBC) leader to another.

Demographically, the OBCs make up about 51 per cent³⁶ (divided between Backward Classes and Extremely Backward Classes) of the Bihar’s population. Among the OBCs, the dominant castes, such as the Yadavs, constitute around 15 per cent of the state’s population, while the Kurmis and Koeris together make up 11 per cent. The extremely backward castes (EBCs), a group of several castes, are approximately 24 per cent of the population.³⁷ The upper castes aggregately constitute around 15 per cent, with the Rajputs and Bhumihar being major ones amongst them.³⁸ The Dalits are around 16 per cent of the total population in the state.³⁹ Besides, the Muslims constitute around 17 per cent the state population.⁴⁰

³² Nalin Verma, ‘Before Polls, CBI Charge Sheet to Nitish’s ‘Trusted’ Officer Rekindles Srijan Scam Politics in Bihar’, *The Wire*, 14 July 2020. <https://thewire.in/politics/srijan-scam-cbi-chargesheet-nitish-sushil-modi-kp-ramaiah>. Accessed on 16 July 2020.

³³ Vijay Swaroop, ‘Jitan Ram Manjhi’s party preps to switch sides again ahead of Bihar elections’, *The Hindustan Times*, 6 July 2020. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/ahead-of-bihar-s-assembly-polls-jitan-ram-manjhi-s-ham-s-likely-to-join-nda/story-g8VAzGI8jwmhcLo6fmT9CJ.html>. Accessed on 23 July 2020.

³⁴ Ullekh N P & A K Mishra, ‘Caste remains an integral part of Bihar’s political landscape’, *The Economic Times*, 11 July 2013. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/caste-remains-an-integral-part-of-bihars-political-landscape/articleshow/21011966.cms?from=mdr>. Accessed on 27 July 2020.

³⁵ Mandal politics is a term used to rise of OBC leaders in 1980s that demanded and fought for the implementation of the report given by the B P Mandal Commission. The Mandal report recommended reservation for the OBCs in government jobs.

³⁶ Sanjay Kumar et al., ‘Caste Dynamics and Political Process in Bihar’, *Journal of Indian School of Political Economy*, Jan-June 2008, 1-31.

³⁷ Sanjay Kumar & Vibha Attri, ‘Decoding the data: The EBC vote, last swung by BJP, now unpredictable as ever’, *The Indian Express*, 6 October, 2015. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/decoding-the-data-the-ebc-vote-last-swung-by-bjp-now-unpredictable-as-ever/>. Accessed on 30 July 2020.

³⁸ Pranav Gupta & Nitin Mehta, ‘Bihar Polls: BJP consistent, Congress erratic among upper castes’, *The Indian Express*, 18 September 2015. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/politics/bihar-polls-bjp-consistent-congress-erratic-among-upper-castes/>. Accessed on 30 July 2020.

³⁹ Sajjan Kumar Singh & Rajan Pandey, ‘Why Nitish Kumar Is Indispensable for the Winning Side in Bihar’, *The Wire*, 27 July 2020. <https://thewire.in/politics/nitish-kumar-bihar-elections-jdu-bjp-nda-15/JUN/2020>.

The existing NDA coalition has a support base of mainly the upper castes, EBCs and a sizeable number of Dalits. The EBCs, Mahadalits⁴¹ and women voters (across all castes) are the main supporters of Nitish Kumar which makes him indispensable to the NDA. He also has supporters among the Bhumihars. The attempt to consolidate these castes can be gauged from the recent elections for the members of the Legislative Council, in which the JD(U) selected two candidates belonging to the EBCs, including a woman of the same community.⁴² In this election, the BJP has also tried to woo the Kushwahas by nominating Samrat Choudhary, a former minister and son of respected Kushwaha leader Shakuni Choudhary. This is, largely, to compensate for the RLSP, Upendra Kushwaha, who left the NDA in 2018.

On the other hand, in the *Mahagathbandhan*, the RJD had traditionally enjoyed the support of Muslim-Yadav combination, which still continues. However, in recent years, the BJP has been able to bring a number of Yadav leaders into its fold. In the past, the RJD also enjoyed the support of the Rajputs who are approximately between four and five per cent of the state's population. However, since 2005, a large number of Rajputs have shown their inclination towards the NDA.⁴³ In an attempt to attract the Rajputs, the RJD has made Jagdanand Singh, a Rajput, the party's Bihar state president. Trying something new, to attract the Bhumihar voters who are regarded as a major challenge to the RJD's rule, the party sent prominent businessman, Amarendra Dhari Singh, to the Rajya Sabha (Upper House of the Indian Parliament) in March 2020. Apart from his caste, Singh is capable of bringing in funds which the RJD needs to contest the assembly elections.⁴⁴ With Upendra Kushwaha (RLSP) and Jitin Ram Majhi (HAM [Secular]) as partners, the coalition is expected to gain the support of the Kushwahas (Koeris) as well as from the Musahar community (comprising the Dalits). The Musahars constitute five per cent of Bihar's total population. The EBCs, especially the Mallah votes, are expected to fall in favour of the *Mahagathbandhan* due to alliance with the VIP, headed by Mukesh Sahni. The Congress is expected to bring some votes of from the Upper Caste-Dalit-Muslim.

Elections and Challenges for the Election Commission

Conducting free and fair elections in Bihar at the time of COVID-19 is a daunting challenge for the EC. On this, Bihar's Chief Electoral Officer (CEO), H R Srinivas, said, "Our job is to prepare for elections assuming they would be held in time. The final decision rests with the

Accessed on 27 July 2020.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ A sub-group of the Scheduled Caste in Bihar.

⁴² Ashok Mishra, 'Churning in Bihar's Caste Cauldron after JD(U) Engineers Split in RJD as Parties Try to Firm Up Formulae', *News18*, 25 June 2020. "<https://www.news18.com/news/politics/churning-in-bihars-caste-cauldron-after-jdu-engineers-split-in-rjd-as-parties-try-to-firm-up-formulae-2686809.html>", Accessed on 28 July 2020.

⁴³ Dipak Mishra, 'Why Bihar politicians are scrambling to get justice for late actor Sushant Singh Rajput', *The Print*, 21 June 2020. <https://theprint.in/india/why-bihar-politicians-are-scrambling-to-get-justice-for-late-actor-sushant-singh-rajput/446037/>. Accessed on 28 July 2020.

⁴⁴ Dipak Mishra, 'Who is Amarendra Dhari Singh? RJD's Rajya Sabha pick that has raised eyebrows even in party', *The Print*, 13 March 2020. <https://theprint.in/politics/who-is-amarendra-dhari-singh-rjds-raiya-sabha-pick-that-has-raised-eyebrows-even-in-party/380545/>. Accessed on 18 March 2020.

ECI.”⁴⁵ Besides, the CEO also confirmed that the electronic voting machines and voter-verified paper audit trail had reached all the districts and the training of returning officers is forthcoming.⁴⁶

After the interaction with the political parties, the EC’s circular has directed that the limit would be 1,000 voters in each polling station and create addition auxiliary polling stations. The EC’s press note said, “[The] facility of optional postal ballot to electors who are above 80 years of age, PwD [Physically Weak] Voters, the electors engaged in essential services and voters who are COVID-19 positive/suspect in quarantine (home/institutional) will be extended in these elections.”⁴⁷ To facilitate this, the state government is creating additional 34,000 (approximately) polling stations (45 per cent more), which will increase the total number of polling stations to around 106,000.⁴⁸

Moreover, as the election campaign in Bihar will be virtual, the insurmountable task for the EC is how to micromanage the use or misuse of social media platforms including WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, Zoom and Google for campaigning? This has to be observed.

People’s Perspectives

To know the general mood of the voters in Bihar, Jeetendra Kumar conducted a survey in which he interacted with a limited number of people from diverse age, region and caste groups. The issues discussed were COVID-19 and its related problems, return of migrant workers and increasing unemployment, India-China standoff and continued deterioration of India-Nepal relations and its correlation with electoral fortunes of the state. Among all, unemployment emerged as the major concern among the majority of respondents followed by the issue of Coronavirus and the return of migrants.

The interactions and survey also exhibited that people are apprehensive about going to voting booths, given the upsurge of infections in the state. This implies that it might affect the voting percentage and inclusivity of the election. It would be particularly interesting to see the percentage of women voter turnout in these assembly elections. The data for the parliamentary elections of 2019 showed that 59.92 per cent of women voters turned up to cast their ballot, which was higher than the total male turnout of 55.26 per cent.⁴⁹ If the same or more percentage of women voters turn out in the assembly elections, it will be

⁴⁵ Santosh Singh, ‘Preparing on assumption that Bihar polls will be held as per schedule: CEO’, *The Indian Express*, 13 July 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/preparing-on-assumption-that-bihar-polls-will-be-held-as-per-schedule-ceo-6502736/>. Accessed on 13 July 2020.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Election Commission of India, Government of India, Press Note, ‘Commission decides not to extend the facility of postal ballot to electors above 65 years of age in General Assembly Elections in Bihar and by elections due in near future in view of constraints of logistics, manpower and safety protocols of Covid-19’. <https://eci.gov.in/files/file/12087-commission-decides-not-to-extend-the-facility-of-postal-ballot-to-electors-above-65-years-of-age-in-general-assembly-elections-in-bihar-and-by-elections-due-in-near-future-in-view-of-constraints-of-logistics-manpower-and-safety-protocols-of-covid-19-%C2%A0%C2%A0%C2%A0/>. Accessed on 17 July 2020.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ ‘In Bihar, woman come out to vote in large numbers, beat men’s voter turnout’, *The Hindu Business Line*, 22 May 2019. <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/elections/lok-sabha-elections-2019-women-turnout-surpass-men-in-bihar/article27203773.ece>. Accessed on 13 July 2020.

advantage to the Nitish Kumar, as many women prefer him because of a number of policies such as giving free bicycle to school going girls, which has transformed female education in Bihar or the introduction of the total prohibition and ban on the sale of alcohol products in the state in 2016.

An important dimension to the Bihar's assembly elections will be social media and electronic means used by the political parties. However, as reflected in Jeetendra Kumar's survey, a sizeable population, approximately 25 per cent of the state, is still unaware about these platforms. Kantar IMRB, a marketing agency, in its ICUBE report 2018, earmarked the state for showing highest growth in new internet users both in the urban as well as rural areas. At the same time, the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI)-Nielsen report on 'Digital in India 2019' pegs the state's internet penetration at 37 per cent.⁵⁰ This is lower than several other Indian states.

Conclusion

With an upsurge of the COVID-19 cases in Bihar, the politics seems to revolve around Coronavirus-linked issues such as returnees, loss of jobs, and poor health infrastructure, among others. Despite the poor performance of the Nitish Kumar-government on all such issues, the NDA has an edge because of the lack of a popular leader in the opposition and the reasons mentioned in this paper.

The upcoming assembly elections in Bihar are a crucial test for the BJP as it has lost recently held state assembly elections in Jharkhand and Delhi, and failed to form a government in Maharashtra. The victory of the NDA would harness the vigour among the party workers for the next assembly elections in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, while the Congress has to depend heavily on the RJD and the other partners.

The acumen of the EC to conduct free and fair elections in such unusual times would be tested. Hence, the Bihar assembly elections remains decisive for sending crucial indicators to the changing electoral politics in India.

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⁵⁰ 'Digital in India 2019- Round 2 Report', IMAI-Nielsen. <https://cms.iamai.in/Content/ResearchPapers/2286f4d7-424f-4bde-be88-6415fe5021d5.pdf>. Accessed on 28 July 2020.