

469A Bukit Timah Road
#07-01, Tower Block, Singapore 259770
Tel: 6516 6179 / 6516 4239
Fax: 6776 7505 / 6314 5447
Email: isassec@nus.edu.sg
Website: www.isas.nus.edu.sg



The Bihar Election: Gamechanger or Business as Usual?

Ronojoy Sen¹

Abstract

Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar's re-election in November 2010 by a huge margin was based on his solid performance over the last five years, something that has been commented on widely by the media, both in India and abroad. But he probably would not have won only on his development agenda. He also had his poll arithmetic right by reaching out to a large constituency, which included the extremely backward castes and women. The paper however, points out that the election result, remarkable as it is, might not signal a change in the style of Indian politics.

This was one election where exit polls were not required to predict the results. Much before the result for the six-phase Bihar elections, which stretched from 21 October to 20 November 2010, was announced, it was known that Chief Minister Nitish Kumar would return to office. However, the margin of victory – with Kumar's Janata Dal (United) [JD (U)] and its ally the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) winning 206 of the 243 seats in the Assembly – still came as a surprise.

Nitish's victory was based on his solid performance over the last five years, something that has been noted and feted by the media, both in India and abroad. In early 2010, *The Economist*

¹ Dr Ronojoy Sen is Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore. He can be reached at isasrs@nus.edu.sg. The views reflected in this paper are those of the author and not of the institute.

carried an article on Bihar saying India's most notorious state was failing to live up to its reputation. Bihar was finally turning around after years of decline and stagnation. In the last five years, Bihar's economy has grown at an annual average of over 11.0 per cent, nearly triple the state's earlier growth rate of 3.5 per cent. This was partly possible due to massive investment in infrastructure, particularly roads. Some 2,400 km of roads were built in 2009 alone with the government spending Rs 2,489 crore (approximately SGD716 million) in 2008-09, compared to a mere Rs 263 crore (approximately SGD70 million) in 2005-06. Another 400 bridges were built in the last five years. As *The Economist* put it, 'Today, Bihar has pot-holes where formerly it didn't have roads.'² What really made a difference to the people was the spectacular improvement of law and order. In a state where there were 400 recorded cases of kidnappings in 2004, the number fell to 66 in 2008.

But Nitish probably would not have won solely on his development agenda. He also had his poll arithmetic right by reaching out to a large constituency, which included the extremely backward castes and women, in addition to his traditional vote bank of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), to which he himself belongs.

Besides the success of Nitish's strategy, there are a few other notable facts that emerged from the Bihar elections. One, the success of the BJP which won 91 seats compared to 55 in the last election. This has breathed life into the moribund National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which governed India from 1999-2004, of which the BJP and the JD(U) are the two main constituents. It has also shown a possible way to the BJP to reach out to Muslims and Dalits, who have traditionally been wary of its Hindutva agenda. Two, the elections have decimated two major politicians from Bihar – former Chief Minister Lalu Prasad Yadav and his ally Ram Vilas Paswan. Both their parties, the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) and the Lok Janashakti Party (LJP), could only win 25 seats, down from 64 in the last election. Three, the Congress and Rahul Gandhi, who campaigned vigorously in Bihar, have come a cropper winning only four seats compared to nine in the last election.

What now needs further scrutiny is the nature of the Bihar mandate which has been interpreted by most commentators as one where governance trumped caste and ethnic politics.³ Nitish himself said after the election victory: 'They [the voters] have unambiguously declared that caste-based politics is passé, and those who seek to divide people to get votes will fail... People have responded to a positive agenda.'⁴ The question is whether the Bihar verdict, as many seem to believe, is a gamechanger for Indian politics.

² 'The Bihari enlightenment', *The Economist*, 28 January 2010.

³ Seema Chishti, 'Simply Nitish', *Indian Express*, 25 November 2010; Samar Harlankar, 'Nitish confirms India has great aspirations', *Hindustan Times*, 25 November 2010.

⁴ 'Caste politics is passé', *The Times of India*, 25 November 2010.

What makes Nitish's re-election special is his emphasis on development and delivering substantially on campaign promises in a state that has long been regarded as among the poorest and worst governed in India. There is, however, evidence to show that in the last few years governance – or *bijli, paani, sadak (bipaas)* as it is now called in India⁵ – figures prominently in the voter's calculus. The National Election Study 2009, conducted immediately after the last general elections, found that drinking water and unemployment were top-of-the-mind issues for voters. One can be sure that these were always concerns for Indian voters but were not possibly being addressed by most politicians. As for the influence of caste in voting, that might always have been somewhat overstated. As political analyst Yogendra Yadav pointed out in a recent article: 'Most voters, in Bihar or anywhere else for that matter, view governance or development from their own social location. Caste appears to be the only factor when there is not too much to choose from in terms of development or governance.'⁶ This means that if the parties or the contesting candidates have little to differentiate them, only then are voters likely to vote for their caste brethren in the hope of accessing state resources.

It is also important to remember that chief ministers and ruling parties being voted back to power, ostensibly for fulfilling at least some expectations of voters, is not so unusual these days. West Bengal, where the Left Front has been in office for over three decades, is seen as an anomaly in Indian politics. But Bihar itself saw Lalu Prasad Yadav and his wife Rabri Devi rule the state for 15 years. In Delhi, Chief Minister Sheila Dikshit is in her third term; Narendra Modi has been the Chief Minister of Gujarat since 2001 and Naveen Patnaik has been holding office in Orissa from the same time. Madhya Pradesh has a second-term Chief Minister in Shivraj Singh Chauhan, Chhattisgarh in Raman Singh and Haryana in Bhupinder Singh Hooda. It is estimated that from end-2007, 15 out of 20 incumbent governments have won elections.

As the reduction in anti-incumbency suggests, state governments have begun paying more attention to voter concerns. But what worked so well for Bihar might not work elsewhere since the state started with such a low base and the results of good governance were there for everyone to see.

These healthy trends might even be difficult to replicate in some of the states that go to elections next year. Tamil Nadu, the home base of disgraced telecom minister Andhimuthu Raja and his party, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), is one of the better-off states in India but also one of the most corrupt. Old-style patronage politics and populism rule there with things unlikely to change much for next year's elections. As for West Bengal, another state

⁵ *Bijli, Paani* and *Sadak* are electricity, water and road respectively in Hindi.

⁶ Yogendra Yadav, 'Bihar election is all about hope, period', *The Times of India*, 31 October 2010.

which is up for polls around the same time, it has been held hostage to the worst forms of populism by Mamata Banerjee, tipped to be the state's next chief minister.

It is probably too early to say that development is going to be the only agenda in the coming state elections.

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