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Nitish Kumar and Bihar's Lost Political Ground

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Nitish Kumar's return to the helm as Chief Minister of Bihar is a remarkable political comeback in the sense that he succeeded in bringing odd allies under a single umbrella, and in doing so without compromising his development agenda. In all probability, he will make it big this time – with a perfect sense of the situation that arose from the blunder he committed when relinquishing the position of chief minister. Kumar had resigned as Bihar Chief Minister a day after Narendra Modi led his party to a historic win in the national general election last year – with Kumar's party suffering a humiliating defeat in Bihar in that election. Notably, Kumar's decision then, which turned out to be a lapse in *realpolitik*, has turned Bihar into a playground for unhealthy politics.

On the day that Modi made it through to Delhi – in Patna, Kumar was in no hurry to face the National Development Council's next meeting that was to be chaired by the new prime minister. Kumar committed a blunder by taking the outcome of the parliamentary elections as the loss of

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his own chief ministerial mandate – instead of seeing it as the result of his poor people-management. Also, he failed to understand that Modi’s mandate was for parliament and for his image as a development-oriented politician or “*Vikas Purush*”.

Now, Kumar took oath as Bihar Chief Minister for the fourth time on 22 February 2015.² He then wrote:

The story of developed India is not possible without the story of developed Bihar. I have [worked] and will continue to work forever to make this a reality... My principal strength is the ability to provide good governance, inclusive growth and social harmony. As I have tried in the last nine years, I aspire to build a state where this strength becomes institutionalised. And as I would continue to try forever, I aspire to build a state that confidently carries the narrative of positive future, vibrant culture and resilient harmony.³

More importantly, Kumar underlined that he “will readily work with the honourable Prime Minister and the Government of India in the interest of Bihar”. This change in his attitude appears to be driven by his homecoming on the strength of his development agenda. Kumar had severed ties with the BJP when it became clear that Modi would be the face of the party and the national alliance it led in last year’s *Lok Sabha* elections. Now, their past bitterness, however, seemed to somewhat melt during the brief meeting between Prime Minister Modi and Kumar after the latter’s return to power as Chief Minister. A warm handshake lifted the frost that had set over the ties between the two leaders six years ago.⁴

The return of Kumar is not devoid of ambivalence. In trying to control the damage his party had suffered in the national election last year, he should have proceeded with pragmatic moves. In fact, he was not able to gain his lost ground despite persisting with organisational campaigns.

² “Nitish Kumar takes oath as Bihar CM”, 22 February 2015, available at <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Nitish-Kumar-takes-oath-as-Bihar-CM/articleshow/46332933.cms>.

³ “Will Work Readily With PM for Bihar, Writes Nitish Kumar”, 22 February 2015, available at <http://www.ndtv.com/opinion/ndtv-com-exclusive-will-work-readily-with-pm-for-bihar-writes-nitish-kumar-741365>.

⁴ “Warm handshake thaws Modi-Nitish frost”, 28 February 2015, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/Warm-handshake-thaws-Modi-Nitish-frost/articleshow/46402858.cms>.

Jitan Ram Manjhi rose to prominence in no time – once he accidentally received the baton of Bihar, after an erroneous reading of the situation by his old-time mentor, Kumar.

However, in a political consolidation mode now, Kumar appears better-prepared for his deserved stake in the state politics. A beginning is being made in the quest for new constituencies, he is befriending the allies which have a better standing against the BJP. No matter how vigorously the Bihar unit of the BJP had played the ‘double game’ to spoil the political and social normality in the state – the effects of the party’s communal polarisation do not appear to favour it.

In addition, the BJP’s attempt to induce defections from Kumar’s JD(U) was detected and exposed. So, the BJP has lost the edge that it gained last May. In 2014, when the Modi wave was at its strongest, the BJP and its allies got 31 out of 40 Lok Sabha seats in Bihar, with 38.8 per cent share of the popular vote in the state. By contrast, the JD(U), the RJD and the Congress collectively got nearly 45 per cent of the vote but won just 8 seats because they fought the BJP as a divided opposition.⁵ A Nitish-led grand coalition could now present a tough challenge to the BJP leadership. Hence, the primary challenge before the Janta Parivar & Allies, led by Kumar, would be to cope with the BJP’s credit earned in the past (while being in government).

The voting patterns and levels of electoral participation are witnessing a sea-change in India. These came to light when the BJP made a breakthrough in the last parliamentary elections. For a party, which won the parliamentary election by an unexpectedly wide margin, it took no time to suffer a humiliating defeat in the recent Delhi Assembly elections, at the hands of the Aam Aadmi Party. Delhi’s verdict has raised doubts about the Central Government’s claims of good governance and policy management, the so-called “achche din” (‘good days’). It also demonstrated that no mandate, however resounding, is secure in India. Indeed, it can also be argued that Modi’s style of governance is not in tune with the ethos of India, which centrally rests on pluralism. Today, there are voices heard that his government and party have no ‘internal democracy’.

⁵ Siddharth Varadarajan, “What Amit Shah Is Doing Wrong in Bihar and Bengal”, 21 February 2015, <http://www.ndtv.com/opinion/what-amit-shah-is-doing-wrong-in-bihar-and-bengal-741317>.

Kumar was voted into government in 2004, with the support of the BJP and in response to the electorate's aspiration for development. He was voted to power again in 2009 for his performance. Once again, Kumar has the opportunity to bring Bihar back on track and to woo the people with developmental determination and performance. Indeed, he has begun his latest term by working towards changing the 'culture of criminality' in the politics of Bihar. Several powerful politicians and criminals have been sent to prison. He seems to be succeeding in engendering a work culture with less political, sycophantic and criminal interference – while focusing on developing the infrastructure.

Some will argue that Kumar's new innings in Bihar has the power to weaken the overtly personalised leadership of Modi. In a very short time, the electorate in Delhi clearly showed that personalised leadership alone, without a developmental agenda and its timely implementation, was unlikely to succeed. In his message to the people, Kumar has now underscored, "I will strive to build a state which emerges forever from the shadow of narratives of bad governance. The idea and fear that Bihar can snap back to any regime of unaccountable governance and [unaccountable] law and order [situation] must be erased from people's hearts and minds". Kumar will be tested on this promise. Some expect Kumar to create another glorious chapter in Indian politics.

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