

In Bihar, it's not just parties – voters' aspirations are clashing too

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“Badlaav to hona chahiye (there should be a change),” he said, sitting on the high wooden chair that served as a roadside saloon for his customers. My reference to Karpoori Thakur, in response to his self-identification as Nai, eased him. Still, he wouldn't open up about what badlaav would translate into how he and the 20 voters in his family would vote. “Ab aap samajh jaiye (you can draw your conclusion).”

For me, *badlaav* meant a change in government, something Bihar and the country need desperately, something I was campaigning for. But two weeks of travel, mostly in north Bihar, alerted me to the multiplicity and ambiguity of badlaav. When I managed to snatch a few hours away from the echo chamber of political colleagues to speak to ordinary voters, mostly men, I realised that the problem in Bihar is not lack of popular sentiment for badlaav, but too many badlaavs that compete and clash with one another. The fragile instrument of the vote is made to carry the weight of multiple and deferred transitions. None of these transitions have an agent that a vast majority can connect with.

The first badlaav is samajik nyay, the social revolution against the stranglehold of the upper castes — now less than 11 per cent of Bihar — over the state's society, economy and politics. Lalu Prasad led the Mandal upsurge that promised to break the backbone of the caste order by mobilising the bottom of the pyramid. Yet, the social revolution was halted after his first two terms as CM. Inattention to governance, indifference to law and order and concentration of power around a caste and a family prepared fertile ground for regime change by the end of the third term. Upper-caste hegemony returned by crafting a coalition with the lower end of the backward-caste spectrum, the EBCs and Mahadalits, while the erstwhile unity of the lower social order shrank into a Yadav-Muslim alliance (14.2 per cent and 17.7 per cent respectively of Bihar's population as per the latest state caste census). Standing in the middle of the forward/backward divide, [Nitish Kumar](#) emerged as a key figure, whose oscillations could tilt the balance, and who presided over the reversal of social revolution.

The stranglehold of caste over political affiliation shows no signs of abating. Each caste has its own world view, its own facts. This time, the Mahagathbandhan has tried to broaden its social coalition beyond the M-Y equation by accommodating [Mukesh Sahani's](#) Vikasheel Insaan Party (VIP), an outfit representing Mallahs (2.6 per cent of the population), and the Indian Inclusive Party (IIP) of I P Gupta representing paan-makers (1.7 per cent). The Congress is trying hard to regain its Dalit and EBC voters and has appointed a Dalit from the Ravidasi community (5.6 per cent) as its state president. The CPI(M-L) adds agricultural labour, mostly Dalit and EBC, to this coalition. The Opposition expects to gain from greater consolidation of Muslim voters, by recovering the small slices that went with the JD(U) and AIMIM, especially outside

the Seemanchal region. Yet, it is not clear if these political moves will translate into the shift required to bridge the eight-percentage-point lead enjoyed by the NDA in the Lok Sabha elections last year.

The second stalled transition is sushasan, good governance, a quantum jump in the quality of developmental outcomes that Bihar needs more than any other state. Nitish Kumar heralded this change with his first term in power, with a bouquet of infrastructural projects, most visible in a dramatic improvement in the quality of roads. Sushasan's glow dimmed soon thereafter, and the balance of governance has shifted from real changes to gimmicks, yet sustained by a shockingly low equilibrium of political demand and supply of governance. Such is the low level of expectation from governments that people still credit Nitish Kumar for the roads built 15 years ago. "Of course, he has worked. This road that we are sitting beside was built by him. The earlier road had gaddhas (potholes)," said an old man from the Kahar community, an EBC caste. Nitish Kumar's policy of prohibition evokes less unanimity, at least among men, as everyone points to continued access to illicit liquor, hooch deaths and penetration of drugs.

The other thing that sustains the regime is the part-real but mostly manufactured memory of "jungle raj" that continues to thrive after 20 years. A young man, not a voter yet, recalled the days when he was not born, when no one could step out of their home after sunset. Regular crimes in recent times and a daylight political murder last week do not seem to affect the jungle raj narrative, not with the upper castes or the media.

The Mahagathbandhan has tried to recover some governance space with a slew of promises, keeping the focus on employment, the biggest issue facing Bihar. Tejashwi Yadav is helped by his track record of ensuring a large number of government jobs in his short tenure as deputy CM. Yet, it is Prashant Kishor's new political venture, the Jan Suraj Party, that has brought greater attention to developmental issues like education and health. His tenacious ground work, sharp political acumen, vast army of paid political staff and deep pockets have ensured recognition for him and his party down to every village. His dialogues reverberate in tea shop conversations. Yet, the conversion of this publicity into votes is very low, dwindling rapidly as the polling day approaches. Now, much of the conversation around governance is limited to the unfeasibility of competitive promises made by both the alliances and the efficacy of the last-minute bribe of Rs 10,000 to women voters. Transition to real sushasan is nowhere on the horizon.

Finally, the Bihar election also carries the burden of resuming the national campaign for samvidhan bachao, the transition towards democratic recovery, signalled by the 2024 Lok Sabha elections but stalled by the shock verdicts in Haryana and Maharashtra. With the passage of time, the focus of this campaign has narrowed to ensuring electoral integrity, or preventing "vote chori". Even if the Special Intensive Revision is not a political issue in the campaign, it carries the potential of changing the electoral outcome. The SIR in Bihar has shrunk the voters' list by 47 lakh, nearly 20,000 in each of the 243 assembly constituencies. Even if one grants that three-fourths of these deletions may have been valid, it still means an unfair exclusion of 5,000 votes in every constituency, enough to change the outcome in dozens of seats. An old moongfali (peanut) seller seemed resigned to his fate as he reported that his wife's name was deleted from the voters' list for reasons not known to him. "Kya farak padta hai hamen?", he sounded indifferent. The next moment, his expression changed: "Lekin ek vote se jeet haar me badal sakti hai (one vote can make a difference between defeat and loss)." The promise of badlaav hung somewhere in between these two moments.