

## What those who celebrate Bihar verdict, and those who lament it, get wrong

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Here is how the media would like you to read the Bihar outcome — as a sign of the shape of things to come. This astounding victory is not just a state verdict but a resumption of the BJP's nation-wide juggernaut. And here is the flipside of the same narrative — elections are pointless. Bihar proves that you cannot take on this authoritarian regime by participating in and legitimising fraudulent elections.

Both these readings have a grain of truth. And a sackful of myth. Both of these are based on a telescopic view of the political reality of this election, a limited and limiting understanding of the horizon of political possibilities and a dim view of the people.

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First of all, the political trajectory of Bihar does not represent the rest of the “Hindi heartland”, let alone the rest of India. The only state in the northern region where the BJP is forced to align with an equal partner, the trends and patterns in Bihar do not find an echo even in the neighbouring Jharkhand, far from flowing into Bengal. Second, the outcome in Bihar was not a reversal of the result in the Lok Sabha polls last year. The NDA had continued its dominance in the state, with a comfortable lead in 174 assembly segments and a vote share lead of 8 percentage points over the Mahagathbandhan (MGB). The final figures for the assembly polls indicate a small push in the same direction. The tally of 202 seats appears unbelievable but is the result of a small addition of 1.2 percentage points in the NDA’s lead over the MGB. Bihar cannot be put in the same category as Haryana and Maharashtra, states that witnessed major upsets after the Lok Sabha elections.

Finally, there was little that was unexpected about the verdict for those who understood the basics of state politics. Ever since 2005, a coalition of two of the three main parties — RJD, JDU and the BJP — has scored a comfortable victory in every election except the strange contest in 2020. The simple fact is that the NDA was a much bigger political coalition — nearly 5 points larger, going by the last assembly elections — than the MGB. The NDA’s social coalition is much bigger than that of the MGB. At 32 per cent, the MGB’s core (Muslim+Yadav) may be larger than NDA’s core caste-community alliance (Forward+Kurmi + Kushwaha+ Bania/Teli+Paswan) of 28 per cent. But MGB’s 10 per cent auxiliary support (Mallah+ Ravidasi +Tanti/Paan) is way smaller and less committed than the 20 per cent Hindu EBCs that lean heavily towards the NDA.

So, it was advantage NDA right from the beginning. The onus was on the MGB to alter this equation either by shifting social blocs or by an effective campaign that cut across caste lines. It made some attempts — attention to EBCs and the promise of government jobs — but too little, too late. Instead, the last-minute bribe of Rs 10,000 (besides the upping of many pension schemes and reduction in electricity bills) cemented the support that the NDA has assiduously built over elections among women voters. These basics, combined with the low level of expectation from a government and the absence of a pronounced anti-incumbency against Nitish Kumar, are enough to explain the nature of Bihar’s verdict. We don’t need to assume that everything the RJD and the Congress did failed, or imagine a masterstroke in every move by the BJP. The sense of awe and shock relayed by the media after this verdict may have been manufactured.

Similarly, the sense of shock experienced by many critics of the present regime may also be over the top. Somehow, watching from a distance or through the echo chambers of social media, there was a widespread but mistaken impression that the MGB was in the lead. The rude shock of the final outcome ignited a suspicion, flamed by the ECI’s low credibility, that the election outcome was manufactured to suit the ruling coalition. Hence, the call for boycott of future elections in some circles.

It is important to distinguish between an unfair and a fraudulent election. There is little doubt that Indian elections are no longer fair, that there is nothing like a level-playing ground in the electoral contest. Bihar elections provided ample proof of the systemic bias, beginning with the deletion of 68 lakh and the addition of 24 lakh electors during the shoddy SIR exercise. The EC's acquiescence in multiple violations of the Model Code of Conduct, including communal propaganda, tendentious allegations of illegal migrants, allowing the bribe of Rs 10,000 to be paid during the campaign period, and special trains to be run to ferry BJP voters from other states, leaves no doubt on this score. Add to it the regime's control over mass media and its access to unlimited money during elections, and you know why free and fair elections look like a chimaera. The Opposition's chances of winning an election are not zero yet, but it has to walk uphill.

That is different from the charge of electoral fraud, that is, manipulation in the voting and counting process, such that the electoral outcome does not reflect the voting choice of the electorate. While many doubts have been expressed on this score in Bihar (belated declaration of turnout figures, discrepancy between postal and EVM votes, high voter deletion, sharp reduction in the votes for "others"), we do not yet have any hard evidence that meets the high standards of proof that such a grave charge requires. And given what has been suggested above, Bihar may not be the right place to look for evidence of electoral fraud.

The Opposition's meltdown is no doubt a setback for all those who struggle to reclaim our democracy. But this is not the end of the road. The next round of elections, especially in West Bengal, would be a better test of electoral integrity. And Uttar Pradesh would be the real signal of the shape of things to come.

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