

Bihar's Vote for Change

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Bihar has voted emphatically for change. The February elections had given rise to a hung Assembly in which the RJD, though dislodged from power, remained the largest party. The huge pro-change wave this time has decisively catapulted the BJP-JD(U) combine into power with a secure majority and pushed the RJD down to the third slot behind the two NDA partners.

The huge gains scored by the JD(U) and the BJP - 33 and 18 seats respectively - have been primarily at the expense of the RJD and the LJP, the two parties conceding as many as 21 and 19 seats. The wave has also cost the CPI(ML) two seats, reducing its tally from seven to five. The CPI(ML) campaign evoked a highly encouraging and energetic public response beyond the party's organisational frontiers, but in a highly polarised situation in which government formation became the uppermost concern of the electorate, the CPI(ML)'s independent campaign did not translate adequately into votes and seats.

The yearning for change had asserted itself quite forcefully in February itself. But back then, even though the NDA had emerged as the biggest bloc, other non-RJD trends had also done well, with Ram Vilas Paswan's Lok Janshakti Party emerging as the biggest third force with 29 seats, the CPI(ML) increasing its tally from five to seven and the Samjwadi Party, too, opening its account with four seats. An arbitrary dissolution of the hung Assembly - widely perceived as a denial of opportunity to the NDA and a blatant attempt at perpetuating the RJD-Congress rule through the backdoors - dramatically transformed the scene and the wind of change became overwhelmingly unidirectional.

Had the UPA government at the Centre not rushed to dissolve the Assembly and allowed the NDA to form government with the help of LJP turncoats and the sundry "independents", we would have had a very different scene now in Bihar. The ill-advised dissolution bestowed the NDA with the halo of a martyr and its boomerang effect is now here for all to see. The NDA has been allowed to "annex" Bihar at a time when the BJP is otherwise passing through very critical times following its shock defeat in the last Lok Sabha elections. After Jharkhand, Bihar is the UPA's greatest gift to the NDA.

It will now be interesting to see how the NDA rule unfolds in Bihar. The BJP's thesis of "coalition dharma" will face its toughest test in Bihar in the coming days. The scene in Bihar is quite different from that in either Maharashtra, where the BJP has very strong ideological common ground with its coalition partner Shiv Sena, or Jharkhand, where the JD(U) is still a very junior partner in the ruling coalition. In Bihar, Nitish Kumar would like to "deideologise" his coalition with the BJP and in a TV interview during the elections he even tried to describe his alliance with the BJP as nothing beyond a seat-sharing arrangement to prevent a division in anti-establishment votes. He also tried to dissociate himself from the NDA advertisement that described Bihar under RJD rule as a paradise for "Bangladeshi infiltrators" and "Pak-trained terrorists".

There are clearly two conflicting sets of elements in the wave that has propelled Nitish Kumar to this emphatic victory. On one side there is the BJP with all its conservative and communal characteristics and agenda. There are all these caste-based power groups who have a feeling of having been "excluded" and "denied" the spoils of power during the last fifteen years and are now desperate to secure a hefty "compensation" for all these lost or wasted years. There are all these "victorious"

criminal MLAs who may agree to be away from the ministerial limelight only in lieu of more lucrative contracts and assured impunity. Also, there are these elitist development enthusiasts who want Bihar to catch up in the race of economic liberalisation and globalisation and emerged as a model of elitist development under the tutelage of the World Bank.

On the other hand, there are these vast sections of the rural poor, the artisans and lower-middle classes who belong predominantly to the most backward castes, dalits and the Muslim community. They have had their aspirations aroused and yet brutally denied and crushed during Lalu Prasad's reign of "social justice". There is this huge army of the landless and the jobless for whom any development must begin with land reforms, employment guarantee and minimum wages. There is the basic aspiration for better living conditions and greater security and dignity, for democratic rights and communal harmony. Only time will tell in which way and for how long would Nitish Kumar be able to "balance" these conflicting agendas and aspirations and provide a semblance of governance.

Fifteen years ago, Lalu Prasad had arrived on the Bihar scene with a big mandate and an enormous social coalition. In fact, he had the benefit of a much more cohesive coalition and greater social vigour which he managed to reduce to a shrinking M-Y equation with multiple cracks. By contrast, the coalition that history has cobbled for Nitish Kumar is far more conflicting and fractious and it will be interesting to see how he handles this new challenge. No less interesting will be to watch Lalu Prasad's new double role, as a Minister in Delhi and an opposition leader in Bihar.

As the most courageous and radical voice of the poor and the oppressed, as the most consistent champion of secular democracy and socio-economic transformation, the CPI(ML) is determined to intensify its efforts and expand its role to make sure that the process of change acquires greater momentum. The campaign against corruption and criminalisation must continue relentlessly, and the battle for dignity, development and democracy must scale newer heights.

P.S.

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