

Smaller Political Parties & Caste Mobilization in Bihar

I. Background

Bihar is one of the most politicised states of India and, indeed, a mini-reflection of its complex socio-political tapestry. The politically charged landscape within Bihar is thus deeply embedded in caste politics, offering exciting fields of empowerment, resistance, and transformation. Bihar has shifted from being a battleground of nationalist struggles during the British Raj to being a **breeding ground for caste-based politics**. Here, caste groups have organized themselves politically to gain representation, thereby changing the power dynamics in the state with time. The caste system, whether considered to be antithetical or an integral part in the development of democracy, is undoubtedly a significant feature of Indian society. Hence, the intersection of caste and politics is pivotal to understanding the developing limits of Indian politics.

In contemporary Bihar, politics witnesses steep fluctuations of both highs and lows, where electoral politics is majorly governed by caste mobilisation. State-level political parties also wield considerable clout by managing niches among specified caste groups, as they often operate as king-makers in a fragmented political arena. This blog explores the fragile role of smaller political parties in Bihar by leveraging **identity politics, grassroots relationships, and political discourses of power**. In the process, the parties fundamentally reshaped how caste and power intersected in Bihar.

II. Caste composition in the Bihar electorate and their political inclination

Political Party	Leader	Voter Caste Composition	Alliance
Rashtriya Janta Dal	Tejaswi Yadav	OBCs (Yadavs) and Muslims	INDI
Janta Dal (United)	Nitish Kumar	EBCs, Mahadalits, and Women	NDA
Lok Janshakti Party	Chirag Paswan	Hindus and Dalits (Paswan)	NDA

III. Strategies adopted by local political parties to muster support

A. Rashtriya Janta Dal (RJD)

RJD has historically followed a combination of caste-based mobilization and an anti-upper caste narrative to win the support of the **OBC and Dalit** communities.

1. 1990s-2010

The former leader of RJD, Shri Lalu Prasad Yadav, heavily marketed himself as the **leader of social justice, standing tall against upper caste dominance** in the state during the period of initiation of the Mandal Commission. He used rustic slogans like “Bhura bal hatao” to reiterate the same. He also devised the ‘**M-Y formula**’ to smartly consolidate the Muslim and Yadav vote bank, which was statistically a major portion of

the total back then. He established a **personal connection** with the people of Bihar by portraying himself as 'one of them' from rural, backward roots. Often criticized for ineffective governance, he worked to uplift OBCs by promoting **reservations and welfare schemes**, including various poverty alleviation schemes and free schooling, to prove his loyalty to his voters.

2. 2015- Present

Shri Tejaswi Yadav, the new face of the party, projects the party to be '**modern and progressive**,' balancing between decades-long values and new-age politics. He has retained the M-Y formula well and even expanded it to Dalits and EBCs, also referred to as '**Pichde-Dalit-Gareeb**.' The party has partly deviated its focus away from the caste rhetoric to **pragmatic issues like education, unemployment, and infrastructure to attract young voters**. In the 2020 elections, they also promised 10 lakh jobs to support the unemployed workforce of Bihar. They use digital platforms to connect with the masses. To counter the BJP's Hindutva ground, RJD is reiterating the topic of **caste census, reservations, and economic assistance to the needy to retain Yadav votes**, which were shifting towards the other side. However, the declining trend of traditional caste politics brings the party to an alarming situation wherein it would have to rework its core functioning fundamentals.

B. Janta Dal (United)

JD(U), powered by Shri Nitish Kumar, has come across as a dominant force in Bihar politics, consolidating support from the **backward classes, Mahadalits, and women**. The party has utilized its **flexibility to change coalitions time and again for subjective gains**. Its survival rests on the bridge formed by caste politics and strategic alliance.

1. 2000-2014

Coming from the Kurmi community (an influential agrarian OBC caste), Shri Nitish Kumar took to power to support the '**Non-Yadav OBCs**,' namely the Koeris and Kurmis. He stood in solidarity with them, countering RJD's Yadav politics. He focused on the EBCs who felt excluded by other ruling parties. In 2006, he introduced a **20% reservation for EBCs in Panchayats and local bodies**. This impressed the EBCs, leading to the formation of a secure vote bank. In 2007, he cleverly introduced the concept of '**Mahadalit**'. He excluded the Paswans (vote bank of LJP) from this to actively divide the weaker Dalit voters from the Paswans (dominant) in the state. He initiated various welfare policies: **Land distribution (2008), Mukhyamantri Mahadalit Vikas Yojana (2011)**, etc. The **women-first policies** brought in by him proved to be a game-changer for him: **50% reservation in village panchayats (2006), Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojana (2010), 50% reservation in government jobs (2011)**, etc. The **Liquor Prohibition Policy (2013)** received massive support for improving the condition of Bihar. He often projected himself as '**Sushasan Babu**' or good governance leader and worked to improve road connectivity, access to electricity, and education, strengthening law and order to lure middle-class and young voters.

2. 2014- Present

JD(U) entered into **Mahagathbandhan with RJD and Congress in 2015** to target Muslim and backward class voters in the state. The **anti-BJP narrative appealed to the Muslim voters**.

This Muslim-Yadav-Dalit-EBC combination proved fruitful and helped them win the 2015 Bihar elections. Surprisingly, he sensed the changing wave of the future and turned back towards NDA in 2017 under the shadow of the **Sushan Babu v/s Jungle Raj argument**. The trademark move was the **Liquor Ban Policy (2016)**, which helped strengthen women's voter base (especially in rural areas). In 2023, he conducted a caste census in the state to reinforce the growing proportion of OBCs/EBCs (63%) to demand higher reservations for them.

C. Lok Janshakti Party (LJP)

LJP was formed in 2000 with a Dalit-centric ideology, with a special focus on the Paswan community. The party is currently making a comeback by restructuring itself to stay relevant among the new-age voters in the present political landscape.

1. 2000s-2014

Shri Ram Vilas Paswan, the then-leader of LJP, established himself as a 'Dalit leader', who rose from the soil to the union cabinet. **The Paswan community, which comprises nearly 4-5% of the state's population, is a loyal vote bank for the party.** He vouched for extending reservation benefits in government jobs and education and bringing targeted welfare schemes to empower Dalits. Under his leadership, the party was open to making profitable collaborations to gain political leverage and secure its position of power. People perceived Paswan as the leader who gets things done on the ground, regardless of alliance. He took to ministerial positions in the cabinet, making him a national Dalit leader who could bring home central benefits, unlike his opponents who remained rooted in Bihar only. He also tried to counter RJD's MY equation by making efforts to consolidate a Dalit-Muslim voter base, which, however, did not turn out well.

2. 2014- Present

RJD took a major shift by joining the NDA, following the anti-left and Hindutva wave. This change of strategy again worked out in their favour. In 2020, after the demise of Shri Ram Vilas Paswan, the party split into two, resulting in a little chaos among Dalit voters. His son, Shri Chirag Paswan, held the reins of the party. He is seen as a youth leader, bringing a fresh perspective to the party. He is often referred to as **PM Modi's Hanuman**, which further builds a **strong connection with upper caste-Hindu voters**. He continues to connect with the party's legacy voters and **brands himself as the protector of Dalit rights**. He launched the **'Bihar first, Bihari first' campaign** to bring about a development-oriented image, keeping aside caste barriers. He constantly pushed for the transformation of Bihar from a 'jungle raj' to a modern developed state. He aggressively criticizes the identity politics of his rival parties. He counters them by redefining RJD's MY equation as **'Mahila-Yuva'**, as he has strategically positioned two young women MPs from his party. He uses modern methods of campaigning to widen the party's digital outreach among voters.

IV. Conclusion

The intertwining of caste and politics in Bihar continues to be a significant factor in deciding who finally rises to power. Local political parties have strategically utilized caste identities to establish their niche voter base, becoming key fixtures in Bihar's ever-changing political sphere. Yet, as Bihar's politics slowly changes to developmental politics and youth-based narratives, these parties are increasingly challenged to break free from

the hard caste arithmetic. The increasing call for education, jobs, and infrastructure has already started changing voter priorities, compelling political parties to change their strategies. Though caste will still be a major player in Bihar's politics, the new trend is towards a combination of identity politics and issue-based campaigns.

In conclusion, Bihar's political parties depend on their capability to balance caste mobilization and progressive politics. Their fate will rely not just on their unification of vote banks but also on resonance with the newer generation of voters who have broader development aspirations. Bihar's new political agenda is thus at a critical junction—where progress and identity converge, determining the path of the state's democratic future.