

CASTE AND GOVERNANCE IN BIHAR POLITICS: AN EVOLUTIONARY ANALYSIS OF ELECTORAL TRENDS, POLICY OUTCOMES AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Bihar, a state in eastern India, has long been recognized for its dynamic and deeply rooted caste-based political structure. This paper examines the historical development, electoral trends, and governance outcomes influenced by caste politics. The paper explores how caste politics shapes policy decisions and socio-economic development by analyzing post-independence political changes, the Mandal Commission era, and contemporary alliances. The study critiques the impact of caste dynamics on governance efficiency, law and order, and public service delivery in Bihar. Leaders like Lalu Prasad Yadav and Nitish Kumar have played pivotal roles in reshaping power equations through caste-based mobilization. Despite improvements in social justice, issues such as corruption, nepotism, and inefficient governance persist. The socio-economic inequalities entrenched by historical caste hierarchies remain significant challenges. This paper proposes balancing caste-based affirmative action with institutional reforms is essential for achieving sustainable development and inclusive governance in Bihar.

KEYWORDS: Bihar, Caste Dynamics, Governance, Electoral Trends, Mandal Commission & Mobilization.

INTRODUCTION

Caste politics in Bihar is deeply rooted in the historical, social and economic fabric of the state. The birth of caste politics in Bihar is linked to the issue of separation of Bihar from Bengal (Rajkishor, Understanding the Politics of Bihar: Through the Prism of Caste, Class and Community; from Colonialism to Postcolonialism , 2016). Bihar has long had a political landscape that bore the imprint of caste cleavages, more so than in many other Indian states. Caste has served since independence both as an instrument of political mobilization and as a constraint on inclusive governance. Gradually, the dominance of the upper-caste elite seen in the early years of post-independence started to give way to the rise of leaders from the backward and

lower-caste cadre in what has been a significant shift in the political narrative in Bihar. The introduction of the Mandal Commission Report in the 1990s was itself a trigger for backward caste empowerment in the state, as it changed the state's political alignments and power equations fundamentally (Kumar S. , 2018).

This paper delves into the historical roots of caste in Bihar politics, the role of various political parties, and the consequences of caste-based strategies on governance and development. Additionally, it explores the socio-economic impacts of caste politics and evaluates the challenges Bihar faces in overcoming caste polarization. Through a thorough analysis, this study aims to understand how caste-based mobilization has shaped public policy, governance, and economic development, while also considering potential reforms for a more inclusive and effective political system. This study explores the nexus between revenue systems, administrative structures, and caste relations in Bihar and how these processes prepared the grounds for political mobilization in caste politics. In post-independence Bihar, there was a political economy where upper caste elites had the upper hand, but slowly, with the emergence of backward and lower caste leaders starting with the Domaland Commission's recommendations, politics witnessed significant changes. The empowerment of OBCs and Dalits changed many power equations but also led to a more fragmented polity with competing caste identities rather than a focus on development (Kumar & Bakhala, 2015). Moreover, the paper attempts to analyze the electoral competition between Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), Janata Dal (United), JD (U), and Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) and their impact on caste-based electoral competition. It elaborates the nitty-gritty of how caste blocs have impacted policies, resources, and government productivity. The paper further analyzes the socio-economic impacts of caste-based politics to include education, employment, and welfare schemes. While caste politics has benefited marginalized sections of society in gaining some form of political representation, it has been detrimental in creating social cleavages and poor governance. Lastly, the paper proposes some policy alternatives and

Historical Context of Caste in Bihar Politics

Shivraj did say, however, that in a state like Bihar, whose caste hierarchy is among the oldest and most entrenched in India, the existing power structures are difficult to dismantle. Historically, upper castes like Brahmins, Rajputs, Bhumihars and Kayasthas were socio-politically and economically powerful and dominated land ownership, education and administration (Louis, 2000). The zamindari system during the colonial period only cemented these divisions further as upper-caste landlords exercised control over massive agricultural land and held tremendous power over rural society. And this system marginalized the lower castes such as the Dalits and backward castes from access to land and education (Kumar S. , 1999).

With the independence, the upper-caste elite continued to uphold the Congress rule in Bihar, reining over politics through the networks of patronage and socio-economic control. However, the socio-political movements led by leaders like Ram Manohar Lohia and socialism coming into the form during the 1960s started undermining the upper-caste hegemony. The Green Revolution and land reform movements had disturbed the traditional hierarchies, ushering in new power centers within the backward classes. This backward caste mobilization paved the way for the formation of regional parties that represented the interests of social justice (Pai, 1994). This

historical background provides the context for the later rise of caste-based political mobilization, particularly after the Mandal Commission.

Role played by Caste in Electoral Politics of Post-independence India

During the immediate post-independence period, the Indian National Congress dominated the politics of Bihar with the continued reliance on upper-caste support, especially where power and influence were made possible (Rajkishor, 2016). Legislative and administrative positions were not sufficiently occupied by backward and lower castes in an official capacity during this period, 1947-1967. The social churn of the 1960s, as influenced by socialist ideologies and agrarian movements, had begun to change this (Frankel, 1979). With a leading figure such as Ram Manohar Lohia proclaiming the backward classes' rights and mobilizing them for the demands of equality in political power, change is well underway.

The elections of 1967 marked the beginning of the departure from the history of Congress-more non-Congress party coalitions, including socialists, briefly capturing power (Sinha, 1973). This episode showed how caste interests would also apparently mobilize for a space in an already established power set. The emergence of the SSP (Samyukta Socialist Party) and, subsequently, the Janata Dal showcased the phenomenon of backward classes coming together to act in demand of their political rights. This type of political jolt established the groundwork for later mass mobilization in the politics of underprivileged members of castes like that by Lalu Prasad Yadav or Nitish Kumar. Since then, caste-based politics have defined the frontiers of electoral politics in Bihar-alliances and vote banks dictated by caste identities and aspirations.

The Mandal Commission and the Assertion of Backward Classes

Mandal Commission is a commission established in 1979 and enforced in 1990, which recommended the reservation of 27% for Other Backward Classes (OBCs) in government jobs and educational institutions. This development brought the much-needed institutional recognition for the demands of backward caste communities (Bhattacharya, 1990). In Bihar, this decision strongly revolutionized politics and society. The implementation of Mandal sparked massive political mobilization among OBCs and has since reconfigured the state's political alliances and leadership. It saw such leaders as Lalu Prasad Yadav of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) at the forefront of backward class advocacy, and Nitish Kumar of the Janata Dal (United) (JD (U)), both taking advantage of the new political awareness to form robust electoral bases (Kumar & Ranjan, 2009). The advocacy of Lalu Prasad Yadav with 'social justice' has consolidated the Yadav-Muslim (MY) vote bank, while that of Nitish Kumar has extended to Kurmis, Koeris, and Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs).

The implementation of the Mandal Commission has not only democratized political representation but also brought about very deep social and economic changes. However, it has deepened caste polarization as upper caste groups feel variety within the rise of backward classes. The Mandalian era brought to light the deep cleavages in the society of Bihar and created the foundation for a sustainable and political dynamic based on caste.

Caste-based Strategies of Major Political Parties

Political parties of Bihar engage in various caste-based alliances which are coalesced into electoral victories by these parties. Rashtriya Janata Dal, affiliated to Lalu Prasad Yadav, garner support with the Yadavs and Muslims complementing each other well. It was the historical

Muslim-Yadav (MY) vote bank combination that has gloriously worked for the RJD for over a decade to strengthen its base in Bihar politics (Yadav, 2004). Different from this, the Janata Dal (United) has focused on the Kurmis, Koeris, and other backward and extremely backward classes (EBC) in the constituency conferring wider representation. Nitish Kumar's model of governance is focused on social development, women empowerment, and law and order to add to this support beyond the caste identity lines (EPW, 2010). While affiliated traditionally by upper caste groups and urban voters, the BJP enlarged the base by entering into an alliance with JD(U). The party has been campaigning on broader national themes and development-oriented policies on which JD(U) focuses its strategy. Out of the disillusionment, woes, and misfortunes that have led the Congress from the dominant to the margin, it often resorts to forming alliances with this regional party. These parties' strategies based on caste have further insulated the value of identity politics in Bihar concerning policy decisions, governance styles, and electoral outcomes.

Governance in Caste Politics

Caste-based governance involves another important aspect that affects local and grassroots governance in Bihar. At such a micro-level, caste affiliations often manage the allocation of government resources, employment, and social welfare schemes. Thus, a system that local leaders, mostly caste-based, have created where public services become a potent tool to feign power has been realized. That hampers not only the equal opportunity afforded to resources but also the equality of castes in the distribution of services. Patron-client systems are built such that "the electorate" becomes "the political representative." This goes against the very notion of a transparent and accountable system, where policies and services must rely on needs and merit rather than caste loyalties. It is this factor that further creates a chasm among diversified communities, preventing the evolution of a cohesive and integrated governance framework. In Bihar, caste politics has affected governance in terms of quality regarding issues like policies, public administration, and institutional functioning. While caste-based mobilizing historically marginalizes, it also creates governance challenges. Under the tenures of leaders like Lalu Prasad Yadav (1990-2005), the importance of social justice, caste empowerment, and shifting political power involved admonishing allegations of corruption, nepotism, and inefficiency in governance. The deterioration of law and order and the weakening of state institutions made the term "Jungle Raj" synonymous with Lalu's administration ((Jaffrelot, 2003).

Thus, the ability of public services like education, health, and infrastructure to provide services was transformed since such political appointments and patronage networks took precedence over merit as well as accountability. The law of caste did determine the distribution of contracts and appointments by government agencies underscoring its detraction-worthy integrity. Upon his taking office as CM in 2005, Nitish Kumar tried to reform the government on issues of law and order, women's empowerment, and infrastructure (Gupta, 2010). Nevertheless, even his administration was compelled to reckon with caste considerations, leading, therefore, to policy decisions favoring specific communities at given times. Therefore, caste politics has democratized representation, but, unfortunately, it has manufactured a patronage-based governance system that often sacrifices long-term developmental and institutional reform priorities in favor of immediate electoral returns.

The socio-economic development and caste politics

As caste has been intertwined with socio-economic development in Bihar, it has created gross inequalities. In the past, upper castes dominated land and educational opportunities that enabled them to monopolize socio-economic and political life. On the other hand, backward castes and Dalits could not come out from the vicious cycle of poverty, as they could not avail the benefits of being educated and employed (Weiner, 1962). The same inequalities also continued after independence; land reforms were poorly implemented, and economic policies were propped up towards the existing elite. The 1990s saw the rise of caste-based politics, where efforts were made toward bridging these gaps with social justice policies, like reservations in education and public employment. Leaders like Lalu Prasad Yadav and Nitish Kumar pioneered schemes benefiting backward and Dalit communities such as scholarships, job quotas, and women's self-help groups. Nitish Kumar's government also emphasized women's education and infrastructure development, providing better roads, schools, and facilities for healthcare (Ghosh, 2010).

This effort was not enough to close the socio-economic gulf. Issues such as landlessness committed among Dalits, lack of industrial development, and limited literacy among marginalized communities continue to raise barriers to progress. Hence, the need to strike a balance between caste-specific affirmative action and the larger economic reforms must ensure that development is all-inclusive and sustainable development.

Contemporary Trends and Emerging Dynamics in Bihar Politics

Caste-based mobilization has impacted Bihar's political landscape for ages, with virtually all electoral outcomes and governance strategies determined by social hierarchies deeply embedded in the state's psyche (NP & Mishra, 2013). The nature of caste politics in Bihar has begun to change, especially in recent years, under the pressure of socio-economic changes, alterations in voter behavior, and the evolution of political narratives. While caste remains a deciding factor, another emerging trend shows that caste politics may give way to issue-oriented politics where governance, economic development, employment, and welfare policies are taking on greater significance, backing traditional caste considerations.

Urbanization and out-migration of labor from Bihar have made rapid impacts on this change from caste-based politics. The large movement of the workforce to other states for employment has changed the status quo in the political perspectives of the state; the young generations in particular, under such variable dynamics, have become active players in directing political prospects (Kumar & Shriyan, 2024). Most of these changes have had a stern impact in that a generation of eligible youngsters listening against casteism is now drawn towards economic opportunity and governance reform, while their predecessors bonded themselves mostly to caste lines; others until recently have been near-exclusive representatives of caste allegiance in voting behavior. Growing political awareness also raises challenges for caste parties and opportunities for others.

In particular, increased digital media presence and political consciousness reshaped the electoral discourse in Bihar (Hasan & Johri, 2017). With social media, digital campaigning, and a plethora of independent political movements, information dissemination has gained momentum, leading to the emergence of issue-based political mobilization. The movements of youth concerning employment rights, education reforms, and transparency in governance are gradually gaining

traction, thereby signaling a departure from unity under rigid caste-based electoral politics toward more developmental issues. While caste identities are still used in party campaigns, there is increasing pressure on the political parties to shift their strategy because of the rising demand for job creation, industrial development, and better public services.

Women's political participation also acts as a crucial rising factor impacting electoral trends in Bihar. Historically, the political agency of women has been compressed within the patriarchal order of caste politics, but in recent years, a growing assertion of female voters voting usually without consulting men in their families has been noticed. Development programs focused on women, such as reservations in local governance and direct benefit transfers, are also gaining importance in theirs as voters. The identification of women as a key voting bloc has compelled political parties to map out schemes for winning over women voters, further complicating traditional caste-margined calculations.

Bihar's political parties, on their part, are gradually adapting to these new realities with the integration of development-oriented perspectives into their traditional caste equations. Such a shift demonstrates the rise of leadership concerned with governance reforms, infrastructure development, and economic policies. Nonetheless, caste remains a hidden yet strong determinant of candidate selection, electoral alliances, and voter preferences (Verma & Yadav, 1991). Caste identities and developmental yearnings continue to gossip about Bihar's political landscape, creating a complex and evolving electoral battlefield.

Therefore, there is a need to closely examine these ongoing trends, observing the transformation of caste politics in the wake of rapid urbanization, migration, youth ideology, women's participation, and new political narratives. While caste continues to remain an important consideration, these shifts manifest a chance for a more issue- and governance-driven political future for Bihar. These emerging patterns will be important in understanding the political prospects of the state and any chances of building an inclusive and self-sustaining model of governance in the future.

Declining or Reshaping Significance of Caste Politics

In recent years, there has been growing debate over whether caste politics in Bihar is diminishing or undergoing a transformation. While caste remains a critical factor in electoral mobilization, political narratives are increasingly shifting toward issues such as development, employment, and governance. The rise of younger, more politically aware voters with exposure to digital media has also contributed to this changing dynamic. The 2020 Bihar Legislative Assembly elections demonstrated this shift to some extent. Despite traditional caste alliances, issues like youth unemployment and pandemic-related concerns played a significant role in shaping voter preferences ((Basu, 2020)). However, caste coalitions still influenced voting behavior, with alliances such as the Mahagathbandhan (RJD, Congress, and Left parties) and the NDA (JD (U), BJP) leveraging caste strategies for electoral success.

Impact of Urbanization and Migration

Urbanization and labor migration have contributed to changes in the caste dynamics of Bihar politics. The migration of large sections of the workforce to states like Maharashtra, Delhi, and Gujarat has created a socio-economic disconnect between rural caste networks and urban economic realities. This exposure to diverse social settings has somewhat diluted caste

consciousness among migrant workers, who often return to their villages with altered political perspectives. Moreover, the rise of urban centers such as Patna has created pockets where caste-based political mobilization is less pronounced, as voters increasingly prioritize issues such as infrastructure, employment, and education.

Youth Perspectives on Caste and Politics

The role of Bihar's youth in reshaping caste politics is noteworthy. A significant portion of Bihar's population is under the age of 30, and this demographic is less inclined toward caste-based political loyalties compared to previous generations. Digital media and education have played a crucial role in fostering a more issue-based political consciousness among young voters (Huang, 2024). Movements led by young activists advocating for employment rights, education reforms, and transparency in governance have gained momentum in Bihar. However, political parties continue to deploy caste strategies, targeting young voters through community-specific appeals.

The Role of Women in Caste-Based Political Movements

Women have emerged as a significant voting bloc in Bihar, often displaying voting behavior independent of male family members. Political parties have increasingly recognized the importance of women voters and have introduced policies aimed at their welfare, such as reservations for women in local governance and welfare schemes targeting female beneficiaries (Chattopadhyay & Duflo, 2004). Women's participation in caste-based political movements is also evolving. While traditional caste hierarchies often limit women's agency, grassroots organizations have empowered women from marginalized communities to assert their political rights. The Nitish Kumar government's emphasis on women's empowerment through schemes like "Mukhyamantri Kanya Utthan Yojana" has further enhanced women's political engagement.

Emergence of New Political Narratives

The rise of issue-based political narratives, such as development, governance, and anti-corruption, is gradually challenging caste-based political mobilization. Political parties are increasingly focusing on welfare schemes, infrastructure development, and education reforms to attract voters across caste lines. However, caste remains a latent factor, often determining political allegiances and candidate selection. The integration of caste dynamics with developmental narratives has become a defining feature of contemporary Bihar politics.

Challenges and Reform Prospects

Bihar's political problems are primarily due to deep-rooted caste structures. One of the fundamental issues is reduced caste polarization. Such polarization entrenches politics as vote-bank politics, undercutting the merits of better policy initiatives. Political leaders hence forge alliances along castes and thus strengthen divisions instead of bringing an inclusive political culture. It undermines efforts to build a governance system based on merit, efficiency, and accountability. The other challenge is reforming institutions. The public institutions in Bihar—the police, judiciary, and bureaucracy—have been crippled by years of political interference and patronage. The open appointments would also be another watering of anti-corruption measures where people know who has to answer for what. However political patronage networks often undermine efforts to combat corruption (Witsoe, 2011).

Bihar now needs a multi-pronged approach to social justice and good governance, wherein better policies between education, health, and infrastructure are adequate for genuinely marginalized sections. Youth interaction with politics should be encouraged; inclusive leadership should be promoted; and youth should be made aware of the damaging effects of caste politics. This can be the beginning of a more equitable and progressive Bihar.

CONCLUSION

Caste politics remains an indelible feature of Bihar's political identity. The empowerment of backward and marginalized castes since the 1990s has reshaped the state's political dynamics, giving voice to communities that were historically excluded from power. While this shift has brought social justice and greater representation, it has also led to governance challenges, including corruption, inefficiency, and caste-based polarization. Leaders like Lalu Prasad Yadav and Nitish Kumar have left their mark on the state's political landscape, emphasizing different aspects of caste empowerment and governance. Bihar's developmental progress continues to be hindered by these dynamics, with socio-economic inequalities, weak institutions, and lack of industrial growth remaining significant concerns. The state must strike a balance between addressing caste-based grievances and fostering a governance model based on merit, accountability, and inclusivity. Moving forward, meaningful reforms in education, healthcare, and infrastructure, along with efforts to reduce caste divisions, will be essential for Bihar to achieve sustainable development and social harmony. The challenge lies in transcending caste politics while ensuring that historically marginalized communities continue to have a voice and opportunities for growth.

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