



## CASTE AND THE 2024 GENERAL ELECTIONS IN BIHAR: AN ANALYTICAL CASE STUDY

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author focuses on how the theme of caste plays a pivotal role in determining the course of the 2024 General Elections in Bihar, and why caste politics remains dominant despite the entry of the themes of development and youth politics in politics. Based on historical explanation, census reports, and large characteristics case studies of various important leading constituencies- Patliputra, Madhepura, Gaya, Darbhanga and Arrah, the paper finds how the caste lines shaped the formation of alliances, selection of candidates, campaigns, and voting patterns. Parties such as RJD, JD (U) and BJP had been tactical in mobilizing caste groups by contacting them at the strategic level through outreach, welfare measures, and electronic outreach, and the caste census debate added to this polarization as yet another electoral issue. Despite the prominence of issues in unemployment, education and governance, caste was still the major parameter of alignment in political preferences primarily in the rural regions. This study comes to the conclusion that even though the contemporary is working alongside the traditional identities, caste remains the foundation of electoral politics in Bihar state.

**Keywords:** Caste, Bihar, General Elections 2024, Political Mobilization, Electoral Behavior, Social Justice.

### INTRODUCTION

The caste system is one of the cornerstones of the history of the social structure in India and this tradition is implemented into the main aspects of political, economic, and cultural life. Caste is not just a form of social identity in Bihar, but its effective political instrument of mobilization and democracy. This has significantly changed the role of caste system in political process since era of post-independent rule with elites succeeding to control political processes to the current situation where castes have grown and given the backward and underrepresented groups the opportunity to use



the electorate to demand their rights. The strength of caste in the life of the people is particularly evident in the Bihar state which is a region where there is a complex social caste system and the history of good social justice campaigns.

The Indian General Elections of 2024 witnessed another chance of caste becoming a major powerhouse and this time around, it was Bihar. All of this Identity politics warfare has been fought with as the battleground has been won and lost with alliances being formed by political parties according to caste arithmetic in the distribution of tickets and formatted campaign narrative. This was because although there was a rising national awareness on development, governance and youthful aspirations, the considerations to caste continued to act as the fulcrum of voter choices and politics.

The socio-political situation prior to the elections was defined by a number of competing factors that include the increasing need of a caste census, generational changes in the relationship with political processes, and a fast expanding digital tech into rural regions. The problem which people were discussing was unemployment, education and development, nonetheless caste still mediated the comprehension and implementation of the problems among the voters. Even young as well as novice voters, who are presumed to be post-caste with orientation, exhibited a caste-oriented voting pattern, especially in rural and semi-urban areas.

The paper will focus on how the caste could affect the upcoming elections in Bihar in 2024 through an examination of the party strategies, voting behavior, and the selection of candidates. It also addresses the question of whether emerging themes such as digital outreach and issue-based politics are changing the role of caste and determining the current axis of democratic involvement in Bihar as cast-based voting. The results are expected to add to the rich knowledge of the interaction of traditional identities and the contemporary electoral politics in the Indian politics.

## **1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

The Indian caste system that began in an earlier form as an occupational system, referred to in early Vedic literature, was rigidified over the centuries to become the social structure also called the caste system. The British colonial rule strengthened this stratification by using administrative mechanisms like cast-based census, land record and institutional arrangement of martial and non-martial races. Despite the caste discrimination being illegal under the Indian Constitution- even though caste was still the primary determinant of resource access, representation in politics and social elevation, particularly in states such as Bihar, post-independence caste-based discrimination was partly due to the affirmative action policies put in place by the government.

Post independence, politics of election was dominated by the upper castes especially under the Congress umbrella. This however changed drastically when the Mandal Commission recommendations of 1990 was implemented subsequent to which reservations were given to Other Backward Classes (OBCs). This shift triggered the emergence of backward caste leaders in Bihar such as Lalu Prasad Yadav and Nitish Kumar, who have been able to mobilize caste identities in terms of social justice, dignity, and representation. The following period of post-Mandal politics was, therefore, a paradigm shift in Bihar politics that proved to be the focal location of the caste-based political power play.



## **2. CASTE DYNAMICS IN BIHAR**

The demographic composition of the state of Bihar shows the very stratified social order with Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs) constituting a 36 percent of the population, Other Backward Classes (OBCs) 27 percent, Scheduled Castes (SCs) 19.65 percent, and Upper Castes approximating 15 percent. It is found that these caste identities are inseparably linked to the electoral behavior of the state so much so that they also affect the way political parties act in the process of voting. The politics of marginalized groups is not new and parties are now making manifestos, campaigns and welfare policy provisions to sway them to vote. The Mandal legacy has meant that caste is close to the center in the articulation of all politics as well as the political discourse.

Political allocations are uniform among the major castes. The traditional OBCs, Yadavs, the strongest OBC caste in India, are the main supporting constituency of Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), whereas Kurmis are mostly following the regional party Janata Dal (United) [JD(U)] led by Nitish Kumar. The Dalit votes are more divided: Paswans lean towards the LJP, Paswans tend to fall into one of the right-wing factions of Lok Janshakti Party (LJP), whereas Mahadalits have turned towards JD(U) because of their targeted welfare policies. Muslims form some 17 percent of the population and are solidly behind the RJD but have sometimes voted with Congress or regional parties such as AIMIM. These caste fissures were quite crucial in the distribution of tickets and coalition-building, prior to the 2024 General Elections, further institutionalizing the caste as the organizing feature of electoral politics in Bihar.

## **3. POLITICAL SCENARIO BEFORE THE 2024 ELECTION**

The Bihar General Elections 2024 were based on two major alliances of political parties, National Democratic Alliance (NDA) that included BJP, JD(U), CHAM(S), and RLJP, and INDIA alliance spearheaded by the RJD, and the Congress and the Left political parties. The BJP mainly targeted the re-mobilisation of the upper caste groups and effectively targeted the EBCs and certain sections of the Dalits, especially Paswans and Mahadalits. On returning to NDA in early 2024, JD(U) aimed at restoring its influence among the Kurmis, EBCs and women voters due to its image and programs related to development and social welfare.

The RJD led INDIA alliance, on its part, had to negotiate its position of domination the Muslim-Yadav (MY) vote bank, in its effort to reach out to a large number of the EBCs and SCs, by proposing a caste census and increase social justice cards. Coalition politics became more complicated by leadership rivalries, the changing allegiances of lesser caste groups and changing expectations among the younger generation. The demand of a caste-based census led by Nitish Kumar and Tejashwi Yadav turned out to be the proactive political issue and the same made the alliance position itself as the leader of the backward and the marginalized groups. The role of the caste-based realignment and micro-targeting of this particular pre-election period was therefore very strong with both the alliances trying to reach the undecided voters especially the Mahadalit and the EBCs.



#### **4. CASTE IN CAMPAIGNING AND CANDIDATE SELECTION**

During the 2024 General Elections, caste was the main factor when it came to distributing tickets and building campaigns by political parties in Bihar. RJD also stuck to historical practice and nominated Yadavs and Muslims candidates on Yadav-Muslim seats in large numbers where these groups were strong in numbers. This was an element of its plan of restoring its centre-MY (Muslim-Yadav) core. Conversely, the BJP and JD (U) are rather more diversified. To increase the social base and create a coalition against the RJD dominion in backward caste politics, they strategically put forward the candidates who represented the EBC, Mahadalit, and non-Yadav oBC groups. These tickets were treated as a vehicle of the outreach to the caste, serving as a representation reminder and inclusion to all social groups.

Strategic use of caste identity and the historical injustice was through the party campaign narratives. RJD leaders particularly Tejaswi Yadav evoked the spirit of social justice and the caste-based census policies to establish even and fair distribution of resources. Although BJP was more reserved in its outspoken caste discourse, it employed populist welfare programs to woo lower-castes and growth as an inclusional discourse. Digital spaces became important battlegrounds whereby there were caste-specific messages, WhatsApp forwards, and social media videos which were curated in such a way so as to appeal to specific communities. The reservation question and the pressure to have a caste census spread enough to become radicalizing issues, thus giving a greater effort to have mobilization in the caste lines during the campaign time.

#### **5. VOTER BEHAVIOR AND TURNOUT PATTERNS**

Voter turnout in the 2024 General Elections in Bihar was significant in the respect that it more or less followed the configuration of caste and customary political affiliations of the state. Yadavs and a sizeable portion of Muslims form the majority of people in constituencies that participated in voting in large numbers and most of these numbers went in favor of the INDIA combine headed by the RJD. This was fuelled by intense mobilization by calls based on the themes of social justice, A demand of caste census, as well as anti-incumbency sentiment. Mahadalits and EBCs, who can be assumed as swing voters, did not vote as one. Rather, they differed in their tastes depending on the geography they lived in, some of them favouring JD(U) and BJP because of welfare outreach, and others favouring RJD because of argumentative caste inclusion rhetoric.

There was the consolidation of the upper caste, especially Brahmins, Bhumihars, Rajputs, and Kayasthas, to the BJP and was driven by the fear of increased caste-based reservation demands and their ideological convenience with the Welfare/governance and national security discourse of the party. In the meantime, women voters also came out as a rather independent electorate and more attention was paid to issues such as inflation, education, healthcare and safety than to considerations of caste only. Child voters, especially urban and semi urban, showed some shift here in the campaign against hard caste loyalties and emphasized jobs with an internet presence. Yet, in villages, the caste identity remained decisive in defining the behavior of the youth voters, which, indeed, points to a slow but not consistent change in the Bihar politics.

## 6. CASE STUDIES OF SELECTED CONSTITUENCIES

- **Pataliputra:** Patliputra is one of the strongholds of the RJD due to its dense Yadav community. Tejashwi Yadav did heavy wooing, with promises of offering jobs to young people, attending caste-based group meetings, reminiscing about the work of Lalu Prasad Yadav, which made a big impression here. There was a strong turnout of voters in the constituency through the Yadav and Muslim communities, and the RJD won by a big margin.
- **Madhepura:** Madhepura is a historically politically volatile seat and in 2024 the electorate of the EBC remained divided. In spite of a vigorous campaign on the caste census and inclusive slogans, RJD failed to make headway against the BJP ability to play divide-and-rule by doing internal polarization among EBC by putting up a representative of a small backward caste and its message of delivering welfare. The ensuing division gave BJP an inch over others in a close lead.
- **Gaya (SC Reserved):** Gaya where only scheduled caste can contest got divided among Dalit voters. Although certain sections were loyal towards LJP groups, JD(U) was capable of influencing a big chunk based on its continuous welfare programs, particularly to the Mahadalits. This was achieved through the assurance of continuity and the social engineering activities of Nitish Kumar which gave JD(U) its upper hand in this seat of carnage.
- **Darbhanga:** Darbhanga became the stronghold of the BJP and upper-caste communities including Brahmins and Bhumihars united under the party. The digital campaign strategy of the BJP which included development messages that were caste neutral with an undercurrent of appeals to upper-caste was a success among voters located in urban and semi-urban areas. The region where there are traditional RJD voters could not oppose this online and caste surge.
- **Arrah:** Arrah was an extremely competitive seat despite its complicated caste-based demographics that were too high with Yadavs, Koeris, Dalits, and upper castes. Fortunately, with the help of its star candidate Tejashwi Yadav among backward caste voters and the first-time voters casting votes, in particular the youth, the RJD won this by a slender margin. The subject of caste census and creation of job opportunities resonated with the marginalized groups and swung the pendulum to RJD on its side.

## CONCLUSION

In the 2024 General Elections, caste will still dictate the electoral manifestation in Bihar and will decisively influence voter affiliations, seat-choice, and political track. Although the discourse of development, computerized outreach, and younger generation desires have gotten additional pertinence, these elements have not substituted caste but instead they work together with it. Party politics, such as RJD, JD(U) and BJP, discursively made use of caste identities, either by distributing tickets, campaigning or reaching welfare benefits. The case studies on the otherwise constituencies such as Patliputra, Madhepura and Arrah further reaffirm the fact that caste is the major axis around which the electoral behavior is structured. Going further, the political life of Bihar should be based on the need to strike a balance between identity-based politics and the inclusive development alloy.



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