

Towards the Fourth Transition in Bihar's Political Process

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Abstract: The paper looks at changes and continuities in the themes, issues and conflicts animating Bihar's political process, changes in the state inter-party competition, tensions between the logic of electoral democracy and political institutions, mobilization and changing narratives of "primordial" groups in the political arena in the backdrop of revolution of rising expectations and discontent in a densely populated and economically backward state; entwined with these are events and changing faces of political leaders in the state in different phases. Moreover, there has been a complex interplay between national and state politics in every phase.

Keywords: state politics in India; political process; political parties; politicization; democratization.

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There are two recurring points in academic as well as non-academic discussions on Bihar. First, it is commonplace among scholars writing about Bihar to juxtapose Bihar's present economic/industrial backwardness with past glory. Important as the past is, people have to live in the present and navigate the challenges of today.¹

Second, discussions on Bihar's political process have tended to veer towards crude sociologism; political conflicts around caste is often presented as something of an exception vis-a-vis other states in India, thereby, not only grossly oversimplifying Bihar's political process, but virtually reducing political process to caste-driven conflicts. The underpinnings of political conflicts in Bihar have been rather complex – energized as it has been by complex variables of personal ambitions/egos/interests, political manoeuvres apart from group dynamics of caste, class and religion. In the 1980's, as political competition intensified, political entrepreneurs increasingly began to look for incidents and issues to mobilize politically significant categories of voters – Belchi carnage in 1977 and its political use changed the fortunes of Congress.

There is churning underway in Bihar political terrain: Bihar's political process is on the cusp of a major transition: the fourth one in the last hundred years. Each phase was marked by shifts in dominant ideological formations, political discourse, dispositions and changing political alignments and narratives of socio-political forces.

The **first** transition in Bihar's political process was in 1947 when Bihar transitioned from British to Congress rule ; the **second** transition was after 1967 election when political developments made it clear that democratization had deepened and newer stratas were emerging as autonomous politico-electoral force , central Congress after the party split led by Mrs Gandhi adopted a "top down" populist mobilization strategy making the state Congress party and leadership irrelevant , **third** one was in 1990 when it transitioned from Congress to non-Congress rule backed by Mandal coalition and was led by Mandal leaders. Now Bihar is moving from Mandal politics to post-Mandal politics.

While the contours of the emerging fourth phase are hazy right now, in this phase caste quotas and caste Othering may not be sufficient to win political power, with Mandal's political logic having worked itself out on the ground; digital - era changes are impacting new voters, agrarian distress, jobs and migration are creating new " demand groups". Political faces, which dominated political space in the Mandal phase, are on their way out - leaders who had moved centre stage during the JP movement and used Mandal implementation to forge their support base - while new personalities are hoping to take over the space. Sons of leaders of the Mandal - era are trying to carve new political ground; along with this, the BJP is trying to consolidate itself in a state where it has not been as successful as in other parts of the Hindi region. Traditional voting blocs are shifting and new political actors like Jan Suraj Party is in the fray: the 2025 Bihar Assembly election is poised to mark a tectonic shifting of political plates in Bihar's political process. Both Chirag and Tejashwi are hoping to expand their traditional

¹ Amartya Sen's and Kaushik Basu's chapter in Singh and Stern(ed),2013

support base and win over important segments -- youth and women - the latter demographic group believed to be supporters of Nitish Kumar. As politics plays out in the run up to the October- November ,2025 Vidhan Sabha election it will become clearer whether the terms and narrative of the contest will get framed around nationalism or hyper-local/local issues impacting everyday life of people. The interplay of potentially changing allies and voter dispositions and equations, shifting realignment of political forces and the emergent battle of narratives by political actors constitute the moment of transformation. The BJP has leveraged the 2025 Union budget to help its campaign in Bihar, announcing a Makhana Board (fox nut) for Bihar in this year's Union Budget – Bihar is the largest producer of Makhana in the country -- as a BJP leader said, "It is largely women, especially Dalit and backward class women, who work in the makhana sector in north Bihar. The thrust given to Makhana by the Narendra Modi government would boost our campaign"². Even more importantly, it is widely believed that the BJP accepted the inclusion of Caste in the Census to ensure chipping away of OBC votes in Bihar.

Before we discuss the present transition in Bihar, let us look at the three earlier ones.

Transition One: From British Raj to Congress Raj: The Nation Building Project in Bihar - "National Unity in Diversity"

Chief Ministers: 1. Muhammad Yunus (Muslim Independent Party; 1 April 1937-19 July 1937(109days); 2. Shri Krishna Sinha: INC, 20 July 1937-31 October, 1939 (2years 103 days) & 23 March 1946-14 August 1947 (1 year,144 days). Post Independence: **1st & 2nd Vidhan Sabha (VS) Election** - Shri Krishna Sinha :15 August 1947-31 Jan.1961(13 years, 169 days) ;2.DN Singh: 1 Feb.1961-18 Feb.1961(17 days); **3rd Vidhan Sabha Election,1962** - Binodanand Jha: 18 Feb 1961- 2 Oct.1963, (2 years 226 days); KB Sahay 2 Oct. 1963- 5 March 1967(3 years 154 days).

The Congress enjoyed rainbow social base, its core support base in caste terms was provided by Bhumiars, Brahmins, SCs, STs and Muslims. Muslim League competed with the Congress for Muslim support before 1947. As the representative political domain began to emerge, Kayasths dominated early Congress and public life in general. Congress began to draw rural/agrarian elements from the 1920's, even as education, urban professions and government jobs in Bihar continued to be dominated by Kayasths, Muslims and Bengalis.

The most dramatic political change after 1947 was that the Congress became the ruling party from being a party of movement, factionalism within the Congress party organization increased, the Muslim League disappeared from the political sphere, regular elections and political mobilization increased politicization, aspirations as well as discontent among people and groups, newer groups and parties were formed while some older ones disappeared. Nationalist euphoria and memories had not dissipated in the 1950's and the Congress party continued to be led by leaders of the nationalist movement. The new political process was based for the first time on universal adult franchise. This phase was marked by relatively lower level of politicization. 'Factionalism' within Congress received much scholarly attention – factionalism based on personality clashes and political interests.

The memories of nationalist movement had not dimmed yet and politicization of political cleavages was relatively low during the 1950's and early 1960's; peasant, backward castes and Scheduled Castes 's (SC) had not yet emerged as an independent political- electoral force. Bihar Congress leaders could mobilize them for factional and party purposes.

Second Transition: 1967-1990: Non-Congress Opposition emerges and the top-down Congress in Bihar

Fourth Vidhan Sabha Election,1967: Mahamaya Prasad Sinha- 5 March1967-28Jan.1968 (329 days); Satish Prasad Singh 28 Jan.,1968- 1 Feb.,1968 (4days); BP Mandal 1 Feb.,1968- 22 March 1968 (50 days); Bhola Paswan Shastri 22 March 1968- 22 March, 1968 (99 days). President's Rule:29 June,1968- 26 Feb.,1969. **Fifth VS Election ,1969:** Harihar Singh- 26 Feb.-1969 – 22 June 1969 (116 days) Bhola Paswan Shastri 2 June 1969 - 9 January ,1972 (221 days); President's Rule: 9 Jan.-19 March,1972. **Sixth VS Election, 1972:** Kedar Pandey -19 March 1972- 2 July 1973 (I year,105 days); Abdul Ghafoor - 2 July 1973- 11 April,1975 (1 year 283 days); Jaganath Mishra- 11 April- 1975- 30 April 1977(2 years, 19 days); President's Rule 30 April-24 June 1977. **Seventh VS Election 1977:** Karpoori Thakur 24 June 1977-21 April 1979 (1 year 301 days); Ram Sundar Das 21 April 1979- 17 Feb.,1980 (302 days). President's Rule 14 Feb.-8 June 1980. **Eighth VS Election, 1980:** Jagannath Mishra 8 June 1980- 14 Aug. 1983 (3 years, 67 days) Chandrashekhar Singh 14 August 1983-12 March 1985; **Ninth VS election 1985:** Bindeshwari Dubey- 12 March 1985- 13 Feb.,1988(2 years,338 days); Bhagwat Jha Azad- 13 Feb.,1988- 10 March, 1989; Satyendra Narayan Sinha -11 March 1989 – 6 Dec.,1989 (270 days); Jagannath Mishra 6 Dec., 1989- 10 March, 1990 (94 days). **Tenth VS Election,1990**

² Indian Express (I.E), June 19,2025

The political dynamics of earlier era began to change slowly in the early 1960's. This was the beginning of "decline of traditional dominance" in the political sphere. There was a famine in 1966-67 in Bihar³. This contributed to discontent among all sections of society. 1967 Vidhan Sabha election in Bihar made visible the cracks in Congress's ability to successfully mobilize critical mass of voters to maintain its electoral-political position.

The 1970's and 1980's saw erosion of Congress organization as well as state and local leadership. This trend as well as socio-political changes underway were masked by Indira Gandhi's populist, personalized, centralized and referendum style political mobilization strategy. What the Congress failed to do in Bihar -- as in neighbouring UP -- was to contain the discontent among the ascendant 'backward classes' and middle peasants who continued to form the core of non-Congress parties. Bihar saw Chief Minister's without independent support base of their own, appointed by the "High Command". Although the Congress managed to retain its dominance in the second part of this phase the nature of dominance had altered -- Mrs Gandhi adopted a "top-down" model" with a series of Chief Ministers appointed by the High Command - Chief Ministers without any independent support base of their own. This phase saw JP movement⁴ and political events culminating in Emergency on 26th June, 1975. The election following Emergency brought to power Janata Party to power. The governments led by Karpooori Thakur and then by Ram Sundar Das was marked by factional strife and leadership struggles. Janata party rule ended, when following the return of Indira Gandhi, it was dismissed by Mrs Gandhi in February, 1980. The next decade saw Congress in power but the High Command mode of controlling state governments continued.

Transition 3: From Congress Rule to Mandal Rule 1990 – 2025

Tenth VS Election, 1990: Lalu Prasad Yadav 10 March 1990 – 28 March 1995 (5 years, 18 days); President's Rule: 28 March- 4 April, 1995. **Eleventh VS Election, 1995:** Lalu Prasad Yadav 4 April 1995-25 July 1997 (2 years, 112 days) Rabri Devi- 25 July 1997-11 Feb., 1999 (1 year 201 days) President's Rule: 11 Feb., - 9 March 1999. Rabri Devi 9 March -1999 – 2 March, 2000; (359 days). **Twelfth VS Election :** Nitish Kumar 3 march 2000-10 March 2000 (7 days) ; Rabri Devi – 11 March, 2000- 6 march 2005 (4 years 360 days) President's Rule 7 march – March – 24 Nov., 2005. **Thirteenth VS Election, Feb., 2005 – no Government formed; Fourteenth VS Election, Oct., 2005 & Fifteenth VS Election, 2010 :** Nitish Kumar 24 Nov., 2005- 20 May 2014 (8 years, 177 days); Jitan ram Manjhi – 20 May 2014 – 22 Feb., 2015 (215 days); **Sixteenth VS Election, 2015 & Seventeenth VS Election, 2020:** Nitish Kumar – 22 Feb., 2015 to now (10 years plus)

Mandal phase politics in Bihar has been marked by two very different leadership styles and governance models : one which witnessed acute "crisis of governance"/breakdown -- with the leader at the helm in government hailing from dominant caste who was reported as being involved with those on the wrong side of the law while championing caste quotas for the officially defined backward castes as a single category and the second one , where the rule of law was restored, which was accompanied by governmental initiatives to develop Bihar while also championing caste quotas - with sub- categories - albeit with much less rhetoric. Political mobilisation repertoire and forms were also different -- while Laloo's campaign used a more violent and masculine political idiom -- "lathi raila" for example symbolized masculine instrument of violence ; Nitish's mobilizational repertoire has been more restrained. In the later part of the Mandal phase there has been a battle of narratives -- with JD(U) led by Nitish attacking the preceding regime as "jungle raj" marked by corruption while the RJD led by Laloo claimed RJD rule as having ushered in Mandal justice.

Laloo-Rabri regime mobilized hitherto dormant groups and was able to craft a coalition of OBCs and a significant section of SCs led by Yadavs, who are seen as local toughs. Unlike UP, where SCs have stayed away from Yadavs in particular and OBCs in general, in Bihar sections of the SCs, except most notably Paswans who were behind Ram Vilas Paswan, were drawn by Laloo's populist rhetoric. This was the phase of aggregation of caste clusters which were beneficiary of caste quotas. Laloo Yadav, used the moment of heightened emotion following Mandal announcement to mobilize the OBC as well as SC voters ; his mobilization saw a marked shift as he began to cultivate an exclusive Muslim- Yadav support base: there was visible Yadavization in all domains of domains of governance though Lalu allotted 37% tickets to Yadavs who form 11% of the population in the Vidhan Sabha election itself - this was alienated other OBCs and the heterogeneous block of OBC disintegrated⁵. By the time Rabri, his wife, took over from Lalu, the RJD had become an MY party in popular perception, completing the arc from "Mandalisation" to "Yadavisation" by the time of 2000 Vidhan Sabha election. As the logic of Mandal played itself out on the ground, the Mandal coalition began to unravel. The SC's, which includes Paswans, form 19.65 % of the state's population⁶ have been divided: Ram Vilas Paswan led the Paswan caste among them while Ravidas caste voted for the Congress, JD(U)/ BJP. Paswan with his steady vote base played

³ See Paul R Brass, 1986, for details of the Bihar famine of 1966-1967

⁴ John R. Wood, 1975

⁵ Sanjay Kumar, 2018, p.59

⁶ Indian Express, June 23, 2025

the role of balancer -- something that Nitish was to do later much more effectively in state politics holding the decisive balancing power.

The dynamics of political mobilisation and corruption narratives changed in this phase. Laloo constructed his political rhetoric on a different register. Political acts and speeches and the political process became markedly more vernacularized. Laloo exhibited masculine style in a rustic and vernacular medium. Laloo's political idiom was laced with masculine and violent symbolism -- "lathi raila". His political communication with his constituency used rustic and comic elements - which his constituency loved. But as the logic of Mandal played out Laloo's mode of 'doing politics' increasingly brought diminishing returns: his support base began to recede, as he began to be perceived as a Yadav leader, though he retained his core support base of MY. The way of doing politics changed in this phase but there were significant political faces like Nitish Kumar and Ramvilas Paswan who 'did politics' differently and used a different mode of political communication.

While India witnessed economic reforms in the 1990's, Bihar, in Laloo/Rabri era, the leadership was disinterested in liberalisation, economic reforms, private/public investment or FDI. As states began to compete with each other to attract FDI, the Laloo Rabri regime stood out as an exception. Laloo -Rabri regime remained largely indifferent to economic reforms -- as such, there was no pressure from his support base either.

In the later part of this phase, under Nitish, Bihar's political process moved towards Mandal justice with governance. Nitish Kumar has been the CM from 2005 and is serving his 8th term as CM. Nitish Kumar moves to build infrastructure (roads and bridges), distribute cycle to school going girls, restore law and order shows that it is possible to restore a semblance of state capacity when and where political leadership has ideas and will to act, even in the context of fragmented societal formation and corroded state agencies . Nitish has pursued his Mandal politics without confrontational rhetoric of his predecessor. His prohibition policy though -- widely believed to be aimed at his women vote bank -- has had complex impact on society and politics. Indeed the former Chief Justice of India, N.V. Ramanna flagged Bihar's prohibition law as a bad law drafted without adequate foresight, which resulted in clogging the judiciary with large numbers of litigation and bail⁷ ; it is also bad economics. Patna High Court too observed that the prohibition law has "ended up on the wrong side of history" by fueling smuggling and hurting the poor.⁸

So, the Mandal phase was marked by two sharply different leadership styles : the first was theatrical, rhetorical and confrontational while the second one was more restrained and confrontational and tried to marry Mandal politics with welfarism and infrastructure development. While in both the UR castes (Unreserved Castes) and SCs (Scheduled Castes) occupied a secondary position, the second period was more accommodative of non-Mandal groups.

Transition 4: Towards Post-Mandal Rule: 2025

Bihar's heightened politicization of social cleavages has been reflected in the fragmented party system in the post-Congress phase. Nitish Kumar's JD(U) with less than 20% of the vote share has been holding the balance of political power and has been the Chief Minister since 2005.

Two fundamental facts which are energizing Bihar's political contest are first, that the average landholding size in Bihar is the smallest in the country after Kerala - worse, unlike Kerala Bihar is a landlocked state; the average agricultural household in Bihar receives the lowest value of output for its produce in the country. In view of the desperate agrarian landscape and distress, jobs in non-agricultural sector are a major electoral issue. Indeed, jobs and migration have acquired a salience in the dominant narrative unfolding in Bihar's political arena which they did not have earlier.

Second, Bihar has an unemployment rate of 3.9% -- higher than the national average of 3.2% as per the estimates of Niti Ayog.⁹ According to a recent Niti Ayog Report¹⁰ , Bihar's economy continues to be predominantly agrarian with 49.6% of the workforce engaged in agriculture; manufacturing jobs are only 5.7% - which is one of the lowest share in the country; service and construction jobs comprise 26 % and 18.4% of the jobs. Needless to add that jobs are a politically sensitive issue; even though Bihar is a state which lacks development as well as an overarching regional identity demands are being made for domicile reservation. Several other states have domicile reservation. JD(U) leader said that a domicile reservation policy would "go against the

⁷ Financial Express, Dec.,27,2021. Also, Indian Express, Dec., 27, 2021

⁸ Times of India, Nov., 15, 2024

⁹ Indian Express, June 12,2025

¹⁰ Niti Ayog Report, March, 2025

Constitution".¹¹ However, RJD led by Tejashwi Yadav and Prashant Kishore of the Jan Suraj party have supported the demand.

BJP : Bihar is the only Hindi state where the BJP has not been able to form a government on its own - the BJP has been able to acquire power only as part of coalition government. The state is crucial for the BJP's project to retain and consolidate its dominance in national politics. In the neighbouring state of UP, the BJP has been able to construct a rainbow caste coalition of UR (Unreserved castes) castes with the non-dominant OBC castes along with non-Jatav SCs - thereby successfully fusing the two master majoritarian currents woven around caste and religion in India's political process. Atleast until now the BJP has not been able to successfully marry the two majoritarian currents in Bihar.

The Central Government's surprise announcement regarding inclusion of caste enumeration in Census was seen a move to consolidate its position in Bihar before Vidhan Sabha elections -- both its NDA allies, JD(U) and the LJP(RV), have been asking for it on the ground that it is needed to ensure justice to backward

The Bihar BJP faces a quandary as its ally at the Centre as well as in Bihar faces uncertainty over future leadership question. BJP top leaders believe that it has to continue with Nitish as the face in Bihar and keep all the existing NDA allies together in a state as politically important and as electorally fragmented as Bihar. As a BJP leader said "Their (JD-U's) indecisiveness is the biggest issue. The ambiguity of (Chief Minister) Nitish Kumar's party about its future could create problems for us. They handle the state and have a role in policy-making at the Centre. Who is going to be its leader will be an issue for the BJP too"¹² (IE, June 10, 2025). With most Indian parties following familial succession model, it remains to be seen how things play out in the case of JD(U) as Nitish's son is not politically active.

BJP: Although a national party, like the Congress in its heydays, it adopts state specific electoral campaigns, mobilizational repertoire and policies – as seen in its recent decision to include caste in the Census. The BJP is manoeuvring to overcome caste centric political mobilization of RJD led MGB by making its appeal multilayered – caste plus Hindu nationalism with a top dressing of welfarism/public provisioning of private goods, infrastructure and development.

The Central Government's surprise announcement regarding inclusion of caste enumeration in Census was seen a move by the BJP to consolidate its position in Bihar before the Vidhan Sabha elections -- both its NDA allies, JD(U) and the LJP(RV), have been asking for it on the ground that it is needed to ensure justice to backward castes. The caste census signalling is to ensure against any shifting of EBC votes – which has formed part of the BJP support base. The state BJP leaders believe that the 2027 population Census along with caste enumeration "provides coherence to the NDA's attempt to take ownership of it and counter the Opposition's attack over caste". The state BJP is taking credit for it: as one BJP leader said "Social engineering will guide our campaign in several Assembly segments. The issue of caste census will play a major role in the campaign".¹³

Although it remains to be seen how successful the BJP will be in consolidating Hindu identity in Bihar, RJD's caste centric mobilisation – with its MY image deeply etched in popular imagination - may not be sufficient to match BJP's multi-layered political signalling and mobilization. As a state BJP leader said, "unlike the INDI(Opposition INDIA or Mahagathbandhan) alliance, the NDA is united. Our message is clear -this is a coherent alliance which instead of bickering aims to deliver results." Further he said, "Attempts have been made to ensure coordination between the two major NDA partners BJP and JD(U) from booths to districts."¹⁴

JD(U) : Nitish has been holding the balance of power - whichever electoral front he joins BJP/ NDA or RJD/MGB - is able to wrest political power in Bihar .Nitish Kumar's core support base has comprised of Kurmis and Koeris, with sections of Mahadalits, Pasmanda Muslims and EBCs also supporting him. Nitish was the first to realize that women were a potentially independent electoral force and has won significant support among them - his Prohibition policy was meant to win support of women voters and he has persisted with the policy .

However, despite holding the key to government formation in all the elections since 2005, Nitish led JD(U) performed poorly in the 2020 elections - when it was reduced to 43 seats - much below the BJP's 74 - from 71 seats in 2015 elections. One of the main reasons for the dismal performance of JD(U) was the LJP(RV) - in 26 seats , Chirag's party polled more votes than the JD(U) losing margin. Nitish categorized 21 castes in the SC list as Mahadalits (more depressed) who needed special government assistance on the ground of being more deprived -- Paswans ,the caste to which Chirag belongs, were excluded from the sub-category. This deepened the cleavage between Paswans and newly labelled Mahadalits.¹⁵

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Indian Express, June 10,2025

¹³ Express, June 19,2025

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Times of India, July, 18,2025

Lok Jan Shakti Party (RV) The party was formed by Ram Vilas Paswan in 2000. The LJP split in 2021, following the death of its founder Ram Vilas Paswan and his son Chirag's party came to be known as LJP(RV). SCs comprise 19% of Bihar population while LJP's core support base is among Paswan's who form 4%. LJP contested the 2020 Vidhan Sabha election alone but won only one seat. Chirag returned to the NDA before the 2024 Lok Sabha elections and won all the five seats it was allocated. This has fueled his ambitions and he is trying to emerge as a symbol of what he is calling 'new Bihar'. Chirag Paswan, Union Minister for Food Processing Industries, is barely hiding its ambitions to replace JD(U) and win over its support base to take up "*bhavisya ki jimmedari*" (responsibility of the future) - a euphemism for the Chief Minister's post.¹⁶

Chirag is believed to be aiming at being the face that can bring together key electoral forces in the state -- even though his party is not as electorally significant as Nitish JD(U) which won 18.52 % of vote share in the 2024 Lok Sabha elections in Bihar -- LJP won 5 seats of the seats allotted to it in NDA seat sharing, with 6.47% vote share. In a fragmented political landscape, Nitish Kumar has ruled Bihar for almost two decades without having a majority -- with not more than 20% vote share¹⁷. The LJP's best performance was in 2005 when it won 29 seats in the 243 - member Assembly. It is believed that -- as a BJP leader said -- "His hints that he could shift to the state and contest from a general seat show that he wants to be the next Nitish(Kumar) in Bihar politics. The BJP these days does not make leaders, only workers"¹⁸.

The Opposition alliance – Mahagathbandhan (MGB) parties comprise the RJD - which is the biggest party in the alliance - the Congress, CPI, CPI(Marxist), CPI(ML) Liberation, and Vikashsheel Insaan Party (VIP). The Congress won just 19 of the 70 seats it contested in the 2020 election; its poor strike rate was one of the reasons the Mahagathbandhan fell short of the majority mark, even though the RJD emerged as the single largest party. VIP contested 20 seats in 2020 as part of NDA and won four. Among the Left parties – CPI(ML) won 12 of the 19 seats it contested. The JD(U) contested 115 seats and won 43 while BJP won 74 seats.¹⁹ In the 2020 Vidhan Sabha election, the NDA comprising the BJP, JD(U), Lok Janshakti Party and Hindustani Awami Morcha, secured a vote share of 43.17 %; the Mahagathbandhan got 38.75%. In 2025 Mahagathbandhan will need a swing of at least 3% to displace the NDA. Any significant shift in EBC and SC votes will be crucial in the 2025 contest.

RJD Although Lalu Yadav's son Tejashwi has made some efforts to attract SC support and promised "inclusive politics", the core support base of the RJD continues to be MY. Appointment of Mangani Lal Mandal who belongs to the Dhanuk caste which is classified as Extremely Backward Class (EBC), which comprises over 2% votes in Bihar (Dhanuks are numerically among top five caste in EBC category), as the new president of the RJD's Bihar unit is aimed at moving from MY pigeon hole. This was confirmed by a RJD leader : "Mangani Lal Mandal has been the most credible EBC face. His election as new RJD chief will send across strong message among EBCs about RJD's efforts to practice A to Z (inclusive) politics"²⁰ The new President, however, is unlikely to have much say in running the party which – like other family controlled parties - has power concentrated in the family. It remains to be seen how much this move will help the party in expanding its support base among the EBC bloc. Tejashwi and the first family of the RJD realize that Mandal justice rhetoric is not enough so it is trying to make jobs the central plank of its campaign while also trying to signal to broader societal forces that it is no longer a Yadav party.

Jan Suraaj Party Prashant Kishore -the election strategist and professional election campaign advisor turned politician- led Jan Suraaj Party was launched after Prashant's two- year long *pad yatra* across the state. The newly formed Jan Suraaj party may find resonance among young aspirational voters but its organisational reach is limited ; by dividing anti-incumbency vote, it may well help the NDA.

Concluding observations

The rural/rururban social and political landscape in Bihar today is fragmented and multilayered but one common thread is that all fragments, including youth of the erstwhile and present dominant sections want to move away from agriculture. Rapid digitilisation has fueled aspirations and anxieties. This has given urgency to the question of job creation. The BJP is trying to present its unified Hindu political identity to build a rainbow social coalition while also deftly appealing to non-dominant SCs and OBCs -- who resent Yadav domination. The BJP is working to leverage aspirations, discontent, fears and insecurities to consolidate and expand its support base in Bihar. Although liberalization and FDI did not impact Bihar as much as many other parts -- just as earlier Green

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Indian Express, June 8 ,2025

¹⁸ Ibid

¹⁹ Indian Express, June 14, 2025

²⁰ Indian Express, June 15, 2025

revolution bypassed Bihar -- the emerging political subjectivities are being shaped by competing narratives of victimhood of (own) caste and religion, rapid digitilisation, agrarian distress and stories shared by migrant labourers to other parts of the country. Precarious economic conditions -- impacting all societal groups -- coupled with passing away of the generation of political leadership which had used Mandal to build its political base and the logic of working out of Mandal justice -- which clubbed heterogeneous castes -- on the ground has brought Bihar's political process to crossroads.

Nitish Kumar has repeatedly invoked the "Jungle raj" metaphor to contrast his regime with that of Lalu Yadav. Undoubtedly, economic growth picked up during his tenure, infrastructure development took place and above of all law and order was restored. Nitish regime certainly turned a new leaf compared with the previous one. But Nitish regime has to be compared with that of Chief Ministers of more economically advanced states. True, after Jharkhand was carved out in 2000, mineral resources and industrial hubs went to Jharkhand. Bihar faces the daunting task of overcoming natural as well as man made constraints - a landlocked, densely populated state with predominantly small-size farms -- which has to compete with more developed states for domestic and international capital - in the backdrop of mobilized, fragmented and fluid societal forces. Bihar -- unlike peninsular Indian states -- does not have linguistic nationalism to draw all the fragmented socio-political forces together against a putatively culturally/linguistically hostile Centre.

While political process of a state like Bihar is extremely complex with multiple actors, individuals and groups -- rulers and the ruled -- acting intentionally/unintentionally to manoeuvre emerging socio-political conditions, institutional responses and events to achieve desired agendas and outcomes; moreover, in politics contingent turns cannot be ruled out but at this political moment, the broad contours of political evolution in Bihar are clear -- the plates of political terrain are shifting and the political environment and the political field is moving towards new terms of political engagement, leadership styles and reinvention of dominant narratives.

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