

4. Caste Politics in Bihar with Special Reference to OBC Politics

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The world view about society and politics in Bihar is all about different castes and how they are the basis of support for political parties. These castes are constantly in conflict for social dominance and political power. The history of the state has numerous instances of caste alliances, networks and mobilizations (Jha and Pushpendra 2012). Even in recent years, for all the development that the state of Bihar has seen, caste continues to remain as one of the most important factors in the political discourse and electoral positioning of the state (NP and Mishra 2013).

The caste politics in Bihar can be categorized into two phases, pre 1990 phase and post 1990 phase. In pre-1990 Bihar, the upper castes – Brahmins, Bhumihars, Rajputs and Kayasthas not only dominated the social and political space, but also the bureaucracy and the judiciary. These upper caste Hindus were numerically small as compared to the Other Backward Classes (OBCs), (Table 1) but they dominated social, economic and political sphere of the state (Kumar et al. 2008).

In 1990s, there was a complete breakdown of the ‘Congress system’¹ in the state on one hand and a major transformation in the social basis of political power on the other. In this phase the upper castes were replaced by backward castes as the political elite of Bihar. The Brahmins,

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¹This term was coined by Rajni Kothari to describe the Congress party as a system which dominated Indian Politics till 1967.

Rajputs, Bhumihars and Kayasthas (who together constitute 15 percent of the population) were replaced by Yadavs, Kurmi-Koeris, and other OBCs. The upper castes and the OBC community struggled with each other for political space in Bihar and after a long struggle, the upper castes accepted the leadership of the OBCs.

Emergence of OBCs as a separate political category

In 1974, Jayaprakash Narayan led an anti-Congress movement initiated by students demanding the resignation of state Congress Governments. This movement led to a lot of disruptions with massive rallies, strikes and shutdowns. Jayaprakash Narayan considered his populist movement as a catalyst for what he termed as 'total revolution'. This was aimed at cleaning up public life in India and ending corruption and the authoritarian rule of Indira Gandhi. This movement had a profound influence on regional parties claiming to represent lower caste interests that emerged across North India in the 1990's and particularly in Bihar where JP's influence was the strongest. It was within this movement that OBC politics emerged as a mass populist movement (Witsoe 2013).

In 1978, Karpoori Thakur of Janata party implemented the, Mungeri Lal Commission report. This Commission was constituted in 1971 and it submitted its report in 1975. It was the first major effort to understand the plight of backward classes in Bihar. This Commission recommended the bifurcation of the backward classes into Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Most Backward Classes (MBCs) (Ahmed 2010). The report when implemented by Thakur for state level backward castes reservations resulted in widespread rioting by forward caste youth and the fall of his government (Ibid). This move of the Janata government led to conflicting social mobilizations in Bihar and shaped the politics of the state on caste based assertions in the coming decades. It also saw the emergence of Lalu Prasad, Nitish Kumar, Sushil Modi and Ram Vilas Paswan in the politics of the state.

The 1990s marked a sharp change in politics of Bihar. The implementation of Mandal Commission report was opposed by upper castes across the country. In Bihar, backward caste groups were mobilized to counter the anti-Mandal agitations. This led to a violent struggle on the streets between the anti-reservationists (mainly upper caste youth) and pro-reservationists (mainly the backward caste youth). This struggle

further intensified the hatred between forward and backward castes (Kumar 1999). Lalu Prasad and Nitish Kumar both became strong supporters of Mandal and reservation politics.

The political history of Bihar in the post-Independence period can be divided into three distinctive phases. In the first phase (1947-1967) Congress party headed by upper caste leaders dominated the state. The second phase (1967-1990) can be linked to gradual decline of Congress as well as of the upper castes and slow but steadily emerging influence of the middle castes in the political arena. The third phase (1990 onwards) is marked by a complete reversal of the first phase that is, marginalization of the Congress party and the upper castes in Bihar politics. (Kumar et al. 2008). This paper focuses on the third phase as it was during this phase that backward castes came to forefront as far as politics is concerned. In 1990s, the Congress suffered a major setback. It not only lost most of the parliamentary seats, but also saw a major decline in its traditional support base—the upper castes, the Dalits and the Muslims. Due to ‘Mandalisation’, the backward castes got an opportunity to get united and capture power. Dalits and OBCs got mobilized under JD leadership with leaders like Ram Sunder Das, Lalu Prasad Yadav, Nitish Kumar, Ram Vilas Paswan.

Table 1
Caste composition in Bihar

	Proportion in the Population of Bihar
Brahmin	5
Bhumihar	4
Rajput	5
Other Upper Caste (Kayasthas etc.)	1
Yadav	15
Kurmi and Koeri	11
Other OBCs	24
Dalit (Census)	16
Muslims (Census)	17

Source: Estimates are based on various Post Poll Surveys conducted by CSDS in Bihar

OBC politics takes a turn after the split in Janta party

In the backward caste consolidation, the three dominant OBC groups -Yadavs, Kurmis and Koeris took the lead and most others were left out. It was believed that this consolidation of backward castes would ensure that a regime of social justice would last for many years. This consolidation was short-lived and there were cracks amongst the OBCs due to an internal conflict between the champions of backward castes. The division became real after the formation of Samata Party just a few months before the 1995 assembly election. Now, there was a division of the social justice regime into two streams. One represented by Lalu Prasad Yadav under Janta Dal² and the other by Nitish Kumar under the banner of Samata Party, later renamed as the Janta Dal United JD(U) (Alam 2014). Though the Samata party failed miserably in the first assembly election of 1995, but it had been able to bring a change in the nature of electoral contest from forward- backward axis to a backward- backward contest. In this contest one side was represented by Yadavs under Lalu Yadav and the other by Kurmis under Nitish Kumar (Kumar 2014a).

²In 1995, Janta Dal consisted of three popular leaders- Sharad Yadav, Ram Vilas Paswan and Lalu Prasad Yadav. But In 1997, Lalu Prasad also left JD and formed a new party Rashtriya Janta Dal.

Table 2
Changing Caste profile of Legislative Assembly
1967- 2010

	1967	1969	1972	1977	1980	1985	1990	1995	2000	2005 February	2005 October	2010
Yadav	12% (37)	15% (47)	11% (35)	16% (51)	14% (46)	15% (47)	19% (63)	27% (86)	20% (64)	17% (55)	22% (54)	16% (39)
Kurmi	4% (14)	4% (12)	6% (20)	6% (21)	6% (20)	4% (12)	4% (12)	4% (13)	4% (12)	3% (11)	6% (16)	7% (17)
Koeri	4% (13)	4% (13)	3% (8)	2% (6)	4% (12)	6% (18)	6% (18)	8% (27)	7% (22)	3% (11)	9% (22)	6% (15)
Other OBC's	6% (18)	7% (21)	4% (14)	4% (14)	6% (18)	4% (12)	7% (24)	10% (34)	7% (23)	5% (17)	8% (20)	12% (28)

Note: Figures in bracket indicate the number of MLAs: The total number of MLAs in the Bihar Vidhan Sabha – 1967 – 1971: 318 Members, 1977 – 2000: 324 Members and 2005 Onwards: 243 Members
Source: (Kumar 2014b: 213)

If we take a look at the caste profile of the legislative assembly of Bihar from 1967 to 2010 (Table 2), we can see that in the pre 1990 phase, the OBC representation was limited in the assembly and it was dominated by upper castes. The 1990s saw a complete breakdown of the Congress system which resulted in the political rise of the OBCs. Post 1990s, there was a significant increase in the share of OBCs in the legislative assembly. Among the OBCs, it was the Yadavs who continued to dominate the assembly. There was a reverse trend in the membership of Yadavs and other OBCs with every election. Only 16 percent of the members in the house in 2010 are Yadav as compared to 20 percent in 2000. The proportion of other OBCs has increased from 7 percent in 2000 to 12 percent in 2010. The proportion of Kurmi members also reached an all time high of 7 percent this year. It has been around 4 percent in the 1990s.

Table 3
Voting Pattern of OBCs in Bihar

	2000 VS	2005 VS	2010 VS	2014 LS
Congress	8	5	3	9
BJP	18	17	19	26
RJD	37	33	21	24
JD(U)	14	23	26	16

Note: All figures are in percent; VS stands for Vidhan Sabha/ Assembly elections and LS stands for Lok Sabha elections.

Source: National Election Studies 2014 and Bihar Post Poll Surveys 2000, 2005 and 2010 conducted by CSDS.

The OBC voters in the state have mainly supported the BJP, JD (U) and the RJD. The raptures in backward class mobilization also gave rise to a new process of social and political coalition (Alam 2014). Nitish Kumar formed a pre poll alliance with the BJP after the 1995 assembly election. The alliance of these parties was an alliance of extremes as the ideology and social base of these parties was very different. This alliance was merely based on electoral math as there was no similarity in their ideology. This alliance was formed under the agenda of “development”

and “Good Governance” as against the “Jungle Raj” being run by the RJD (Jagannathan 2013). Though the alliance did well but in 2000, it fell short of forming the government. This election saw RJD getting its highest ever OBC vote share. It got 37 percent of the OBC votes. The BJP and the JD (U)/Samata Party were close with a combined vote share of 32 percent. This was the only election in which the RJD did better than BJP-JD (U) alliance as far as OBC votes are concerned. In the 2005 election, the BJP- JD (U) alliance came to power in the state and also did well amongst the OBC voters. Close to four out of every ten OBC voters had voted for the NDA. The BJP’s vote share remained almost constant as compared to the 2000 assembly election, but its ally JD (U) performed much better and managed to increase OBC support by 9 percentage points. There was a 4 percentage points decline in OBC votes for the RJD (Table 3).

In the 2010 assembly election, both BJP and JD (U) saw an increase in their OBC vote share. In 2013, the JD (U) broke its alliance with the BJP after the party promoted Narendra Modi to lead its election campaign. The two parties contested the 2014 Lok Sabha election independently and it did not have any negative effect on support for the BJP among OBCs. In fact in the 2014 Lok Sabha election, BJP got the highest OBC vote share among all the parties.

OBCs are not a homogeneous group and they are further divided into sub categories. The upper OBC (comprising of Yadav, Kurmi and Koeri) and the extremely/ most backward castes. (EBC/MBC) The EBC category is also not a homogeneous category and consists of number of small castes. In the last couples of years the upper OBC’s did well politically and economically, but the progress of EBCs was not as good as the upper OBCs.

Table 4
Yadavs are polarised in favour of RJD

	2000 VS	2005 VS	2010 VS	2014 LS
Congress	3	8	2	18
BJP	3	5	6	15
JD(U)	5	7	9	6
RJD	74	64	56	46

Note: All figures are in percent; VS stands for Vidhan Sabha/ Assembly elections and LS stands for Lok Sabha elections; Samata Party 2000 has been included with JD(U); Figures for 2005 are for the election held in October 2005.

Source: National Election Studies 2014 and Bihar Assembly Election Post Poll Surveys 2000, 2005 and 2010 conducted by CSDS.

Yadavs who can be considered to be upper OBCs have been loyal supporters of Lalu Prasad Yadav. The consolidation of Yadav support for the RJD is much greater than the support of other caste groups for other parties. RJD by forming an alliance with the Congress tried to build a strong social coalition of Muslim and Yadavs. This alliance was able to present itself as a possible alternative which could challenge the BJP in Bihar. Table 4 shows the voting pattern of Yadavs since the 2000 assembly election. RJD remains popular with Yadavs but over the years there has been a decline in support for the party among them. RJD's vote share among Yadavs has declined from 74 percent in the 2000 assembly election to 56 percent in the 2010 assembly elections. In the 2014 Lok Sabha election, it came down by 10 percentage points to 46 percent. A deeper analysis shows that Yadavs remained polarised in favour of RJD in constituencies where the party had put up a Yadav candidate. In such constituencies more than 75 percent of the Yadavs had voted for the RJD (Kumar 2014c).

Table 5
Kurmi and Koeri are polarised in favour of JD (U)

	2000 VS	2005 VS	2010 VS	2014 LS
Congress	9	3	5	1
BJP	25	20	22	16
JD(U)	26	43	37	31
RJD	23	13	5	13

Note: All figures are in percent; VS stands for Vidhan Sabha/ Assembly elections and LS stands for Lok Sabha elections; Samata Party 2000 has been included with JD(U); Figures for 2005 are for the election held in October 2005.

Source: National Election Studies 2014 and Bihar Assembly Election Post Poll Surveys 2000, 2005 and 2010 conducted by CSDS.

The JD (U) has a strong support base amongst the Kurmis and the Koeris. Nitish Kumar himself belongs to the Kurmi community which is numerically not very strong as compared to Yadavs. JD (U) and its ally BJP have been getting most Kurmi-Koeri votes in the state. In the 2000 assembly election, 51 percent voters of the Kurmi-Koeris had voted for the JD (U) - BJP alliance. This figure went up to 63 percent in the 2005 assembly election and later dropped by just four percentage points in the 2010 assembly election (Table 5). In 2010 assembly elections, 55 percent of the voters from the Kurmi and Koeri caste voted in favour of JD(U)- BJP alliance. The polarization of voters from these two dominant OBCs in favour of JD(U)- BJP alliance was much higher in constituencies where the alliance had put up candidates from these castes. In such constituencies, 95 percent voters from the two castes voted for the alliance (Ibid). The breakup of the JD (U) – BJP alliance in 2013 also had an impact on support for the former among Kurmis. The JD (U) failed to consolidate support among the community in the 2014 Lok Sabha election as the the BJP and its allies made significant inroads. Overall there has been a gradual decline in the vote share of JD (U) among Kurmi-Koeris.

Table 6
Voting pattern of lower OBCs

	2000 VS	2005 VS	2010 VS	2014 LS
Congress	9	4	3	4
BJP	22	24	25	44
JD(U)	13	25	30	19
RJD	24	18	8	8

Note: All figures are in percent; VS stands for Vidhan Sabha/ Assembly elections and LS stands for Lok Sabha elections; Samata Party 2000 has been included with JD(U); Figures for 2005 are for the election held in October 2005.

Source: National Election Studies 2014 and Bihar Assembly Election Post Poll Surveys 2000, 2005 and 2010 conducted by CSDS.

Apart from these three dominant OBCs, there are a number of lower OBCs who constitute around 24 percent of the state's population. Their relatively higher proportion in the population makes them an important social group in any election. From 2000 assembly elections there is a clear preference for JD (U) and BJP amongst the lower OBC (Table 6). Most of their votes are clearly divided among the two parties. There is rise in the JD (U) - BJP vote share with every election as far as lower OBCs are concerned. In 2005 assembly elections, this alliance got 35 percent of the lower OBC votes. This percentage went up to 49 percent in 2005 elections and 55 percent in 2010 elections. In the 2014 Lok Sabha election (where BJP and JD (U) did not contest together), BJP captured most of the lower OBC votes. JD (U) saw a massive decline in its vote share among this group. The RJD and the Congress have never been popular among this group and therefore have not received much support from them.

Table 7
Voting pattern of Yadavs across different classes

		2005 VS	2010 VS	2014 LS
Upper Class Yadav	Congress	12	2	20
	BJP	7	5	14
	JD(U)	9	10	7
	RJD	57	53	43
Lower Class Yadav	Congress	7	2	12
	BJP	5	7	18
	JD(U)	7	6	4
	RJD	65	62	56

Note: All figures are in percent. VS stands for Vidhan Sabha/ Assembly elections and LS stands for Lok Sabha elections; Figures for 2005 are for the election held in October 2005.

Source: National Election Studies 2014 and Bihar Assembly Election Post Poll Surveys 2000, 2005 and 2010 conducted by CSDS.

Table 8
Voting pattern of Kurmi- Koeri across different classes

		2005 VS	2010 VS	2014 LS
Upper Class Kurmi-Koeri	Congress	2	5	2
	BJP	20	26	16
	JD(U)	42	34	29
	RJD	10	4	14
Lower Class Kurmi Koeri	Congress	3	3	*
	BJP	20	14	*
	JD(U)	44	43	*
	RJD	13	6	*

*Note: All figures are in percent. VS stands for Vidhan Sabha/ Assembly elections and LS stands for Lok Sabha elections; * Insignificant number to cases.*

Figures for 2005 are for the election held in October 2005.

Source: National Election Studies 2014 and Bihar Assembly Election Post Poll Surveys 2000, 2005 and 2010 conducted by CSDS.

Table 9
Voting pattern of Lower OBCs across different classes

		2005 VS	2010 VS	2014 LS
Lower OBC belonging to Upper Class	Congress	4	4	5
	BJP	40	27	46
	JD(U)	24	31	16
	RJD	15	7	9
Lower OBC belonging to Lower Class	Congress	4	1	3
	BJP	19	22	40
	JD(U)	25	29	26
	RJD	19	10	5

Note: All figures are in percent. VS stands for Vidhan Sabha/ Assembly elections and LS stands for Lok Sabha elections; Figures for 2005 are for the election held in October 2005.

Source: National Election Studies 2014 and Bihar Assembly Election Post Poll Surveys 2000, 2005 and 2010 conducted by CSDS.

Class among caste can also influence electoral choices. We tried to check whether people belonging to the same caste but different class vote in the same pattern and have similar preferences. We find that both upper and lower class Yadavs vote for the RJD (Table 7). Still support among lower class Yadavs is relatively higher as compared to upper class Yadavs. A similar trend can be seen among Kurmi –Koeris for Nitish Kumar’s JD (U) (Table 8). The pattern is quite different for the BJP. Unlike JD(U) and RJD, The BJP enjoys relatively greater support among upper class other OBCs as compared to the lower class.

After the RJD and the ruling JD (U) announced their decision to fight the election together, the politics of the state has become very interesting and it is believed that the upcoming assembly elections in Bihar will not be a walk in the park for either of the two alliances that have taken shape (Urmilesh 2015). We will try to see what can work for and against both these alliances.

JD (U)-RJD- Congress Alliance

It is believed that Nitish Kumar has made some political blunders that can cost him dearly in this election as far as OBC vote is concerned.

The coming together of Lalu and Nitish can also be a disadvantage for the alliance. RJD's decision of accepting Nitish Kumar (belonging to the Kurmi community) as the CM candidate for their alliance can also work against them. Yadavs who are politically influential often blame Nitish for their decreasing influence in Bihar during his tenure. BJP can use this factor in their favour by giving a greater share of tickets to Yadavs. Many non Yadavs might fear the power sharing during Lalu's tenure and remember how unfavorable his tenure was. These concerns could shift them towards the BJP like in the case of the 2014 Lok Sabha Election (George 2015). Differences could arise between RJD and JD (U) during ticket distribution and seat sharing arrangements. Many OBC candidates could switch to the BJP and its allies if they are denied tickets due to the alliance. Rajesh Ranjan alias Pappu Yadav, a five times MP who has left the RJD to form his own party can split Yadav votes in the Kosi belt of Madhepura, Supaul, Saharsa and Purnea districts. Though Pappu Yadav would find it difficult to break Lalu's Yadav-Muslim social alliance, he could surely emerge as a spoiler for the RJD on some seats (Ramachandran 2015).

What can work for JD (U)-RJD alliance are caste alignments. Had Lalu and Nitish contested separately there could have been a repeat of the 2014 Lok Sabha election and a division of the 'Anti-BJP' vote. Nitish Kumar alone does not have any substantial social support base to counter the BJP. On the other hand, Lalu Prasad Yadav has a wider social base but doesn't have a popular face to take on the BJP and Narendra Modi. Congress had neither of the two (Singh 2015). The voters might see this alliance as a secular choice but the alliance partners should not over do the secular cards as it can result in polarization of the majority community. Nitish Kumar can be seen as a factor of reassurance for all sections of backwards, Dalits and Muslims (George 2015). Extremely backward classes (EBC) votes will play a very significant role in this election and this is where Nitish Kumar has an advantage. Nitish Kumar worked for the EBCs as soon as he came to power. He created a quota in civil bodies for EBCs and implemented health schemes for them. The alliance should try and give tickets to a large number of EBCs as this social group could be a game changer in the upcoming election.

BJP led NDA Alliance

As of now the BJP is not projecting any CM candidate because projecting either an upper caste or a backward caste candidate can work against the alliance. It is a safe decision as the BJP in Bihar is divided between upper caste and OBC leaders and projecting either of the two would annoy the other group (Khan 2015). The main problem in front of the party is to make sure that no leaders from the alliance dominates the public discourse as it could anger either of the two group and affect the social support base of the party (Khan 2015). Even after BJP's impressive victory last year, there may be some fall in popularity due to a gap between promise and performance. But there are many factors that are in favour of BJP led NDA and can help the party as far as OBC votes are concerned.

Upendra Kushwaha, who had parted ways from the JD(U) in 2013 due to the differences with Nitish Kumar, formed a new party Rashtriya Lok Samata Party which entered into an alliance with BJP led NDA in 2014. He belongs to the Koeri community and could help the alliance in denting Nitish Kumar's OBC vote. Kushwaha himself has a lot of support among this community. In the 2014 election, the BJP was successful in making inroads among OBC voters as well. Apart from the party's traditional voters -forwards castes, urban, educated and middle class voters, a large shift in favour of BJP led NDA took place among the lower OBCs. The NDA was able to cut off the Yadav votes as well (Alam 2014).

The results of Bihar assembly elections will have a major impact on Narendra Modi's authority and would also be a test for the so called secular alliance of the Janata Parivar. The lower OBCs will play a big role in Bihar as the upper OBC (Yadavs, Kurmis and Koeris) are likely to remain aligned with the JD (U) - RJD alliance. It is not necessary that there would be another Modi wave in Bihar. At the same time we do not know whether the JD (U)-RJD alliance would be welcomed by people of Bihar. Only the results will tell which alliance the people of the state accept and support.

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