

How Will Bihar Shake Out?

WORKING
PAPER

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Introduction

The exit polls are out in Bihar, and we are none the wiser. It is seemingly a photo finish between the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the Janata Dal United [JD(U)]-Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD)-Congress Grand Alliance. The Bihar election is ending as it began, full of theatre and intrigue. We can only guess how it ends.

We were making our way to East Champaran; we didn't realise Narendra Modi's rally would be in Gopalganj district that day. The rally was over, but traffic had stopped moving 2 km from the rally site; we would be stuck at the same spot for the next few hours. Nowhere else to go, we got out of the car and started chatting with rally-goers. An exuberant BJP supporter exclaimed, "We have 8-10 lakh people today!" This was clearly an overestimate, but the crowd was bigger than we had seen elsewhere.

We stopped in at a roadside stand where 4-5 men were being served their thalis and asked from where they had come to attend the rally. "Dewaria," responded one man (Dewaria is in Uttar Pradesh (UP), not Bihar). He went on, "None of us are from Bihar. People are coming from Gorakhpur, Kushinagar, Allahabad. The Party gives us enough money to eat lunch as well." The Muslim shopkeeper who was cooking for them, the only person there who would actually be voting in Bihar, was clearly supporting the Grand Alliance, but he was happy for the extra money generated from the rally.

The real reason for the traffic bottleneck then became clear. The road had narrowed to a single lane. While we headed further into Bihar, bus after bus, each with a "UP" license plate, was headed the other way. We analysts often mistakenly use rallies to gauge the *hawa* for a party. But, ultimately, rallies are about theatre and spectacle, while elections are won on the strength of the ground-level campaign.



Privately, a section of BJP workers have been telling us that they can now see the NDA losing in this election, not something we heard in the first couple of weeks of the campaign. In our previous piece, using available data, we argued that the NDA would have to do very well in the third and fourth phases of this five-phase election if it is to win, something that even BJP leaders have now said publicly. Given that the NDA was well ahead in 2014, the NDA might still pull off this victory.

It is clear, however, that the Grand Alliance has run a stronger ground campaign than the NDA, and that the campaign has had a major impact on changing voters' minds. The NDA now seems unlikely to get near the 172 assembly constituency (AC) segments it won in 2014. In the remainder of this piece, we assess the structure of the Grand Alliance, how it shaped the campaign, as well as how the campaigns, for both NDA and the Grand Alliance, conducted themselves during this election.

Understanding the Grand Alliance

When once bitter enemies Nitish Kumar and Lalu Prasad Yadav, and their respective parties JD(U) and RJD, formed a pre-electoral coalition, most (including us) were skeptical that it could work. Yet our interviews suggest that coordination and vote transferring across parties in the Grand Alliance has worked reasonably well. The JD(U) and RJD were known to have very different caste bases of support. The effectiveness of the Grand Alliance demonstrates the sheer malleability of caste coalitions in Indian politics; it also demands a closer look at how the coalition was able to function.

Lalu's Appeal

Early in the campaign, the NDA sought to paint Lalu's tenure as chief minister of Bihar, from 1990-2005, as a "jungle raj" where hoodlums received state support, leading to a breakdown of law and order and stifling economic development. There is merit in these claims. In the 1990s, while India was growing, data from the National Institute of Public Finance and Policy (NIPFP) shows that per capita incomes in Bihar actually declined from Rs. 1197 in 1990-91 to Rs. 1093 in 1997-98. From the outside, given his record on economic development, support for Lalu can seem puzzling.

At Lalu's rally in Darbhanga, we spoke to a neatly dressed middle-aged man, now with an office job, from the scheduled caste Paswan community. He told us, "We were in the jungle; Lalu released us from that jungle." Lalu provided the most marginalised sections of society what Hanna Pitkin has called *descriptive representation*; that is, he developed leaders that came from the same marginalised communities, who spoke and looked like these populations. This was the core principle in his rise to power in the 1990s, as evidenced, for instance, by the rise of Bhagwati Devi. Devi, an illiterate stone quarry worker from the scheduled caste Musahar community, was mentored by Lalu and rose to become the Member of Parliament (MP) from Gaya constituency in 1996 with Lalu's support.



We arrived late at night to our hotel in Siwan district, next to the railway station. Here, a major migration hub in Bihar, trains arrive at all hours and shops are open all night. At one grocery stand, behind the counter, we found two young Muslim shopkeepers chatting it up with a middle-aged Hindu man with a *tilak* on his forehead. The shopkeepers were strong supporters of the Grand Alliance, while the Hindu man was an equally strong supporter of the BJP. (Despite an image of casteism and religious rivalry, most of our conversations in Bihar took place in friendly environments with a variety of *jatis*, both Hindus and Muslims, and often with different party affiliations.) The Muslim shopkeepers spoke of the dignity Lalu brought to marginalised communities and justified the breakdown in law and order, stating, "If a population has been exploited for 100 years, of course there will be violence when they come to power suddenly." At the same time, they had grown disenchanted with Lalu, arguing that Nitish had opened their eyes to the *vikas* that was possible in Bihar.

In East Champaran district, we spoke to a family in a village on the outskirts of Harsidhi; the entire family would be supporting the BJP and NDA this time. One of them was a young man in his mid-twenties, now working for Reliance and shuttling back and forth between Gujarat and Bihar. He offered, "Gujarat has developed, Bihar hasn't. Where is Gujarat and where is Bihar?" At the same time, a family member admitted, "Lalu gave us a voice, and we gave him 15 years of rule. We are even now."

The Logic of the JD(U)-RJD Alliance

Lalu's vote base is often simplistically thought of as a "Y+M", a combination of Yadavs and Muslims; in fact, Yadavs and Muslims are not nearly as fixed a vote base as is often purported, as shown in our last piece. Furthermore, Lahu has electoral support across the poorest and most disadvantaged sections of society, and, as the previous narratives show, he is still admired even among those who no longer electorally support him. Lahu's brand of politics generates an emotional bond for voters, and his voters tend to have strong connections to him instead of "floating."

While Lahu and his party, RJD, still have a sizeable vote share, it has been slowly decreasing in state elections. In its heyday, RJD received 28% of the vote share, in both 1995 and 2000. In the two elections in 2005, it received 25% and 23%, and its vote share had dropped to 19% in 2010 (In 2014 national election, it received 20%). By itself, or with weak coalition partners, it is unlikely that RJD can win an election.

Even in 2010, with a huge victory in partnership with the BJP, the JD(U)'s vote share was 23%. In the 2014 national election, when JD(U) decided to go it alone, it received only 16% of the vote share. Unlike the BJP, which has a significant base of upper caste voters and Modi admirers, the JD(U) has little core voter base. Without the addition of Lahu's fixed vote, the JD(U) would have little chance to defeat the BJP (In 2014, the BJP's vote share had surged to 29%). The logic of the Grand Alliance has always been to add Lahu's fixed vote with Nitish's appeal among "floating voters". The JD(U)'s decision to name Nitish as the chief minister, if the Grand Alliance is to win, was aimed at attracting floating voters who may have been concerned about Lahu's influence in the Grand Alliance.

Assessing the Campaigns

In the study of voting behavior, scholars distinguish between two types of appeals, those that target the core base of voters and those that target the floating voters. When one side is dominant, in that it has the numbers in its favor, its optimal strategy is to appeal to the core base of voters to maximize turnout of supporters to make sure to win the election. In close undecided elections, as in this one, the optimal strategy is to convince floating voters on the margin to put one's party/coalition over the top. In the previous piece, we opined that *vikas* was the issue that is most likely to attract floating voters.

It is our belief that had the NDA been able to stay on message in terms of *vikas*, it would likely have won this election easily. Too often, it got side tracked with myriad issues, including beef and reservation, so the resulting election has become very close. Ultimately, if beef was a major issue to a voter, it is likely he or she was already voting for the NDA; its unclear how much it does to convince floating voters. The Grand Alliance took a two-pronged approach in this campaign, using Lahu to engage BJP on caste and identity issues while freeing up Nitish to talk about his agenda for *vikas* to lure floating voters. After an overhaul of the campaign, the NDA righted the ship somewhat from phase 3 onwards, but it never seriously challenged Nitish's model of development, nor did it ever seek to gain credit for Bihar's recent successes even though Nitish was in NDA for most of his tenure as chief minister. As it stands, Nitish's credentials for development remained almost unchallenged by the NDA, and this may turn out to be the deciding factor in the election. Perhaps the most surprising aspect of the campaign was



the extent to which JD(U) and RJD was able to coordinate its voters. Maybe the party organisations of JD(U) and RJD stayed in line because their political survival is at stake in this election. At a teashop in Araria, we met a young man who expressed displeasure with Lalu but would still vote for RJD because of his support for Nitish. By contrast, at times, vote transferring was a problem for the NDA. In Arwal district, we met an upper caste Bhumihaar who generally supported the BJP in a seat where the NDA candidate was from the Rashtriya Lok Samta Party (RLSP) and of the Kushwaha caste. He would no longer vote for a Kushwaha candidate, even though he had done so in the past. He complained, "Before, we supported Kushwahas because they are the largest population here, but this time we have a good Bhumihaar candidate, so they should cooperate with us." Other instances of discord in NDA have been well publicised, such as Lok Janshakti Party (LJP) supremo Ram Vilas Paswan's outburst in Bochaha constituency against BJP karyakartas. The NDA campaign's decision to give more face time to local leaders and other coalition partners was aimed at fostering greater vote coordination, and it remains to be seen whether this worked.

In our previous piece, we demonstrated that the NDA was moving to strongholds in phase 3 and 4, and that they were likely to do better in these phases. Our own interviews suggest that the NDA was stronger in these areas, but perhaps not strong enough to sweep. We toured extensively around constituencies that went to the polls in phase 5. Despite trying to consolidate Hindus around the issue of beef in these constituencies, we did not meet a single voter who thought that beef was a major issue in this election. At the same time, phase 5 constituencies (which have not been included in many exit polls) may hold the key to this election. Even in 2014, the NDA won only 15 out of 57 constituencies in this phase. In an election this close, if Hindu consolidation can even slightly add to this number, it may be enough to tip the scales in favour of the NDA.

Concluding Thoughts

The pollsters have produced exit polls much like their pre-election polls, comprising inconsistent predictions that point in every possible direction. As people who work extensively with data, we don't pay too much attention to exit polls. The data quality is often poor, datasets are never furnished, and sample characteristics are rarely provided. This is to say nothing of the adjustments that pollsters make to their data without publicly declaring how they are doing so.

The election is simply too close to call. Soon, we will know the actual results in Bihar, and the exit polls won't matter anymore. But the questions answered during through these election results will reverberate throughout Indian politics. Will voters punish the NDA for failing to stick to *vikas* throughout its campaign? Can the NDA continue the strategy of projecting Narendra Modi from the center to win elections without naming a state-level face? Is this the election, which will make it imperative for parties to stop thinking in terms of simple caste calculus and more about development, going forward? We'll know the answers soon enough.