

# It is Tejashwi's, not Nitish's, make or break chance

As the leader of the largest party in Bihar and with a long political career ahead of him, how the RJD scion carves out a space for himself in the shadow of JD(U)'s Nitish Kumar will determine whether the change of guard in the state is just a blip on the radar or has the potential to be a turning point

Indian politics has kaleidoscopic properties. One can see many different things by adjusting the lens. This week's turn of events in Bihar has compelled analysts to focus on the personality of Janata Dal (United) supremo and chief minister (CM) Nitish Kumar and his reasons for yet another political somersault. Some believe this change could inject renewed vigour into the Opposition camp to challenge the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2024 general elections and have mentioned the possibility of Kumar emerging as a consensus candidate to lead the Opposition.

However, the key to understanding the current moment and its future implications for Bihar and Indian politics is not Kumar, but deputy CM and Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) scion Tejashwi Prasad Yadav. Adjust the lens of the kaleidoscope to see what has been unfolding in the background.

With RJD patriarch Lalu Prasad unwell, the party and ideological mantle of his politics are now with Tejashwi. As the leader of the largest party in Bihar and with a long political career ahead of him, how Tejashwi carves out a space for himself in the shadow of Kumar — with whom he shares both father figure-like affection and the animosity natural towards a political rival — will determine whether this event is just another blip on the radar or has the potential to be a turning point.

While we may never know the exact nature of the deal between Kumar and Tejashwi, we can conclude that the former has little to gain if he decides to step down as CM in favour of the latter before 2024. So, the best possible bargain for both is likely to be that the JD(U)-RJD coalition

contests the next assembly election under Kumar's leadership, and Tejashwi takes over the mantle after being groomed as the joint heir to Lalu Yadav and Kumar's political legacy.

Will Tejashwi choose to carry the Mandal legacy, or has he realised that the heydays of Mandal politics are over and that he needs a new narrative to take the BJP on? Tejashwi's political actions and rhetoric, and Kumar's reaction to these moves, will inform us whether the new bonhomie is driven primarily by desperation on both sides or if the field is being laid out for a larger game.

Tejashwi's actions are likely to depend on his reading of emerging politics, appetite for the long game, and the ability to reinvent himself. And here, a comparison with the Samajwadi Party (SP)'s Akhilesh Yadav's political fortunes in Uttar Pradesh (UP) would be instructive.

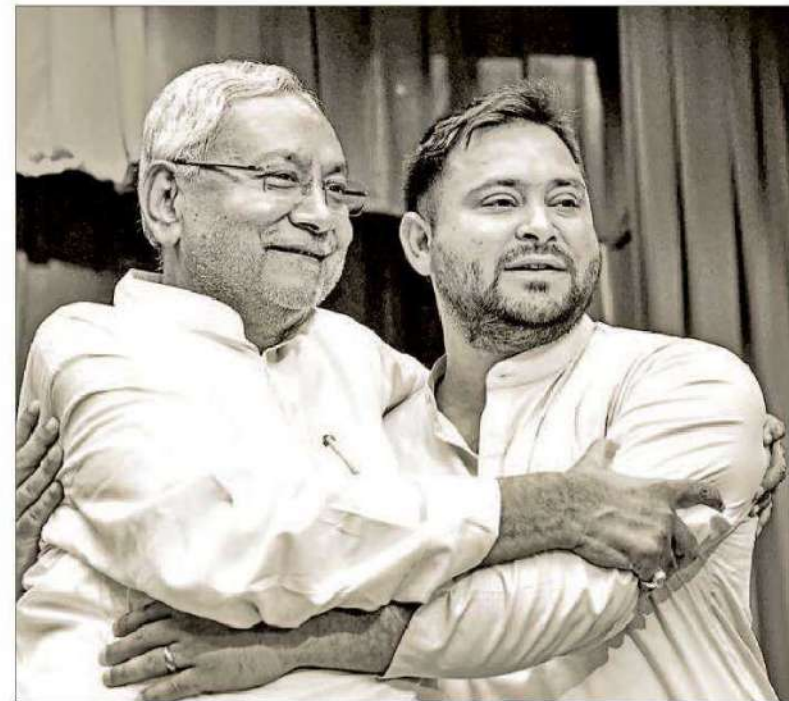
Akhilesh undoubtedly played a crucial role in the 2012 assembly elections, but since then, the SP has lost every election under his leadership.

Even the party's best performance in terms of vote share in the recent UP assembly elections was not enough to catapult the SP alliance to victory.

A similar thing happened with the RJD in Bihar. The party has been out of power for the past two decades, except for a brief interlude between 2015 and 2017 as part of the ruling coalition. In the 2020 elections, despite galvanising the campaign, the RJD could not emerge as the single-largest party — and its alliance with the Congress and CPI (ML) fell short of the majority mark.

Both Mandal parties, the SP in UP and the RJD in Bihar, have hit a glass ceiling. Even their best performance is not enough to win them power. The reasons for this are rooted in the negative image of these parties on vital issues. For example, the perception of being not only soft on law and order, but also promoting lumpen elements has led to the loss of women's votes. The turnout of women voters has started exceeding men voters in UP and Bihar, impacting the vote share of both parties. In UP, the post-poll surveys indicate that the SP trailed the BJP by more than 10 percentage points among women voters during the 2022 assembly elections. Similarly, the NDA had a five-percentage point advantage among women voters in the 2020 Bihar elections.

While it is well acknowledged that Kumar enjoys massive popularity among women voters, Tejashwi should be aware that Kumar could not



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carry the same advantage of women voters in 2015 when they contested together. The Lokniti-CSDS post-poll indicated no difference among men and women while voting for the alliance, as both remained at 42%.

When voters were asked to rate Kumar's governance and development work, men rated him slightly higher than women in the 2015 post-poll survey. So, Kumar's popularity among women voters becomes operational when he is contesting against the RJD, not with them. This is where Tejashwi will have to reinvent the RJD's image, especially since the BJP has started gaining among women voters in many states. The post-poll analysis from UP, Assam, Uttarakhand, and Goa confirm this trend.

Similarly, the core social base, comprising the dominant-backward caste of Yadavs, is keeping a large number of smaller castes away from these parties, and the BJP is now effectively using the significant Muslim base of these parties to pivot elections on Hindu-Muslim axis. Religious polarisation helps the BJP to wean away smaller backward castes, resulting in a net loss for the SP and RJD.

Tejashwi is unlikely to break the glass ceiling for himself and the alliance if he campaigns on the traditional secular-communal divide. However, he also cannot adopt a lax attitude on the Muslim question as he must have learned some lessons from Asaduddin Owaisi's All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM), making significant inroads in certain pockets of Bihar. The fragmentation of the Muslim vote and its consolidation in favour of the RJD, ironically, both can prove electorally costly for the party.

Similarly, some believe that the demand for a

caste census can galvanise politics in favour of Mandal parties. While Kumar and Tejashwi met former President Ram Nath Kovind last year to make the demand, and the Bihar government has decided to conduct its caste census, Tejashwi must tread cautiously on this issue as it remains unclear who will benefit electorally from this exercise. The issue can sharpen the dominant vs non-dominant backward caste fault line, again limiting the RJD's possibility to expand its base.

In addition, Mandal parties have been facing another internal challenge. Akhilesh consolidated his grip on the party by sidelining his uncle Shivpal Yadav. Yet, many family members continue to hold the reins of the party. And the situation has given the BJP a powerful campaign platform on nepotism and corruption.

This does not mean that the BJP is bereft of candidates with a family legacy. But the party under Prime Minister Narendra Modi manages to weave a powerful narrative on the poor governance record of the Mandal parties, using the dynastic lens. Tejashwi faces the same challenge of keeping a check on the political ambitions of other members of the Yadav family, especially now that he is part of the ruling coalition.

None of these challenges have straightforward solutions, and Tejashwi will need immense patience and creative energy to break the glass ceiling. Kumar, who can surprise even his closest confidants, can impart many lessons in the art of political management, but Tejashwi will have to grow as a political man on his own.

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The views expressed are personal



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