
Other Backward Class- A Potent Force in Upcoming Bihar Assembly Elections

Bhanu Pratap* and Abhinav Mishra**

**Post Graduate Department of Political Science, H.D. Jain College, Veer Kunwar Singh University, Ara*

***Research Scholar, Department of East Asian Studies, University of Delhi*

ABSTRACT:

The elections in most of the states of India are influenced by caste and class forces and Bihar is no exception in this regard. However, what makes Bihar unique is the role played by the Other Backward Classes in the elections. When the election approaches near the parties contesting the elections in Bihar apply different tactics to woo the different castes belonging to the Other Backward Classes category. This appeasement of Other Backward Classes by the political parties contesting elections in Bihar along with the extra hype given by the media politicizes this class and makes them a potent force in the elections in Bihar. It is within this context that an attempt is made to outline and analyse the role played by Other Backward Classes in upcoming Bihar Assembly elections.

Keywords: Politicization, Mandal Commission, Shudras, Neopolitics, Political Glorification, Grand Alliance, Varna Hierarchy.

Bihar since long has voted on caste and class lines. In the 1990s, under Lalu Yadav's reign it became the order of the day. The Yadav Card along with Congress' support and its Muslim vote bank helped Lalu Yadav and Rabri Devi to "rule" Bihar for more than a decade.

With the 2015 Bihar Assembly Elections knocking on the door, the political parties contesting the elections are on a spree to woo various backward classes like Kushwaha, Kurmis etc. to expand their vote bank. These backward classes collectively known as "Other Backward Class" are in the lime light as they are being appeased by the main parties which are contesting the election i.e. the Grand Alliance consisting of Rashtriya Janata Dal, Janata Dal United and Indian National Congress and their opponent the Bharitya Janata Party which seems all set to register its victory in Bihar assembly elections to move forward its 'Modi Vijay Rath' which had been stalled earlier this year by Arvind Kejriwal in Delhi.

The rustle and tussle between the parties contesting the election for OBC votes has compelled a news website to term it as the 'Mother of All Elections'. The outcome of the election will determine which of the political parties contesting the Bihar assembly elections possesses the greatest ability to attract the votes of the other backward classes. Before going any further in the

discussion, it is important to understand what does the term Other Backward Classes (OBC) signify?

The term Other Backward Classes in contemporary era is used to refer to a group of various castes which have come under the purview of 27% reservation quota as per the recommendation of Mandal commission report 1980. The core of the other backward classes consists of peasant castes of various descriptions. They occupy a low position in the “varna” hierarchy and they have in general been devoid of traditions of literacy.² Further, since they have also lagged behind in the pursuit of western education, they are often poorly represented in government jobs in particular and white-collar occupations in general.³ The expression ‘backward classes’ appeared for the first time in the 1870s in Madras Presidency, a region which witnessed a non-Brahmin movement made up of lower castes except for the untouchables.⁴ To begin with, the British government in Madras had grouped together under the label ‘backward classes’ both Shudra and untouchable castes, swelling their numbers from 39 to 131 between 1870 and 1920.⁵ This classification had no other aim than to identify the groups eligible for positive discrimination.⁶ But the stigma of untouchability decidedly made the depressed classes a separate group, whereas the ‘castes other than depressed classes’, an awkward expression indeed, finally became a separate category in 1925.⁷

When India achieved independence, Nehru gave them a new name, though hardly more satisfactory: ‘other backward classes’, implying classes other than the untouchables and the tribes. But the key word here is ‘classes’: even if he was not the first to use it, Nehru was clearly intending to distance himself from an approach in terms of caste.⁸ The Constituent Assembly did not enter into this debate. It merely included a clause in the basic law, article 340, stipulating that the President was entitled to appoint a commission in charge of identifying the ‘socially and educationally backward classes’ and suggesting measures to improve their condition.⁹ By emphasizing their backwardness in social and educational terms, the Constituent Assembly further complicated the task of those who would have to define the contours of this new social category - ‘OBC’ to use the abbreviation commonly employed in India. It was only after the acceptance of the recommendations of Mandal Commission that the OBCs acquired political substance and became a potent force in the electoral politics of India. Since then the politicization of OBCs has continued ever since only varying in degree and over space.

Some of the political analysts have argued that the millennium era Neopolitics 2.0 was marked by a clear mandate for stability and governance rather than politics for vote banks.¹⁰ According to them, since 2014, Neopolitics 2.0 has assumed greater significance which is evident from the success of Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in Delhi Assembly elections and the victory of BJP in 2014 Lok Sabha elections. They are of the view that BJP had achieved something even more spectacular nationally in 2014, when the saffron party managed to take a 66 per cent quantum leap in vote share across India from its 2009 base of 18.8 per cent. BJP’s biggest gains were in northern and western India, and were probably the most dramatic in the Hindi heartland.¹¹ In fact, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the two original Mandal States with deep rooted caste loyalties, showed a remarkable degree of affinity to Neopolitics 2.0.¹² However, if this is the case, then how will these political analysts explain the race among the political parties in Bihar to woo the OBCs just months before the elections.

By analysing the above mentioned incidents one may be stuck with questions like why are the political parties striving to attract the OBCs, while there lives a considerable number of people belonging to the Scheduled castes and Schedule tribes in Bihar. What are the various ways by which this appeasing of OBCs is taking place in Bihar? Will this phenomenon intensify as the Bihar assembly elections approaches near?

It is in this context an attempt is made in this article to analyse the phenomenon of wooing of OBCs to find out whether they are a potent force in the upcoming Bihar assembly elections or not and how the above mentioned phenomenon of appeasing the OBCs will define the course of the Bihar assembly elections in 2015. But before that it is important to understand why the political parties in Bihar resorted to this sudden appeasement of OBCs on such a massive scale. Bihar has 131 OBCs and 130 odd EBCs, whose members together make up around 65 per cent of the total population of Bihar.¹³ EBCs are a subgroup of OBCs and gain in reservation to government jobs, 17 per cent in a chunk of 27 per cent.¹⁴ Technically called OBCII, this group is also entitled to higher scholarships for its students and reservation of seats in panchayats.¹⁵ Amongst OBCs/EBCs Yadavs are the largest caste constituting around 14% of the total population of Bihar;¹⁶ followed by Kushwahas- 7-8%;¹⁷ Koeris- 6.5% and Kurmis around 5%.¹⁸ So the wooing of OBCs and EBCs by the political parties is natural as they collectively constitute a large chunk of the total population of Bihar.

The present Chief Minister of Bihar himself belongs to Kurmi caste which itself is among the several castes enlisted in the OBC list. He joined hands with Mr. Lalu Yadav to lessen the damage caused by former chief minister Jitan Ram Manjhi. As mentioned above, the Yadavs constitute around 14% of the total population of Bihar, thus the combined vote bank of Kurmis and Yadavs in addition to 16.5% of the Muslim vote of the congress is enough to put a strain on the forehead of the Amit Shah, the master strategist of BJP. Seeing the huge share of OBC/EBC population in the total population of Bihar, Janata Dal United under the leadership of Chief Minister Nitish Kumar has applied a realist strategy to attract the other castes who are demanding OBC/EBC status for their caste by obliging them. For e.g. last year the Bihar cabinet approved the inclusion of a Muslim caste so far among the OBCs, the 'Kullaiya' into the EBC list. Apart from this, 'Giri' a Brahmin sub-caste was moved into the OBC list through a government notification.¹⁹ Bihar has over 25 lakhs Giris mainly in Siwan and Motihari district. Moreover getting in the full poll mode, Mr. Nitish Kumar also announced 50% quota for OBCs/EBCs along with SC and ST in all government contracts upto 15 lakhs.²⁰

The ally turned opponent of JDU, the Bharitya Janata Party is also on a wooing spree. In order to appease the Kushwaha community which constitutes around 7-8% of total population of Bihar; BJP declared Emperor Ashoka to be a Kushwaha.²¹ This sudden reference to historicity is an attempt to legitimise the Kushwahas as a ruling class since ancient times and bring them out of the low social and economic status that they have been looked upon at. It will not be surprising if other political parties make similar claims with similar aims with regards to other castes. BJP has also created an 'OBC Morcha'. While BJP had six morchas including the scheduled castes and scheduled tribe wing, this is the first time in history that a 'OBC Morcha' has been set up.²² The move to set up an 'OBC Morcha' comes ahead of elections in Bihar where Janata Parivar

constituents –Nitish Kumar and Lalu Yadav could hold a sway over a large chunk of OBC votes.²³

There is also a tug of war going on between the Bharitya Janata Party and the constituent parties of the Grand Alliance regarding the political glorification of OBCs/EBCs. For e.g. while addressing the newly created ‘OBC Morcha’ of the Party Amit Shah said that BJP has most MLAs and MPs from the OBC community.²⁴ Shah stated “we have not been in power for long but it is the BJP which has given the maximum number of OBC chief ministers and the first Prime Minister from the community has also come from BJP.²⁵ By saying this Shah was pointing to Mr. Narendra Modi who is said to be from the OBC community. While JDU and RJD have considered Amit Shah’s statement to be baseless, as according to them the first Prime Minister from the OBC community was H.D Deve Gowda from the Janata Parivar.

CONCLUSION

Thus the race to butter up the OBCs and EBCs has heated the scenario of Bihar politics and turned it into a battle ground to secure maximum vote share of the OBC community. The party in power along with the rival parties are applying various strategies to tap the OBCs to increase their vote bank. The contesting parties are doing all they could to secure the vote of this community undermining all their past sayings about the caste and class politics. For e.g. despite Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s call to rise above the agenda of caste and class, the BJP senior officials have attended caste based meetings.²⁶ Thus the OBC vote factor will play a vital role in the upcoming Bihar assembly elections and the party who taps the largest chunk of this class will define the course of Bihar politics in the years to come.

ENDNOTES

1. The term mother of all elections taken from Correspondent, “Bihar Assembly Elections: It’s more than an election”, HardNews, 29 May 2015, <http://www.hardnewsmedia.com/2015/05/6585> (accessed 15 June 2015)
2. Yadav, Nomita. “Other Backward Classes: Then and Now”, Economic And Political WEEKLY, NOVEMBER 2-9, 2002
3. *ibid.*
4. Jaffrelot, Christopher. *The Politics of OBCs*, p.1, <http://www.india-seminar.com/2005/549%20christophe%20jaffrelot.htm> (accessed 10 June 2015)
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*
10. “*Fighting outside the Caste Silos*”, The Hindu, 27 June 2015, <http://thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/a-fight-outside-the-caste-silos/article7358628.ece> (accessed 4 July 2015)
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*

13. Editors, “*In Bihar Caste Rejig, the Backward List Grows Longer*”, Indian Express, 13 March 2014, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/politics/in-bihar-caste-rejig-the-backward-list-grows-longer/> (accessed 10 June 2015)
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. The Data on the percentage share of Yadav has been taken from <http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-election-commission-in-a-spot-bihar-has-601-crore-adults-but-more-than-621-crore-voters-2087320> (accessed 10 June 2015)
17. Kumar, Roshan. “*Chandragupta, now a Kushwaha*”, The Telegraph, 9 December 2014, http://www.telegraphindia.com/11/41210/jsp/fontpage/story_2960.jsp#.VaPLexX4wN (accessed 18 June 2015)
18. The data on Koeri and Kurmi Caste has been taken from <http://www.niticentral.com/2015/01/10/bihar-2015-impending-lalu-nitish-marriage-295812.html> (14 (accessed 24 June 2015)
19. Editors, “*In Bihar Caste Rejig, the Backward List Grows Longer*”, Indian Express, 13 March 2014, <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/politics/in-bihar-caste-rejig-the-backward-list-grows-longer/> (accessed 8 July 2015)
20. Singh, Santosh. “*Nitish Kumar’s poll bonanza for backward classes; 50% quota in Bihar govt contracts*”, Indian Express, 2 July 2015, [Http://indianexpress.com/article/india/politics](http://indianexpress.com/article/india/politics) (11 July 2015)
21. Kumar, N. “*Now King Ashoka Gets a Caste Certificate: The BJP Game in Bihar*”, Catch News, 2 June 2015, <http://www.catchnews.com/politics-news/now-king-ashoka-gets-a-caste-certificate-the-bjp-game-in-bihar-1433246407.html> (accessed 20 June 2015)
22. Correspondent, “*BJP creates OBC morcha ahead of Bihar elections*” Daily News Analysis, 4 July 2015, <http://www.dnaindia.com/india/report-bjp-creates-obc-morcha-ahead-of-bihar-election-2101564> (accessed 8 July 2015)
23. Ibid.
24. Editors, “*After Bihar poll win, Shah says Janata Parivar a damp squib*”, One India, 10 July 2015, <http://www.oneindia.com/india/after-bihar-poll-win-shah-says-janata-parivar-damp-squib-1803150.html> (accessed 12 July 2015)
25. Ibid.
26. Correspondent, “*Bihar Assembly Elections: It’s more than an election*”, HardNews, 29 May 2015, <http://www.hardnewsmedia.com/2015/05/6585> (accessed 15 June 2015)

REFERENCES

- i. Jaffrelot, Christopher. The Politics of OBCs, p.1, <http://www.india-seminar.com/2005/549%20christophe%20jaffrelot.htm> (accessed 10 June 2015)
- ii. Yadav, Nomita. “*Other Backward Classes: Then and Now*”, Economic And Political WEEKLY, NOVEMBER 2-9, 2002

-
- iii. "Fighting outside the Caste Silos", The Hindu, 27 June 2015, <http://thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/a-fight-outside-the-caste-silos/article7358628.ece> (accessed 4 July 2015)
 - iv. Galanter, Marc. "Who are the Other Backward Class? An Introduction To a Constitutional Puzzle", Economic And Political Weekly, Special Article, October 28 1978
 - v. Yadav, Mahohar Lal "The Battle of Bihar", Patna Daily, 1 April 2015, <http://patnadaily.com/index.php/readers-write/10580-the-battle-of-bihar.html> (accessed 20 June 2015)
 - vi. Gupta, Dipankar. "The Caste Bogey in Election Analysis", The Hindu, 21 March 2014, <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-caste-bogey-in-election-analysis/article5811003.ece> (accessed 22 June 2015)
 - vii. "After Bihar poll win, Shah says Janata Parivar a damp squib", One India, 10 July 2015, <http://www.oneindia.com/india/after-bihar-poll-win-shah-says-janata-parivar-damp-squib-1803150.html> (accessed 12 July 2015)