



Analysis of the Legislative Assembly Elections in Bihar, India

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RECAST(E)ING 'MODITVA' IN BIHAR?¹

One would assume that legislative assembly elections in one of India's poorest state, Bihar cannot pose a challenge for the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA), which won a landslide last May, acquiring 336 out of the 543 seats of the Lok Sabha, the Lower House of the Indian Parliament.

However, Prime Minister Narendra Modi's development mantra and personal charisma did not seem to be convincing enough for the state's predominantly Other Backward Classes (OBCs), [Extremely Backward Classes](#) (EBCs), and Muslim vote bank. Held between 12 October and 5 November 2015, the Bihar assembly elections resulted in the victory of the incumbent Chief Minister (CM) Nitish Kumar-led 'Grand Alliance' by winning the majority with 178 seats out of 243. In contrast, Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies got only 58, while the Left Front, led by Sitaram Yechuri's Communist Party of India (CPI (M)) won only 3 seats.

For some, this defeat undeniably signals that "[Modi's appeal to voters has begun to wane](#)", but I argue that instead of declaring the BJP's significant loss and defeat, rather state-specific considerations should be highlighted, which the BJP could not account for this time. Nevertheless, it should be also highlighted that, while 'Moditva' could unify a significant proportion of the nation last year at the general elections, the BJP remained the preferred choice mainly for the upper (caste)-middle classes. This has proven to be especially problematic [in Bihar with 88.71 per cent of the population residing in rural areas](#). Eventually, caste-based politics could not be won over by promises of development and right-wing ideologies, but the *bahujans*, i.e. the majority remained supportive of their own leaders from their own *jati*.²

Before examining how the BJP's setback in Bihar can have an effect on the ruling party in terms of the forthcoming legislative assembly elections in India, an overview of the state's socio-economic characteristics is necessary.

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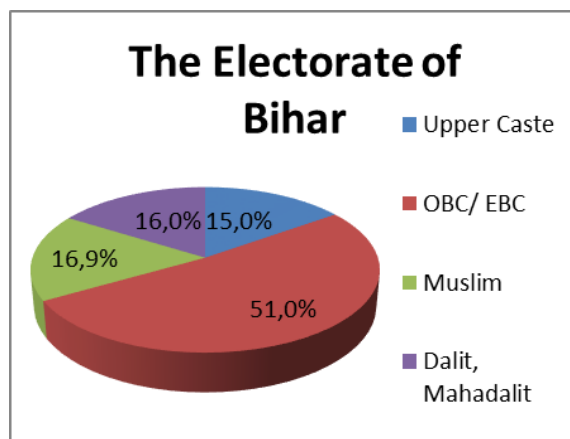
- 1 The word '[Moditva](#)' is "combined from the name of Narendra Modi and Hindutva. The concept of Hindutva was coined by Savarkar's pamphlet *Hindutva: Who Is a Hindu?* in 1923. Originating from the north-western Indian state of Maharashtra and established in response to the pan-Islamic Khilafat movement, its description of the Hindu Rashtra/nation entails territory, religion, language and race, arguing that as the largest and oldest community, Hindus embody the nation."
- 2 "The caste system, as it actually works in India is called [jati](#). The term *jati* appears in almost all Indian languages and is related to the idea of lineage or kinship group."

VOTE BANKS AND 'CASTE CARDS'

With a population over 103.8 million and a literacy rate of [73 and 53 per cent](#) for males and females respectively, the case of Bihar provides an interesting example. The state's lopsided development is reflected in its double-digit growth between 2005–2014 in [industry](#) (13.25 per cent) and services (11.17 per cent) amid [higher than average poverty rates](#) (33.74 per cent), and the worst ranking in terms of [economic freedom](#) among the big Indian states.

This imbalanced economic and human development, however, can to some extent be explained by the state's social – class and caste – structure. This has turned Bihar into a place of harsh political contestation in order to gain the support of the lower sections of society, also shown in the recent legislative assembly campaigns.

[Figure 1](#)
[The Electorate of Bihar](#)



As shown in Figure 1, the electorate of Bihar is mainly comprised of the *bahujans*, thus the OBCs, the EBCs, Dalits, Mahadalits, the mostly deprived, and also 'minorities'.³

On the one hand, politics of Bihar has been characterised by continuity and stability, meaning uninterrupted rule by a single charismatic leader. Previously, for 15 years it has been Lalu Prasad Yadav, supported by a joint Muslim–Yadav electorate,

3 "[Bahujan](#) – the majority of the people, the backward classes, comprising of dalits [15%], backward castes [52%], tribals [7.5%] and minorities [10.5%]. These groups account for 85% of the population, however, in politics, army, trade and high governmental jobs their proportion remained around 10%. The BSP, Lalu Prasad's Rashtriya Janata Dal [RJD] and the Samajwadi Party [SP] are their main proponents." Bihar's upper-caste communities consist of Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Bhoonihars and Kayasthas.



while for the last 10 years Bihar's name has been made equal with that of its Chief Minister, Nitish Kumar. On the other hand, the general elections in 2014 brought about widespread support for the BJP-led NDA coalition, which eventually won 16 seats in the Lok Sabha. Thus, it seemed that the NDA had thereby significantly overtaken Lalu Prasad Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD), but also Nitish's Janata Dal (United) (JD(U)). It is important to highlight that after a 17-year-long alliance the JD(U) broke off from the BJP in 2013, allegedly on the grounds of disapproving Modi's candidature because of the [2002 massacre and communal riots](#).

In connection to this, many claimed that the JD(U) made a wrong decision and gave way to the BJP in its endeavour to attain majority seats in the Rajya Sabha, the Upper House of the Parliament as well. However, in my view the Chief Minister's turn has proven to be part of a well-outlined strategy to strengthen his own party's power, separate from a national party, in order to portray it more convincing for the state's electorate.

Figure 2
[Bihar General Elections 2014](#)

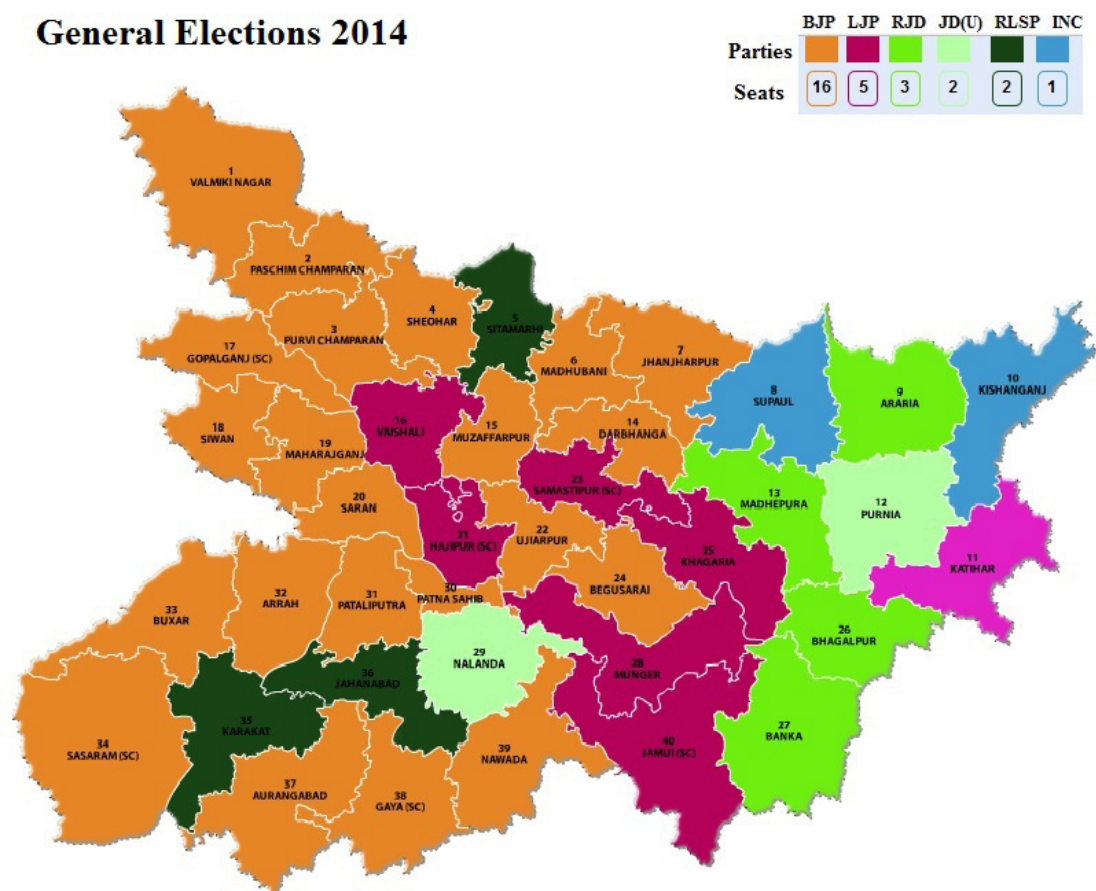
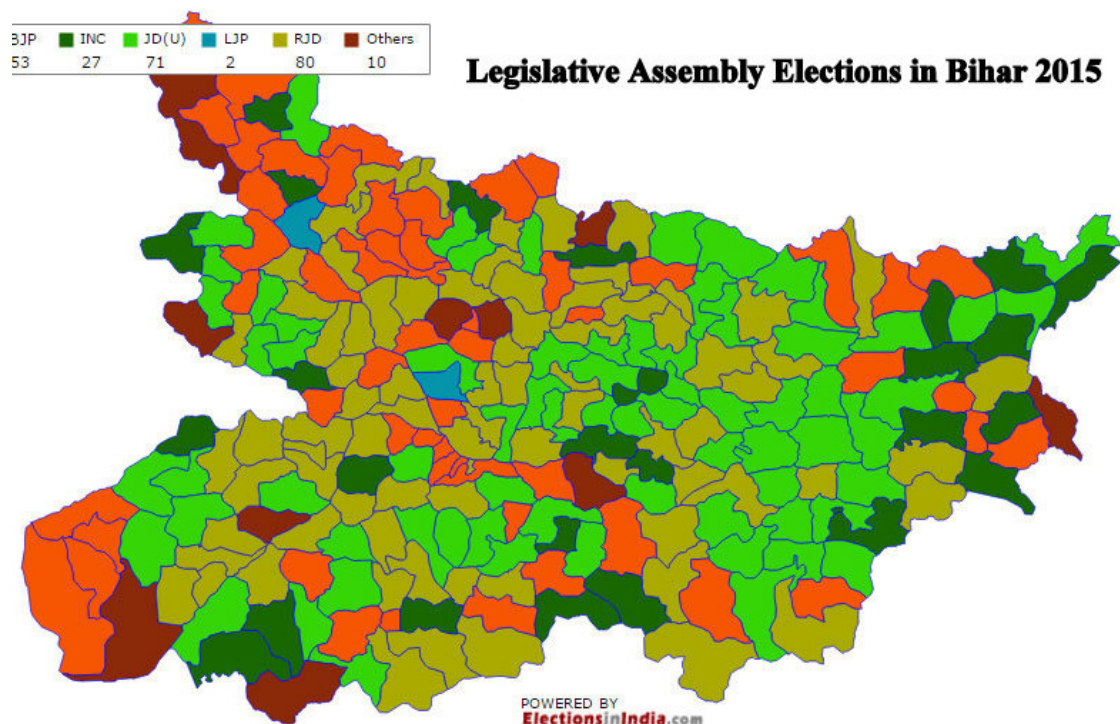


Figure 3
Bihar Elections 2015. [Constituency Map](#)



The above two constituency maps show the areas, in which the BJP and the JD(U) had won during the general elections and the recent legislative assembly elections in Bihar. These maps imply that within one year Bihar's overwhelming support for the BJP and its ally, the socialist-populist Lok Janshakti Party (LJP),⁴ gave way to a renewed trust in Nitish Kumar and Lalu Yadav. However, I argue that this does not necessarily mean a significant loss or change either for the JD(U) or the BJP, but only signals different considerations behind the general and the state elections, with caste-preferences weighing more in the latter.

If we look at the assembly election results of 2010 in Bihar with the JD(U)–BJP–RJD [winning 115–91–22 seats respectively](#), proportionally there have been no significant differences with regard to the JD(U) or the BJP over time. Concerning the RJD, we can nevertheless speak about Lalu's comeback with the number of seats rising significantly from 22 in 2010 to 80 in 2015. In line with this, the INC's success has to be mentioned as well: it won 27 seats recently compared to 4 in 2010. However, when it comes to a national–regional party divide, again looking at it proportionally, there has been no significant change. From a 39 per cent national (BJP; INC) and 61 per cent regional/state party representation in 2010, the recent results can be translated into a 33 to 67 per cent party representation, signalling no major breakthrough or shift.

4 The LJP was part of the BJP-led NDA both during the general elections and the legislative assembly elections.



[Table 1](#)
[Bihar Election Results](#)

Party	Seats won
RJD	80
JD(U)	71
INC	27
BJP	53
BJP allies	5

Nonetheless, a preference towards the *Grand Alliance's* regional parties (JD[U] and RJD) at the assembly elections can be explained as follows. Favouring a strong leader as Prime Minister from a national party to serve the interest of the country seems sensible. However, at regional and state level it is predominantly a community/caste-, and network-based choice for a state-leader to gain quick benefits. In this regard, it is also important to highlight that "when Narendra Modi was Gujarat CM, Shivraj Singh Chouhan was Madhya Pradesh CM, Raman Singh was Chhattisgarh CM and Navin Patnaik was Odisha CM, all of them won their state elections on their individual popularity, even though [their parties had mixed results](#) in the Lok Sabha polls".

Besides significantly disregarding this aspect on the BJP's side, the *Grand Alliance's* propaganda has been also successfully built around what Lalu Prasad Yadav has termed "[a contest between forwards and backwards](#)". As part of this, the Hindu nationalist volunteer organisation Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh's (RSS) chief Mohan Bhagwat's remark on the reconsideration of caste-based reservations sparked the age-old debate between the upper and the lower castes about merit-, or social status-based quotas. Reminding the Bihari people of the Hindu nationalists' stance on this has undeniably come at a detriment of the BJP in a state where Indians "[do not cast their vote, but vote their caste](#)". Being well aware of this, Nitish Kumar's alliance with Lalu Prasad Yadav and also Rahul Gandhi's Indian National Congress (INC) resulted in the formation of the *Mahagathbandhan* [Grand Alliance]. This JD(U)–RJD–INC alliance eventually guaranteed the widest possible electorate outreach and secured [Bihar's 'Development Man's](#) third term as Chief Minister.

Within the above ideological framework, after breaking off from the BJP and aligning with Lalu Prasad, Nitish Kumar made all the necessary efforts and enacted laws to win the hearts and minds of Bihar's electorate. To secure his Muslim and Yadav vote bank, besides his alliance with Lalu, Nitish's government decided on [grants-in-aid to 609 more madrasas](#) across Bihar, predominantly in INC, RJD, and JD(U) areas, thus among others in Araria, Katihar, Banka, Surpaul, and Kishanganj. Moreover, bearing in mind that the BJP-led coalition also aimed at reaching out to the EBCs, who [comprise about 30 per cent of the state](#), Nitish's government included the Teli (oil-presser caste) among the Extremely Backward Classes. Interestingly,

their inclusion had already come up in 2009, but [the Coordination Committee had opposed it](#) during the same government's tenure back at that time on the grounds of the community's influential socio-economic and educational status. This move is significant, considering that the Telis have been traditionally BJP-voters. Besides the Teli, Badai and Dangi castes have also been rescheduled from the OBC' to the EBC's list, while the Tanti, Nishad and Nonia have been [included into the Scheduled Castes'/Scheduled Tribes' list](#).

Eventually, the secular-labelled JD(U)–RJD–INC alliance could successfully unite their vote banks and bring together Yadavs (14 per cent), Kurmis (4 per cent), Mahadalits, Muslims, the EBCs and OBCs (such as Koeris; 5 per cent). Furthermore, besides relying on its traditionally *bahujan* vote bank and '*neech rajneeti*' [low level politics], Nitish Kumar's alliance aimed at also luring upper-caste voters away from the BJP by issuing caste certificates. As part of this, children from upper-caste Hindu and Muslim families, whose annual income does not exceed 1.5 *lakh* (meaning one thousand) rupees became entitled to a 10,000-rupee-worth scholarship, if they pass the matriculation in first class. Utilising on the [BJP's merit-based argument](#), [Nitish had also extended stipends](#) for [upper-caste children](#) from Class I–X.

While all parties tried to do their utmost to expand their vote bank, external influence has also come as a setback to Modi's BJP and as an indirect help to the *Grand Alliance*. Bearing in mind the forthcoming assembly elections in Uttar Pradesh (UP) in 2017, and being a significant leader whose words carry significant weight for Dalits, Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) chief Kumari Mayawati has played the card into the hands of Nitish and Lalu. Recalling the recent [Dadri incident](#) in UP,⁵ the notion of 'Hindu Rashtra' [Hindu nation] by the BJP and its polarising affiliate organisations, she forecasted an unfavourable destiny for UP in the aftermath of a potential BJP victory in Bihar and therefore called on the *bahujans* to cast their votes carefully.⁶

As a result of this, the *Mahagathbandhan* could [outmanoeuvre the BJP's alliance](#) with Ram Vilas Paswan and Jitan Ram Manjhi⁷ and [beat their Dalit–Upper caste–EBC](#) ("D-U-E") strategy. Interestingly, references to the detrimental effects of a revised Land Bill on farmers with the possibility to delete the consent clause for land acquisitions have undeniably come at hand to CM Nitish Kumar, while Modi failed to play the 'Gujarati development' and 'Hindutva' cards to attract enough supporters.

5 During the campaign, a tense debate emerged around the sanctity of the cow leading to atrocities all over India and causing [the death of Mohammed Akhlaq](#), who was beaten to death on 28 September for allegedly consuming beef at home. Such incidents in other states and union territories, along with the recent election campaigns in Bihar also made the Election Commission to invoke its powers under Article 324 of the Indian Constitution to put an end to inflammatory advertisements, also in Bihar. Prominent artists, writers, like [Arundhati Roy](#) have also given back their awards in protest against intolerance and extremism in India.

6 This could also be the reason why the INC could also win significantly more seats this time compared to the 2010 assembly elections.

7 The BJP also wanted to attract some Yadav votes through [Ramkripal Yadav](#), former aide to Lalu and currently Minister of Drinking Water and Sanitation under the BJP's aegis, and BJP leader Nand Kishor Yadav in their coalition.



Considering the internal and external factors in the election results of Bihar, the forthcoming legislative assembly elections in 2016 in West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Puducherry, Assam, and in 2017 in Uttar Pradesh might prove to be challenging for the ruling NDA-government. These will necessitate reconsideration of the [BJP's state-wise strategies](#) to acquire majority in the Rajya Sabha as well.

WHITHER BJP MAJORITY IN THE RAJYA SABHA?

Overall, as the election results have shown, references to the 'Gujarat model' and the successfully used 'development and unity' agenda over playing the 'caste card' did not work in Bihar. In this state, ideologies of the right wing failed to significantly address the needs of the state's predominantly rural, poor, caste-based communities amid the crucial question and status quo of reservations and quotas.

Political alliances being always fragile and political U-turns being in sight as an option at every election, the recent setback of the BJP should propel its leaders to revise the party's state-wise strategy. As has also been highlighted by Prashant Jha among others, the BJP's failure can partly be explained by the continuity of Modi's 'one-man-show', and the lack of charismatic leaders in the BJP, who could, or would be allowed to secure Modi's power regionally. A revised strategy could either lead to a more assertive domestic policy with the help of the RSS, or to a formation of ad-hoc 'rainbow alliances' as for example the case of Bangaru Laxman had shown. While ruptures might become clearer with a more assertive value-, and ideology-based disequilibrium within the Sangh Parivar, which comprises of right-wing organisations, the BJP should be careful in its rhetoric in order to maintain and over time expand its support base.

The Aam Aadmi Party's victory in Delhi and the recent election results in Bihar could therefore propel the BJP's leadership to revise their strategy in order to balance regional party leaders, who are favoured as an alternative to both the BJP and the INC at state elections. While the elections in Maharashtra were a success for the BJP in 2014, besides Bihar, Modi has to face tough leaders in the forthcoming legislative assembly elections. West Bengal's Didi, Mamata Banerjee, Tamil Nadu's Jayalalithaa, or Uttar Pradesh's Chief Minister, Akhilesh Yadav, all have a stronghold in their respective states. Modi's plan undeniably aims at gaining majority seats in the Upper House to realise quick industrialisation projects and facilitate land acquisitions in a smoother way. As a result, the central government's strategy makes the people rather cautious than supportive for a party, which would be able to push through its will without challenge. Together with the growing concern among farmers with regard to the Land Acquisition Bill's revisions, people – especially in states with a significant rural population – are more willing to cast their votes in favour of regional parties in the hope of them being more attentive to their problems and being able to quickly deliver more.

CONCLUSION

Overall, while the BJP's significant power decline cannot be declared after its setback in Bihar, the recent election results should undeniably make the central government more cautious and attentive to particular states' needs.

The BJP's election propaganda has failed in this regard by neglecting the socio-economic characteristics of Bihar, being inconsiderate of the *bahujans'* sensitivity to reservations, and being overconfident after last years' Lok Sabha elections. Eventually, as a strong regional leader and Chief Minister, Nitish Kumar was granted another five-year-long term because he played the right cards at the right time – such as including particular castes on the EBCs' or SC/ST's lists, and also giving concessions to poor, upper-caste families. In this sense, 'Moditva' has been recast and reshaped under the aegis of Nitish Kumar's alliance both on caste-, and development bases. Therefore, by delivering to its people and forging alliances with Lalu Prasad Yadav, he could eventually gain the necessary number of votes. For the BJP, it was too much of a reliance on Modi's personal charisma and the same, national strategy, which was not enough at the state level.

Thus, charismatic and caste-based leadership significantly matters at state elections, as cunningly played out by Nitish Kumar upon the advice of Narendra Modi's 'Lok Sabha campaign-designer', [Prashant Kishor](#) with the 'Bihari–Bahari' ('Bihari–outsider') CM–PM differentiation. Therefore, while trust can be placed upon a 'Bahari' to lead the country, local issues require the attention of someone, who delivers at the right place and the right time, and also bears the support of the majority community of the state.