

INDIAN PARTY SYSTEM DURING COALITION AT FEDERAL/ STATE LEVEL: BIHAR

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Abstract

The nature of party system in the federal units of India/ states have kept evolving with the changing times and circumstances. The parliamentary democracy within the framework of federalism has its own socio-economic and socio-Political implications which are intertwined. Therefore, changes within the political system at the macro/ micro level are generally, if not necessarily, reflected at the micro/ macro levels as well. This is evident in the nature of political competition in Indian party system as well. The sudden blow to the Indian National Congress and the predominant party system at the state level which began in 1960s ultimately led to coalition politics at the national level. The researcher has tried to understand and explain this phenomenon during the era of coalition in the context of Bihar.

Key words: Party System, Parliamentary Democracy, Federal, Competition, Coalition.

Historically speaking the competitive politics/ party system of Bihar began its journey in independent India with Congress System/ Predominant System which ensured organisational cover of political representation to almost every socio- cultural identities. However, social stratification was clearly visible in the organisational structure as upper castes were at the helm of political power/ dominance which implicitly allowed them to articulate and appropriate the benefits of political system. The gradual deepening of the democratic traditions within the political community at large led to awakening among the socially and politically deprived communities about their potential for larger political share in the realm of power. This pan India awareness , particularly among the socially backward and deprived identities started asserting themselves which led to cracks in the hegemonic dominance of Indian National Congress particularly at the state level since 1960s. The politicization of the caste in general and the numerically strong OBC, Dalits and disadvantaged sections began to reshape the political system through polarization under the neo-political outfits which gradually not only became the principal competitors of political space within the state but also pushed the INC at the margin. Supporting the causal analysis of identity bases resurgence in Bihar it was argued that ‘ the political mobilization’ of these castes within the upper caste dominated congress party and the resistance by the upper cast virtually created ‘ forward-backward axis’ for power struggle. (Francine Frankel, 1989, ‘ Caste, Land and Dominance in Bihar’ in F. Frankel and MSA Rao (eds) , Dominance and State Power in Modern India: Decline of a Social Order, O.U.P, N. Delhi, pp 46-132; also, Christophe Jaffrelot, India’s Silent Revolution: The Rise of The Lower Castes in North India, London, C. Hurst & Co., 2003, as quoted by Sajay Kumar and Rakesh Ranjan in

Bihar: Development Finally Arrived, Party Competition in Indian States, Palshikar, Suri, Yadav(eds), p 262). In the era of coalition politics which engulfed the Indian political system since 1990s the socio-political dynamics of party system in Bihar could not remain insulated. Thus, the researchers have found that the political manifestations since 1990s are to be located in the realm of reassertion and reaffirmation of primordial social cleavages of caste hierarchy as the most convenient tool to grab political power through legitimate instrumentalities of electoral competition. Explaining the inbuilt relationship between social reality and political competition scholars are of the opinion that post congress party competition is generally characterized by the politics of reassertion and reaffirmation of societal stratification on the basis of ascribed status/cast cleavages. In fact the patterns and trends of party politics in the 1990s would suggest that the demos have been galvanized/polarized on the cast lines as ideological and non-parochial issues concerning the people at large have taken the back seat which was clearly reflected in low intensity priority to good governance, better material conditions of the people, uniform and universal provisions of basic amenities and a healthy and universal access to health and educational infrastructures. (Sanjay Kumar, S. Alam, and D.Joshi, Caste Dynamics and Political Process in Bihar, Journal of Indian School of Political Economy, 2008, 20(1&2), pp 1-32).

In the contextual location of the party system of Bihar and its impact on national politics the perusal of electoral politics indicates that Bihar has entered the phase of multi party system with political tug of war between two major political parties/alliances led by RJD and JDU which are led by Lalu Prasad and Nitish Kumar respectively. Moreover, the tag of cast/identity oriented party politics has started giving way to emerging language of politics that is development and good governance. It was clearly reflected in the general election of 2009 followed by assembly election in 2010 as the incumbent political alliance/coalition of JD(U) and BJP not only established their preponderance in general election against the usual norm of anti incumbency but also in the assembly in terms of both seat as well as vote share both. The abysmally poor performance by the RJD-LJP alliance as well as the INC in the 2009 Lok Sabha and 2010 Assembly elections did change the academic narrative about Bihar politics from ‘ caste to development’. (Sanjay Kumar, Rkesh Ranjan, Party Competition in Indian States, Palshikar, Suri, Yadav (eds) OUP, 2014,2014,pp 263-64). In other words the tone and tenor of politics in Bihar has certainly started giving due importance to modern idioms of performance as well rather than depending on caste variable alone. Had it not been so the 50% of total voters belonging to Dalits, Yadavs and Muslims could have easily ensured fairly good performance for Lalu-Paswan alliance. In fact had it been singular and exceptional political/electoral outcome in favour of JD(U) –BJP then one could have outright dismissed the above argument but the fact remains that successive win of this alliance/coalition over RJD-LJP clearly indicate that governance/performance has come to play in critical role in Bihar. “The caste arithmetic of political parties and alliance could not stand the strong wind of development blowing across the state, which wiped out even the regional differences.” (ibid, 2014, p 265). As per the surveys conducted during the elections for assessing people’s level of satisfaction with the state

government it can be easily concluded that pro-development governance did play important role in ‘ engineering the shift’ among the voters from diverse social communities which ultimately led to defiance of so called ‘ monster of anti-incumbency’(ibid 269).

Notwithstanding the critical component of development/performance one should not rule out completely the role of caste/identity in the successive positive political festivities for the JD(U)-BJP combine. In fact certain decisions of the government not only sub-divided the cast structure but sent a political signal of real champion of social justice. The decision/ policy of creating a sub- category of Mahadalit and extending the benefits of OBC reservation to numerically strong Pasmada Muslims did ensure a very significant social engineering which paid rich political dividends to the ruling political combine in the electoral politics of Bihar as it broke the social base of opponent. Political analysts tried to explain this political master stroke in terms of a successful attempt not only to discredit the political opponents in general and RJD in particular but to grab altogether their plank of social justice. In fact such policy initiatives with clear cut political orientation turned out to be a camouflage in the name of development. Thus at the macro level of policy initiatives it appeared as nothing but one of the critical components of developmental issues but in real terms it was intended to realign/micro-manage social engineering in favour of the ruling alliance in general and JD(U) in particular.(ibid,p 271).

Though the ongoing ruling alliance is gaining strength in a multi-party situation of Bihar but one should not overlook the fact that BJP despite being a national party leading the NDA at national level has been trying to remove the tag of a junior partner of JD (U) by consistently improving its socio-political base which is reflected in the rising graph of its share in terms of vote as well as seat. In other words ever since forging the alliance in 2000 it has been marching ahead from a junior partner to probable equal, if not senior, partner of the alliance which was palpable during seat sharing squabble between the allies in the pre-election developments of 2010 assembly elections. This intra-alliance competitiveness for gaining more space in the political arena of power politics no doubt keeps threatening the tenure of coalition and change of political partners. However, despite political sea-saw among the ruling coalition’s the fact remains that era of predominance of Indian National Congress appears to be completely over and the coalition is there to stay until the verdict goes in favour of a political party.

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