

A Dynasty Returns to Rule Bihar

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With the resounding defeat of NDA in Bihar elections, the outraged feelings of secular liberals of our country have at last been assuaged. The talk of growing intolerance has disappeared almost overnight, and no more awards are being returned by the eminent recipients of various national awards. Just as the motor-mouths in BPJ have stopped issuing daily vitriolic statements condemning the slaughterers of *gau-mata* and their perceived sympathisers, the fervor of others in a matching tit-for-tat demonstration of the consumption of her meat in public also seems to have evaporated, reminding one of the *Rubaiyat-I-Omar-Khayyam*, 'I came like water and like wind I go.' We all can now breathe a great sigh of relief – India is no longer intolerant and communal. It has again become a benevolent, vibrant and secular democracy as it has always been. As Mr. Jay Panda, an MP from Odisha, wrote, perceptions do matter and it was no coincidence that the narrative of rising intolerance always seemed to peak around the elections, steered mostly by the non-vernacular media that is a safe sanctuary for our elites and liberals, despite the fact that on an average, two communal incidents had occurred per day during 2011-13 before NDA had come to power.

Intolerance is perhaps embedded in Indian psyche since the beginning of time - what was the caste system but intolerance against humanity itself, against the very notion that all men are born equal? Many commentators had pointed out that one had never heard of so much talk about intolerance during the countless communal riots that had happened in this country since independence, during Sikh riots in 1984, Babri Masjid in 1992 or Godhra and Gujrat in 2002, even if we ignore the imposition of Emergency of 1977, and all that had followed in its wake including the compulsory sterilisation of Muslims, as a temporary aberration. No awardees had returned their national awards and the TV channels – few though they were then – never aired endless debates about the danger posed by rising intolerance. We can probably rest assured and comforted that till the time the next elections come up in Assam, West Bengal, Kerala and Tamil Nadu in the next year, and in UP in 2017, not much will be heard about intolerance, consumption of beef, or increasing communalisation of our socio-cultural fabric. Perhaps there will be no more return of awards too. Bihar elections have restored the equilibrium in our democracy that were seriously under threat of being sabotaged, but the saboteurs have now been silenced and India can rejoice in the wisdom Bihar has so convincingly exercised.

It is well-known that among all land vertebrates, ostrich has the largest eye. Its eyes are, in fact, bigger than its brain; they provide fantastic eyesight but the undersized brain does not necessarily facilitate good judgment. Ostriches bury their heads in sand when scared to see something they do not want to see. No wonder many of our political leaders astoundingly exhibit some of these remarkable traits, and so do

¹ Author is a commentator. Opinions expressed are strictly personal.

many of our liberal secular intellectuals, including the wise men and women who frequently grace our adored TV channels that propagate the truth and nothing but the truth on a 24X7 footing. While they will seize every opportunity to denigrate the Congress leadership and its dynastic roots in the hoarsest of voices, they did not raise even a dim cacophony when Mr. Lalu Prasad Yadav hoisted two of his sons- both first-time MLAs - to preside over the fate of the people of Bihar for the next five years: one, a 26 year-old school-dropout, as the Deputy Chief Minister, putting him in charge of some crucial portfolios and the other, an intermediate-pass 27-year old lad, as a Cabinet Minister with three important portfolios. People cannot miss uncanny similarities in circumstances, when he had to hoist his wife Rabri Devi on the throne of Bihar in 1997, being under intense pressure to quit in the aftermath of the fodder scam. Both his sons, like his wife, are absolute greenhorns with little experience of politics, governance, administration or statecraft.

Lalu was the real emperor behind the throne then, and remained the undisputed controller of the destiny of Bihar for one and half decades, even though he was not on the throne for half the time. Assuredly, he will become so even now, despite being unable to contest any election due to his conviction and sentencing in the fodder scam cases. In addition to the crucial portfolios of roads and building construction, Tejaswi has been given the portfolios of welfare of other backward castes and extreme backward castes. Tej Pratap has been entrusted with the crucial portfolios of health, minor irrigation and environment and forests. Together, these six ministries accounted for Rs 18000 crore of expenditure out of total Rs 132593 crore in the revised estimates of 2014-15 for Bihar. Lalu's two sons will now command ministries which make up about 15 percent of the budget of Bihar, for augmenting the resources of which Mr. Nitish Kumar has steadfastly been demanding the special category status for the state.

With Mr. Abdul Bari Siddiqui, also from RJD, getting the important finance portfolio, although without the plum part dealing with commercial taxes, which goes to Bijendra Pasad Yadav of JD(U), Lalu will be the real controller of Bihar's purses. He will become the undisputed commander of Bihar's caste-infested political landscape too. Both the parties have got 12 ministries each, with the collateral beneficiary Congress getting the remaining five including the important portfolios of education and animal husbandry, but RJD has now succeeded in bagging the additional important portfolios of transport, cooperatives, labour, tourism, mining, disaster management and department of youth, art and culture, apart from the ministry of minority welfare.

Minorities, OBCs and EBCs are of vital political importance to RJD for expanding and consolidating its base in the state. This will clearly go against the long term interests of JD (U) which has managed to keep only the Department for Welfare of SCs and STs with it. That Lalu's nominees are in charge of all ministries and departments dealing with the the interests of minorities, OBCs and EBCs, is not a mere coincidence, given their importance in a state where elections are by and large still determined by caste equations. Any overenthusiasm displayed by either party in respect of minority welfare is likely to bring the two allies into direct conflicts of interests. One can expect there will be close competition in expanding the distribution of doles to SCs/ STs and other minorities/ OBCs/ EBCs by the two ministries represented by these two parties, once bitter foes but now tied together in a unique marriage of convenience. The ministries allotted to RJD together account for about 20 percent of the total expenditure budget of the Bihar government, but with finance ministry safely secured, Lalu will firmly be in the saddle, reigning the

finances in and out as he desired, dispensing favour and disfavor as he liked. Apparently to allay the fears of return of the Jungle Raj which had prevailed under the previous Lalu-Rabri dispensation, Mr. Nitish Kumar has kept the home portfolio with himself, and for good reasons- to ward off Lalu's influence in deciding the transfers and postings of police personnel to manipulate the law and order machinery. But there should be no doubt as to who the real mover and shaker behind the Government is.

The equations between the two parties were made abundantly clear during the oath taking ceremony itself; after Nitish Kumar, the next JD(U) member to take oath was Bijendra Prasad Yadav at number five, after the two sons of Lalu and Mr Siddiqui. It was not only flaunting the superior numerical strength of Lalu's 80 against Nitish's 71, but also a reminder of the coming of age of 'Yadav Raj'- every fourth member in the newly elected Bihar assembly is now a Yadav. As the Patna edition of a national daily came out with the headlines, "In Lalu Raj, Nitish wears crown with RJD thorns." The thorn is likely to be more than a mere irritant in the days to come.

The fight back and subsequent rise of Mr Lalu Prasad Yadav has been nothing short of a miracle. Like a proverbial phoenix, he has risen from the ashes and his persona now looms larger than life over the political horizons of Bihar. But his figure will from now on be flanked by his sons too, who have been initiated into politics without any education, experience or training. Of course they are not the first of their kinds, and certainly not the last in the strange political culture practiced in this country.

In a democracy, one does not question the wisdom and prudence of people's choice. It needs no reminding that it was absolute 'Upper Caste Raj' in Bihar before Lalu had taken over in 1989, and that 'Jungle Raj' under Lalu was, in a way, a retribution for the unspeakable atrocities inflicted by the Upper Caste Raj on the lower castes and Dalits. If Biharis have now decided again to be ruled by Bihar's first family and voted with their castes, they must have good reasons for that.

There are few ways of entering politics in India: through family, through money and muscle-power and through hard working from the grassroots. As Patrick French had shown, as many as 156 MPs in the 15th Lok Sabha were hereditary MPs, who came to politics only by virtue of their families. Bihar's destiny is inseparable from India's, and may the Great Dispenser of India's Destiny install more such dynasties to redefine democracy, *a-la* Indian style. May our secular and liberal thinkers wallow in the glory of our dynastic democracy and live barricaded lives in intellectual hallucination pontificating before the TVs.