

Caste Calculation in the Politics of Bihar

Dr. Ambrish Gautam*

Assistant Professor, Centre for Sociological Studies, School of Social Sciences and Policy, Central University of South Bihar, Gaya Campus, India

***Corresponding author**

Dr. Ambrish Gautam

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Abstract: Is the caste an important factor in Bihar elections? Aur it is synonymous for all. It is a difficult question that can be asked. But very easy to answer that these things happen in every body life. (Hum betiour vote apni hi jatikodetehain) We give daughter and vote to our own caste. It means vote could not be separated from the caste in Bihar. Each and every step that has been taken according to the caste feature, role, numbers etc played significant role in the 2015 Bihar Assembly elections.

Keywords: DNA, RSS, JDU, BJP, RJD, OBC, SC, YADAV, JAT, GUJJAR, AHIR.

“If I go with the RJD, the upper castes won’t vote for me. If I go with the BJP, the Muslims won’t vote for me. So it is better to be independent and be good to everyone. I have to save my politics.”

(A mukhiya candidate from sagarpur village of Madhubani District) Prashant Jha Hindustan Times oct 22 2015

INTRODUCTION

The strength of the total electorate in Bihar 2015 assembly election was 66826658 which include 35646870 male, 31177619 female and 2169 third gender [1]. Though the electorate may be classified on the basis of caste, religion, class etc, caste consideration are of prime importance. The forward caste means Brahmins, Bhumihars, Rajputs and Kayastha.

Land and other resources such as official position, literacy, better economic conditions and social respect have been the privilege of these castes which accounts for the political dominance of these castes. But now the situation has begun to change and these castes are being gradually eclipsed politically. However they still retain a political significance disproportionate to their numerical strength.

Of course it was aware of the formidable social combination stitched together in 2015 assembly elections by Lalu, Nitish and the Congress and had worked out its own social arithmetic with Ram Vilas Paswan, Jitan Ram Manjhi and Upendra Kushwaha. Bihar looked set for an epic political battle, one that would ask important questions of those in the fray: would Modi retain his old magic, would the public accept Nitish with Lalu, would it be a battle of “my development versus your development” or would caste be at work in Bihar that which up to now had always voted by caste.

2015 assembly election was basically fought on the basis of caste combination in Bihar. That has been started with the speech of PM Narendra Modi,

One slip of tongue from PM Modi — that there was something wrong with the DNA of Nitish — gave Nitish his first major opening. Even though the PM corrected it to “loktantrake DNA me gadbadi” [2], Nitish linked it to Bihar pride and played it up in his speeches. Secondly PM Modi has announced 1.25 lakh crore special package for Bihar, Nitish kept countering data with data, calling BJP’s data “fudged” and unleashing his own. It was development politics at its best. Modi kept his bureaucrats and data team busy through August and early September to counter Nitish’ data and provide ammunition for his posers. Nitish meticulously worked out how Rs 1.08 lakh cr of the Rs 1.25 lakh cr special package was compilation of old and unrealized projects. He came out with his own seven resolutions for Bihar saying the state could take care of itself. There were jibes and counter jibes on the federal structure. Nitish looked better prepared with data than the PM.

Meanwhile, Lalu Prasad had been struggling with an agenda for his speeches. The best that he could do was to demand that the Centre release caste census data — but development politics maintained the upper hand [3].

In another development, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat's statement on the need to review the reservation policy changed the course and the template of the election: it went from a development-focussed election to a caste election [4]. Modi's absence from Bihar for a month, his belated clarification on Bhagwat's remarks, the Dadri incident and the 'meat' controversy gave Nitish and Lalu the openings they had looked for. Now they proclaimed that the BJP wanted to "eliminate reservation". The BJP was caught unawares. Modi delivered his final punch by alleging that Nitish, Lalu and the Congress had been out to take away the reservation quota of the Dalits and OBCs and give it to 'another community'. The Grand Alliance gave a veiled clarification. The BJP stepped up pressure by publishing reservation ads which was frowned upon by the EC. PM patted himself on the back for silencing his opponents on reservation. His final punch was an allegation that Nitish and Lalu were "protecting terrorists". Nitish, however, was unprovoked and stuck to his template – his record and the goodwill of the people.

As per the observation of Prof. Deepankar Gupta, Bihar election First, based on numbers alone, no caste can win an election on its strength alone [5]. So even in constituencies that are supposed to be dominated by the Yadavs for instance, the percentage (of Yadavs in the population of that constituency) would be around 15 per cent at the most. Again, only 15 per cent of Bihar's population comprises Yadavs. So if 25 per cent of Bihar's MLAs are Yadavs, the remaining 75 per cent are non-Yadavs. Several Yadavs fought on Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) tickets, others on Mahagathbandhantickets. Some won, some lost. The point is, caste alone does not win an election. But we find that the Other Backward Classes (OBC), upper castes and Dalits got together, leaving out some sections of extremely backward classes, to bring about this verdict. Incidentally, there is nothing in the caste order that promotes such coalescence.

It is an important sociological point that we define caste system in terms of mutual repulsion. So if they come together, it can't be because of caste; it must be something else. During the Mandal Commission agitation, the OBCs came together, regardless of their differences, because they saw the promise of a future where their children, who belonged to agrarian or lower middle class backgrounds, would have a foothold in colleges and government jobs. So Jats, Gujjars, Ahirs, Kurmis, Yadavsetc got together because of the promise of jobs and educational opportunities in urban areas. We saw that largely, the Khuswahas did not vote for the Yadavs and the Scheduled Castes did not align with the Paswans. So if you were to look at caste logic alone, it would not work. When they come together it's not because of caste affinity, but external factors.

Early experience of casteism in Bihar

In Bihar the previous experiences say that in different election, various kind of factors had acted, but at every step caste had played important role for mobilizing people and movement of people from one party to another party. During 1977 and 1980's decade's kayasthas have played a significant role in BIHAR politics. K B Sahaya, Badrinath Verma, Jagati Narain Lal, Syam Nandan Sahaya, Baldeo Shaya, Kamal deo Narain, Anirudha Prasad and P N Sinha were among the prominent legislators who were active but the population of kayastha was very less and merely constitute 1 percent of total population. So it cannot be said that only kayastha were voting for them because other castes has also voted for them and at that time party line as well as the personal personality of the leaders was important. But this community got marginalized on the account of the close nexus between violence and politics and majority of this caste were service orientated so they started shifting from one area to another area.

At the same time Brahmin community was also dominant in politics, into two major groups Maithili and non maithilis. The maithils generally come from the northern districts like Darbhanga, Madhubani, Sitamarhi, Muzaffarpur, Bhagalpur, Saharsa, Purnea, Munger and Begusarai While the non maithils reside in other parts of the State and are generally concentrated in Middle bihar. Some prominent leaders were Kedarpandey, Ramanand Tiwary, Jagnarain Trivedi, Bindeshwari Dubey, K K Tiwari and Lal Muni Choubey emerged in politics but they could not ensure Brahminical dominance of Bihar level politics. Whereas Maithili brahman came to the fore front in 1961 when Binodanand Jha became the chief minister and continued till 1963. At that time Brahmins came to a unity but it could not continue. In 1980s the prominent Rajput leaders who emerged as significant leaders were Surajnarain Singh, Chandra Shekhar Singh, Ram Dulari Sinha, Bhishma Narain Singh. At the same congress party in the state had to face the problem of dissident groups. And that was the end of the key role of upper caste in Bihar and in 1990s the other group had highlighted them at the political platform in a very decisive manner. In 1967, a non-Congress government—propelled by the growing political clout of OBCs—came to power in Bihar for the first time. Indeed, the proportion of OBC state legislators grew by nearly 10 percentage points, hitting almost 30% in 1969 [6]. However, the lack of clear governing majorities led to several decades of political instability. Although the Congress's luster was badly tarnished, its persistent hold on power in Delhi and the depth of the opposition's fragmentation allowed it to maintain the upper hand in the state for most of the period until 1989. Janata Dal, a precursor to a host of backward-caste parties like the Janta Dal stormed to power in 1990 behind a wily politician, Lalu Prasad Yadav, who

was one of several backward-caste leaders in India to receive a boost from a government commission that advocated civil service and educational quotas for OBCs, not to mention the resulting upper caste backlash. Exploiting these fissures, Yadav stitched together a formidable coalition of backward castes and Muslims to maintain political power for a decade and a half. Yadav's core political base consisted of his own Yadav community, the most politically and economically successful subgroup of the OBCs.

Janata Dal came to power in the state in 1990 on the back of its victory at the national stage in 1989. Lalu Prasad Yadav became Chief Minister after winning the race of legislative party leadership by a slender margin against Ram Sundar Das, a former chief minister from the Janata Party and close to eminent Janata Party leaders like Chandrashekhar and S N Sinha. Later, Lalu Prasad Yadav gained popularity with the masses through a series of popular and populist measures. The principled socialists, Nitish Kumar included, gradually left him and Lalu Prasad Yadav was the uncrowned king by 1995 as both Chief Minister as well as the President of his party, Rashtriya Janata Dal. He was a charismatic leader who had people's support and Bihar had got such a person as the chief minister after a long time. But he couldn't bring the derailed wagon of development of the state on to the track. When corruption charges got serious, he quit the post of CM but anointed his wife as the CM and ruled through proxy. In this period, the administration deteriorated fast. During this time in Bihar Yadav caste had emerged at political height and started controlling of all the machinery of the state, they had captured almost all the political post under their control. By 2004, 14 years after Lalu's victory, The Economist magazine said that "Bihar [had] become a byword for the worst of India, of widespread and inescapable poverty, of corrupt politicians indistinguishable from mafia-dons they patronize, caste-ridden social order that has retained the worst feudal cruelties". In 2005, the World Bank believed that issues faced by the state was "enormous" because of "persistent poverty, complex social stratification, unsatisfactory infrastructure and weak governance" [7]. By 2005, the popularity of the RJD government had sharply declined, heralding the fourth phase of the state's politics. The party's fifteen-year rule witnessed a decline in the quality of governance, characterized by slowing growth and a breakdown in law and order.

Due to this condition of Bihar in 2005 election Nitish Kumar came with a slogan development of Bihar. In 2005, as disaffection reached a crescendo among the masses, middle classes included, the RJD was voted out of power and Lalu Prasad Yadav lost an election to a coalition headed by his previous ally and now rival Nitish Kumar. Nitish Kumar has regained Bihar's true identity, which is the place from where people who

changed the world come like Gautam Buddha or Asoka or Sher Shah Suri or the Sikh Gurus. Despite the separation of financially richer Jharkhand, Bihar has actually seen more positive growth in recent years. The BJP-JD (U) alliance forged a powerful political coalition that exploited the BJP's popularity among Hindu upper castes and the JD (U)'s constituency made up of the lower rungs of the OBCs, a new grouping that came to be known as extremely backward castes (EBCs). The construction of the EBC identity was a savvy attempt to strip votes of non-Yadav backward castes from the RJD. Kumar's JD (U) also fractured the vote of Bihar's Dalits by again targeting the most backward among them, fashioning a new Mahadalit category and directing welfare benefits to this new group.

The caste factor had played a crucial role in the coronation of Nitish Kumar as Bihar Chief Minister in 2005. He received support from forward castes, non-Yadav backward class and Dalits. After Lalu and Rabri's rule, for the first time people of Bihar got the taste of development. It was Nitish Kumar's development mantra which reined into the traditional vote bank of the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD). But Nitish set the example of brilliant social engineering by forming Extreme Backward Class Commission which, led to further division in the OBC category. Nitish then brought Dalit into his camp by dividing them too. He formed a new category called Mahadalit from Dalits. So in his term of Chief Minister Ship Kumar had divided and further divided the OBC into several groups and sub groups. Sach groups has been separated from the RJD support toward Nitish Kumar. That thing had continued till 2009 vidhan Sabha election in which result has seen and a large section of OBC and upper caste group has voted in favour of JD (U) BJP coalition and Nitish came into power with a vast majority. In this situation basically OBC vote bank shifted towards nitish and his social engineering works.

Again in 2015 assembly election scenario has been changed various caste communities in Bihar seem to be polarized for or against one of the two big alliances ahead of the state assembly polls; however, it is the lower backward caste voters, referred to as Most Backward Castes, who might decide the outcome of the elections.

The voters belonging to the lower backward castes are large in numbers. Different estimates throw up different numbers but it's generally accepted that they roughly constitute 25 percent of the total voters in the state. While members from other castes have voted en-bloc for the party of their own choice in the recent past, the votes of the lower OBCs have remained divided among various political parties. Besides other considerations, the main reason for it is there are numerous castes within this category. They are, among

others, Lohar, Kumhar, Badadhi, Sunar, Tatwa, Teli, Kahar and Kewat. Members of these communities provide traditional services to people.

Going by the voting pattern in the last few elections, it's proven that individual castes have voted for parties of their choice in large numbers. While the Yadavs have voted for the Lalu-led Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) in large numbers, the Kurmis have voted for the Nitish Kumar-led Janata Dal (United) in a big way. There is nothing hidden about the fact that upper castes voters have been consistently with the BJP for the last two decades. A large number of them, however, voted for the Congress earlier.

Ram Vilas Paswan still remains the most popular leader amongst the Dalits, more so among the Paswans, and he has the capacity to lend this support to whichever party he may align with. No wonder Paswan manages to form an alliance with parties of his choice much more easily than others. For any party of LJP's size, Paswan has managed to remain in power for much longer than any other leader.

The reason for voters of a particular caste voting for a particular party in large numbers is mainly due to the leadership coming from that caste. The absence of leadership among the lower OBC voters has resulted in their votes getting split between various parties. The division of votes also took place because they voted mostly on local considerations.

With UpendraKushwaha on their side, the BJP reminding the voters about the caste to which the prime minister belong (lower OBC), and some clever ticket distribution (giving proper representation to the lower OBC candidates), I personally believe, the BJP may corner a bigger chunk of these votes in the forthcoming assembly elections.

The lower OBCs always hoped that power would get decentralized and trickle down to them for their benefit. The hope remained alive at least for a few years. The prospect has got alive again with the BJP as the possible agent of change. Hopes, aspirations and perception have an important role in mobilizing opinion and finally votes. It remains to be seen which party manages it the best.

Another factor which work effectively in Bihar politics is demographic shifts which introduced fresh uncertainty. Traditionally, men in Bihar have been significantly more likely to vote when compared to women. In 1962, total voter turnout in Bihar stood at 44%; however, this aggregate number masked considerable variation. Male voter turnout was 55%, more than 20 percentage points above female turnout (32%) [8]. That gap remained for the next three decades, before narrowing in the 1990s. By 2005, the

differential in voter turnout between men and women reached single digits. In 2010, female turnout outpaced male turnout for the first time. Young voters are also important when it comes to demographics. Out of an electorate of nearly 67 million eligible voters, almost 31% are between the ages of 18 and 29. The BJP's ability to cater to younger voters through its messaging, social media, and projection of Modi as a leader in touch with India's youth was instrumental in establishing the party's dominance in 2014. One study found a stark correlation between changes in the BJP's electoral fortunes and the share of first-time voters, those between the ages of 18 and 23. The ability of the BJP alliance to recapture the political imagination of young voters, and to mobilise them to turn out, will be key to its success.

A final factor pertains to the swings in parties' caste support bases. Traditionally, each of the major parties has relied on distinctive vote banks. On the anti-BJP front, the RJD has attracted votes from the Yadav and Muslim-minority communities. Because the Congress—the other party with strong Muslim support—is allying with the RJD, the anti-BJP coalition is poised to sweep the Muslim vote. According to data from the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, the BJP alliance only earned 2% of the Muslim vote in Bihar in the last general election. The JD (U), for its part, has profited mainly by targeting EBCs and Mahadalits

For the National Democratic Alliance, the upper caste vote (78% of which went to the BJP alliance in May 2014) [9] is likely to stay loyal. Each of the BJP's alliance partners represents a key community that adds to this base: the LokJanshakti Party's base is among the Paswans, one of the most significant Dalit castes, while the RashtriyaLokSamata Party claims to represent the Koeri community, an important OBC caste. Hindustani AwamMorcha, as previously noted, seeks to carry the Mahadalit vote.

While data from the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies indicate that 76% of the Yadav vote collectively accrued to the RJD, the Congress, and the JD (U) in the 2014 general election, the recent defection of key legislator Pappu Yadav from the RJD has raised fresh doubts about the anti-BJP coalition's monopoly of this group's votes. Pappu Yadav has joined hands with a group of smaller parties unaffiliated with either major alliance, instigating rumors that he has struck a tacit understanding with the BJP to divide the anti-BJP vote in his area of influence.

Another wild card is the Dalit vote. Kumar's ability to carve out a Mahadalit identity was a key component of his past electoral success. If the National Democratic Alliance can occupy this ground, thanks to its embrace of former chief minister Manjhi's

Hindustani AwamMorcha (Secular), it will eliminate a major source of support for the anti-BJP alliance.

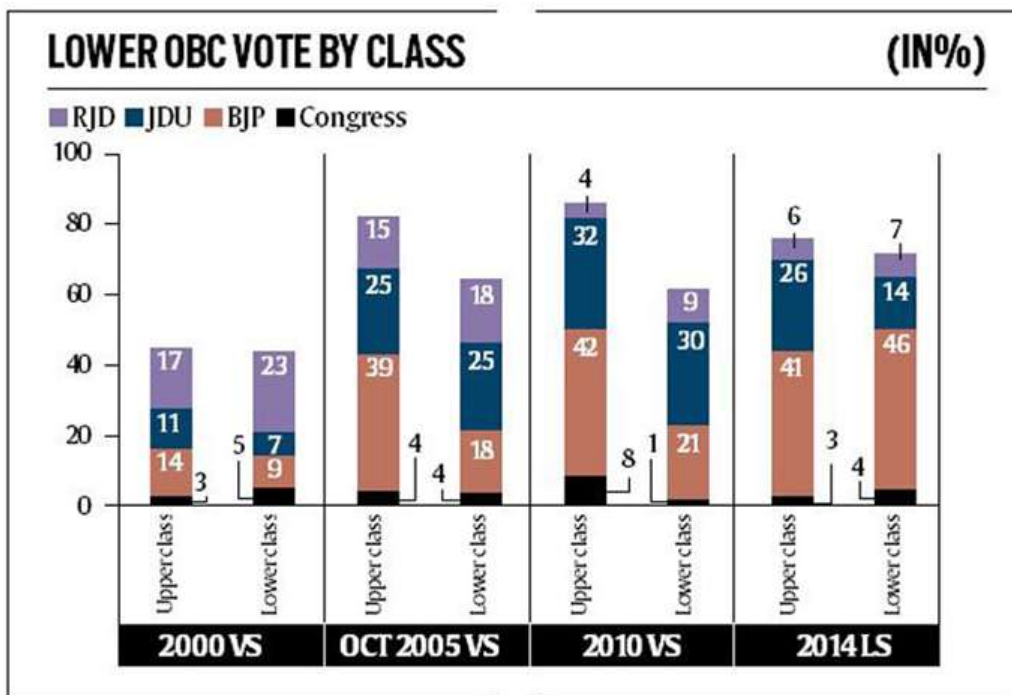
A final wild card relates to a spate of minor players, each with a small vote share but the potential to play spoiler. Chief among these spoilers are the Left parties, six of which recently announced a grand alliance. Other spoilers to look out for include the Samajwadi Party, the Nationalist Congress Party, and the All India Majlis-e-IttehadulMuslimeen (AIMIM). The Samajwadi Party and Nationalist Congress Party, once members of the anti-BJP alliance, recently announced their plans to contest the Bihar election as part of an alternative anti-BJP front (which includes Pappu Yadav’s fledgling party). While these two parties have limited presences in Bihar (collectively, they earned just 2.4% of the vote in Bihar’s 2010 assembly election), their decision to go a different route risks dividing the anti-BJP vote.

The rising popularity of the AIMIM is one of the most interesting developments in contemporary Indian politics. With strong roots in the city of Hyderabad, the AIMIM has begun expanding beyond its narrow geographic domain. The AIMIM contested 24 seats in Bihar, raising the prospect that it might draw Muslim votes away from the anti-BJP coalition. But couldn’t succeed.

Lower OBCs and Muslims

Lower Other Backward Classes (OBCs) or Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs), making up close to a quarter (24 per cent) of Bihar’s electorate, are a heterogeneous group whose vote has not firmly aligned behind any party. Results from the past three Assembly elections and the most recent Lok Sabha election show that there are significant differences in voting patterns between upper class lower OBCs and lower class lower OBCs. In the two most recent Assembly elections, the BJP performed more strongly among upper class members of the lower OBCs.

It received 39 per cent of the upper class votes among the community as compared to 18 per cent of lower class votes in October 2005, and 42 per cent of upper class votes as compared to 21 per cent of lower class votes in 2010. The BJP snagged a similar share of the EBC vote across class in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, but JD (U) notably performed more strongly among the upper class (26 per cent) than the lower class (14 per cent) of EBCs. Undoubtedly, the BJP will be contesting strongly for the EBC vote. The question is whether they will be able to consolidate it across class, as they did in 2014, or whether their support within EBCs will come more from its upper classes, as in 2005 and 2010.



Source: www.lokniti.org

The Muslim vote, making up about 16 per cent of Bihar’s electorate, has also tended to be segmented on the basis of class. But this segmentation has not been as consistent as that of the upper castes. Lalu’s RJD — for whom Muslims have been a critical base of support

— performed more strongly among lower class Muslims (53 per cent) than upper class Muslims (38 per cent) in 2000, but observed the opposite trend in 2010 (32 per cent among upper class Muslims and 23 per cent among lower class Muslims). Congress mirrored

these trends, winning a larger bloc of upper class (27 per cent) than lower class (11 per cent) Muslim voters in 2005, but did better among lower class (16 per cent) than upper class Muslim voters (7 per cent) in 2014. Class then appears to matter among Muslim votes, though its relationship with the RJD and Congress share of vote has not been consistent.

Yadavs, Kurmis/Koeris

Class has sometimes been a significant variable in the share of the Yadav vote, making up 15 per cent of Bihar's electorate. As with the Muslim vote — the other cornerstone of Lalu's base — the RJD performed better among the lower class (63 per cent) than the upper class (54 per cent) in 2005. But Lalu performed better among upper class Yadavs in 2014, winning 56 per cent of their vote compared to 42 per cent of lower class Yadavs. In the 2000 and 2010 Assembly elections, Lalu won roughly an equal share of Yadav votes across class. It is therefore difficult to predict whether the Yadav vote will be fragmented on the basis of class in the upcoming Bihar polls.

The Kurmi/Koeri vote, making up 11 per cent of Bihar's electorate, too has been segmented on the basis of class in some elections and not in others. In the 2000 Assembly elections, the JD (U) took more than one in four (27 per cent) upper class Kurmi/Koeri votes while receiving just a nominal share (3 per cent) of lower class votes.

Conversely, the RJD won 25 per cent of lower class Kurmi/Koeri votes but only 12 per cent of upper class votes. The JD (U) saw the opposite trend in 2010, when it did better among lower class Kurmi/Koeris (41 per cent) than upper class members of the same castes (21 per cent). In both 2005 and 2014, however, JD (U) won a similar share of Kurmi/Koeri votes among upper and lower class voters. As with the Yadavs, there is not a consistent enough pattern here to speculate about whether the Kurmi/Koeri vote will split along class lines.

Upper castes

The BJP enjoyed even greater consolidation of the upper castes, which makes up 15 per cent of Bihar's electorate, among lower class members (71 per cent) than upper class members (53 per cent) in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. However, this gap is the exception that reveals the norm. In the 2000, October 2005, and 2010 Bihar Assembly elections, the upper caste vote was not segmented on the basis of class.

Nitish Kumar rose because he empowered backward castes which were less fortunate. But, the vehicle he chose for this empowerment was upper caste bureaucrats. So, at the end of 10 years, things stayed where they were for us," said the mallah leader. The net result is, a person like Mukesh Sahani, a mallah,

returned from Mumbai after a successful film career (he organised the sets for films like *Bajrangi Bhaijaan*) to plunge into mallahpolitics, has now accused Nitish Kumar of 'betrayal' of the EBCs. This was even after Kumar included nishads into the list of scheduled tribes, which means a bigger reservation cake for the community -- by no stretch of imagination is the nishada tribe.

Caste lives in Bihar. And, elections bring out divisions in all their splendour. The thinking is now -- the 15 per cent or so upper castes are with the BJP. This is neutralised by the 15-odd per cent Muslims who will vote against the BJP. Most of the Yadavs, around 15 per cent of the population, will vote for the Nitish-Lalumahagathbandhan (grand alliance). But a small number will also go with the BJP. However, it is the EBC on which all parties are working. If the EBC can be fractured, despite obvious handicaps, the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance will have penetrated the Nitish-Laluarmour.

Lastly I would like to quote the statement of Lalu pd Yadav to economic times on 3rdoct. 2015 that caste is the biggest star in the bihar. Caste is central to Bihar politics, the Rashtriya Janata Dal leader and former CM told ET in an exclusive interview on Friday, projecting the upcoming polls as a battle between the upper castes represented by the BJP-led alliance and the backward castes under the Grand Alliance, which includes his party. "You cannot ignore caste. It is a reality in India,"

CONCLUSION

Various Assembly and Lok Sabha elections indicate that the votes of the lower OBC remained divided between the RJD and the JD (U)-BJP alliance till the 2005 elections. It is only after the 2009 Lok Sabha elections that we witness a clear shift in preference. They voted for the JD (U)-BJP alliance in bigger numbers than in any elections in the last few decades. This shift got further consolidated during the 2010 assembly elections and 2014 Lok Sabha elections.

Since 1996 till 2010, when the JD (U) and the BJP had been in alliance, one wonders if the lower OBC voted for the JD (U) or for the BJP. Findings from the 2014 survey data do indicate a massive shift towards the BJP when the party had no alliance with JD (U) - a clear indication of the party being more popular among this category of voters. There are also indications that the BJP benefitted from its alliance with the JD (U) at least with regard to the lower OBC voters as large numbers of them preferred Nitish Kumar-led JD (U) more than the BJP. However, one can't deny the fact that the 2014 Lok Sabha elections the shift was due to the personal popularity of NarendraModi. One cannot say for sure whether things stand where they were.

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