

Congress in Bihar Politics: From Dominance to Marginality

ANIL K. OJHA

Political parties are about power, they represent the principal instrument through which segments of the population compete to secure control of elective institutions and, through them to exercise a predominant influence over public policies. Parties are central to election and policy makings. They make and break governments, administer patronage, and take decisions that deeply affect people's welfare. Under their aegis, the masses are mobilized. Political parties remain prominent among political institutions that shape the configuration and plot the direction of social institutions, as well as the destinies of humankind. Thus parties richly deserved to be studied.¹

Further, the study of elections and voting behaviour is one of the important sub-fields of Political Science. It is via elections that citizens participate directly in the political process and are able to hold governments accountable. So, the study of parties through elections, particularly in terms of their support bases, constitutes a viable mode of political enquiry in democracies. After more than five decades of periodic elections in which all political offices are contested and all adults are qualified to vote, there is little doubt that democracy in India has taken root.²

In this paper, an attempt has been made to trace the causes and consequences of the decline in social bases of Congress support in Bihar. The Indian National Congress (hereafter, Congress), founded in 1885, was ruling party for decades at the national level as well as in most of the states, including Bihar, following independence, leading the experts to characterize the Indian Party system as the Predominant Party system. Even in the pre-independence period it was the principal contender for power as evidenced though elections held under Government of India Acts, 1919 and the 1935 for the Bihar Provincial Council and Assembly.³

And after independence notwithstanding reverses, the party re-emerged both in the post-1967 and post-1977 scenarios. But from 1989 onwards to date, the process of a systematic decline has engulfed it in Bihar and U.P. It has shown tendencies to re-emerge in other states, but in Bihar its base has become stagnant. How did the Congress lose this preeminent position in Bihar? What are the reasons for a decline in the Congress's support base? How far have changes: in the nature of linkages between the voter and this party; in the patterns of inter-party competition, in its goals and ideologies, and in the structures affecting the processes within the organization responsible for this decline?

Bihar, the second most populous Indian state with 54 Lok Sabha seats has been a politically active state and has proved to be an important factor in national power dynamics particularly since 1989. With its bifurcation and the creation of a new state—Jharkhand, the state now has only 41 Lok Sabha seats. Among the crucial Hindi-speaking states, it is only in Bihar that the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) has never come to power.⁴ Barring two interruptions of 1967-71 and 1977-79, the Congress dominated the state's politics till the 1980s. The Janata Dal (JD) replaced the Congress as the dominant party during 1989 Lok Sabha elections, getting 31 seats with 36.4 percent votes as compared to the four seats and 28.1 percent votes of the Congress.

Since March 1990, the JD and its new incarnation—the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) continues to be in power, though at times with the outside support of other parties or in a coalition. The present RJD government has the Congress as a junior coalition partner upon which its dependence has decreased with the creation of Jharkhand.

A clear understanding of politics in India is not possible without looking at some of the enduring forms of social organization. Two of these durable modes of identity are religion and caste. However, it is caste that has formed the very basis of election strategy and politics in Bihar since long.⁵ Caste, in politics, is so tacitly and so completely accepted by all, including those who pose most in condemning it, that it is everywhere the unit of social action.⁶ In Bihar, politics is organized on the basis of caste; it is a means of securing or retaining power. Hugh Tinker was right in speculating that state politics would be caste politics throughout most of India for many years to come.⁷ The changing relationship between social cleavages and politics of electoral mobilization and the emergence

of upper caste or upper/lower, Other Backward Caste (OBC) or Dalit as more or less a homogeneous category in states like Bihar has been underlined by commentators.⁸

Historically, a system of widespread inequality and the existence of a dominant strata of upper castes characterizes society in Bihar. In so far as the Congress strategy of social support is concerned, support for it came from the traditional social groups often as a function of deliberate strategy and at times, as a consequence of deep social cleavage and polarization.⁹ When India attained independence, the upper castes—Kayastha (1.36 percent), Bhumihar (2.89 percent), Rajput (5.87 percent) and somewhat later Brahman (5.97)—besides the Muslim community (13.28 percent) dominated the Congress party and state government in Bihar. Though the OBCs, about 49 percent, were represented in the Congress, the leadership remained in the hands of the upper castes. For example, in the Congress ministry in Bihar in 1962, 58 percent cabinet ministers were from the upper castes and eight percent from OBCs.¹⁰ In most of the Bihar Congress ministries the upper castes were overrepresented.¹¹

That kind of situation persisted upto 1967. During those days one of the notable feature of Congress politics in Bihar was caste-based factionalism often drawing strength from the central leadership. In 1967 all the four stalwarts of Bihar Congress saw to it that potential supporters of their factional rivals did not win. The party could win only 128 out of 318 seats in the house. Other factors, to be delineated below, also contributed to it. With the Congress split in 1969 three party bosses, representing Kayastha, Bhumihar and Rajput castes, parted company with Indira Gandhi. And, a new Brahman-Harijan alliance emerged under the leadership of Jagjivan Ram and Lalit Narayan Mishra, which restored the fortunes of the Congress in 1971 and 1972 with the continuous support of the Muslims.

There was a clear lack of OBC support for the party. In 1971, out of 31 Lok Sabha members from general seats in Bihar 10 were from the OBCs, while in 1980 out of 22 only two were from that category. The OBCs especially Yadavas, politicized and mobilized at the behest of Lohia Socialists, later landed up in the Congress. But, after the 1972 elections the attempt at adjustment with the middle castes received a setback. Earlier, after the split of 1969, Daroga Prasad Rai, a Yadav, was made the first Congress (R) chief minister of Bihar. After the weakening of Congress (O), Bhumihar and Rajput leaders began to rejoin the Congress and upper caste representation

once again increased. Between 1972-77 out of three Congress chief ministers, two—Kedar Pandey and Jagannath Mishra, were Brahmans. During this period the country faced a lot of political upheavals some aspects of which were the Navnirman Andolan starting in Gujarat and Jaya Prakash Narain led famous Bihar agitation against internal emergency.

In the 1977 elections, the Congress lost badly in Bihar; it could not win a single seat. Its vote share dropped sharply from 40.1 percent to 22.9 percent, while its national average had come down from 43.6 percent to 34.5 percent.¹² In 1977 the Muslims were also, more or less, alienated from the Congress. Later on, with the end of the Janata Party rule, the landed upper castes, disenchanted with the opposition's reservation politics, re-entered the Congress. These castes—Bhumihars and Rajputs still enjoyed sufficient coercive power in rural areas. Thus, the Congress dominance was mainly based on the core support of the upper castes, the Scheduled Castes (SCs, 14 percent) and Muslims.

The Congress power in villages had in the past arisen from its successful mobilization of two separate categories of castes. These were the landless Harijans at the bottom and the upper castes at the top. The Congress by taking socially and economically entrenched groups into its organization relied on the accommodation along the already existing lines of identity. This led to a great dependence of the Congress on men whose main reason for remaining within it was the benefit they derived from its control of government and continued confirmation of the traditional status, which they enjoyed in view of such an association at a time when they were otherwise threatened by the modernist egalitarian compacts of democratic politics.

The OBCs deeply resented the upper caste hegemony in state politics. With the rise of middle peasantry and their political mobilization initiated by *Lohiaites*,¹³ the situation changed. Many of the OBCs—particularly the Yadav (14 percent), Kurmi (5.27 percent) and Koeri (4.93 percent) castes—becoming conscious of their numerical strength and its potentiality in democratic politics, started asserting a new political role. The cleavage between the upper castes and the OBCs soon turned into a conflict under the leadership of Karpoori Thakur leading towards a greater consolidation of the OBCs. So, the gradual politicization of the dormant strata widened the anti-Congress political space in Bihar.

Though the process of polarization was not complete in the mid-

1970s, it had been clear since the late 1960s that the weaker sections had become increasingly aware of their rights under the law and, as such, more and more assertive. This put a strain on the Congress machine just when, in fact, it had begun to ossify and decay.¹⁴ Caste conflicts took a virulent form in Bihar as was evident during caste riots in 1978 and 1990 over job reservations. The Mandal agitations particularly, led to the consolidation of castes along two axes—the forward and backward.¹⁵

In the 1980 elections, the Congress won less votes in Bihar than its all-India average. The combined votes of the Lok Dal and the Janata Party had exceeded by 7 percent. The middle peasantry largely voted for the Lok Dal.¹⁶ The decay in the Bihar Congress during 1980s had several causes. Apart from the caste-based factionalism that existed earlier, growing complacency fostered by the 1984 Lok Sabha outcome—which itself was a by-product of the sympathy wave generated out of Indira Gandhi's assassination. Rigidity and privateering also cast the old machine into oblivion. The old key operatives had come to accept refraining from much personal profiteering, while the new role incumbents often lacked both the self-restraint and skill at forging new coalition. Things were made worse by Indira Gandhi's attempt to centralize power.

During the 1980s the apparent population in Congress politics concealed undercurrents of clientelism.¹⁷ In Bihar, dissident activity became a permanent feature of Congress politics. During the period six chief ministerial changes had taken place. Nominated by the Prime Minister, their survival hinged more on central party backing than on a majority in the state legislature. In certain cases the party leadership decision fully disregarded the factional balance of forces in the state, causing tension. Jagannatha Mishra's *Janjagaran* campaign in the late 1980s had considerably weakened the party in Bihar.

Further, during the 1980s the Congress leadership's playing of the Hindu card created scepticism in the minorities. It was said that Indira Gandhi started thinking in terms of the Hindu backlash because the government was perceived by Hindus as favouring the Muslims.¹⁸ The growth of Hindu revivalism was explained by her as being the reaction to a real or imagined threat from the Muslim communal organizations.¹⁹ Rajiv Gandhi also adopted the same policy. He vacillated and the value of pragmatism was compromised with the fundamentalist forces. The constitution was amended to placate extremist Muslim sentiments in the wake of the Shah Bano case and

to meet the Hindu reaction the lock of disputed Babri structure was opened in 1986 and *Shilanyas* was allowed to be performed in Ayodhya in 1989. In Bihar, Muslims gravitated towards the JD in the aftermath of Bhagalpur riots of October 1989. This process crystallized further in the post-Ayodhya demolition phase, where a political demarcation between the Secularists and anti-Secularists emerged. Laloo Prasad emerged as one of the most successful and effective champions of secularism and reservation for OBCs. So, this consolidation of Muslims with the OBCs and the SCs strengthened the JD in Bihar, thus weakening the Congress.²⁰

In fact, the historical shift in political power during 1990s saw the RJD becoming the mainstream voice of the backward caste politics, particularly for the MY (Muslim-Yadav) combination. The RJD though mobilized around secular issues, ably created electoral divisions based on religious lines and got Muslim votes in bulk, playing on their fear psychosis of the BJP.²¹ Politics of caste was initiated by the Congress but, in the post-Mandal phase the JD used the caste weapon first against the Congress and later on, the RJD used it against the BJP combine. The emerging political change in Bihar is the result of the cultural and social interaction of previous decades and political generations.²² The recognition of caste and *jati* as active and dynamic elements in Bihar's cultural and political lives thus becomes imperative. M.N. Srinivas observes that under the impact of modernizing forces, caste was becoming a stronger player in the political arena. The *djinn* of caste was being let loose from the bottle of the local community to become an active force in state and national politics.²³

Earlier, with regard to social tensions arising out of class militancy prevalent in Bihar during the 1980s, the role of the Congress was one of ambivalence. It was accused of being aligned with the oppressors. In central Bihar there was a serious agrarian unrest as the landless workers and landowning peasants were locked in a violent Naxalite-led encounter. Various landed castes, both from the upper castes and OBCs, formed *senas* to protect their caste and economic interests. In such a polarized scenario the Congress government showed little interest in actualizing either a policy or a legislation. Also, on the face of the opposition's political mobilization through demonstrations, *dharnas*, *gheraos*, road blocks, rallies, etc., its leadership tried to meet the challenges through centralism, plebiscitary politics and managerial style. Despite Rajiv Gandhi's famous presidential speech at the Mumbai Congress Centenary

convention denouncing "the Congress power brokers, who dispense patronage to convert a mass movement into a feudal oligarchy", nothing tangible was done at the organizational level to alter the situation. The party's mass membership drive and organizational election remained a formality providing opportunities to well entrenched loyalists and sycophants to thrive on. Having failed in many of the party functions such as mobilization, recruitment, articulation, aggregation and integration in Bihar society, it arrived at a situation of policy drift. It could not present a specific political identity and thus failed in resurrecting its vote bank. It could not mould and reinforce citizens' political identity.

The decline in the Congress may be attributed to its failure in adapting to the changing socio-political conditions. As an opposition party it could not make election issues of, either the corruption in administration or politicization of bureaucracy or even the lack of proper understanding of development priority on the part of the ruling establishment of the state. Further, the incidence of political crime and violence has been a disquieting feature of Bihar politics. But the 1980s saw an alarming increase in the criminalisation of politics for which the Congress was not the least responsible.²⁴ This Continued unabated during the 1990s and presently the Congressmen are at the receiving end.

During the 1998 and 1999 Lok Sabha elections, the Congress had seat adjustments with the RJD in Bihar. Its decision to vote against the ratification motion in the Rajya Sabha had compelled the NDA government at the centre to withdraw the President's rule from Bihar in February 1999. The RJD reciprocatingly supported the Congress President, Sonia Gandhi in her abortive government formation exercise after the fall of the NDA government in April 1999. Its seat sharing arrangement with the RJD was not foolproof. In 1998 it contested 21 seats as against the 8 allotted by the RJD; in 1999 it contested 16 seats as allotted by the RJD.

So, it can be concluded that as a result of sharply divided caste loyalties, political parties in Bihar are constantly haunted by the need to reconcile two divergent objectives—group solidarity and broad social representation. And a reconciliation between the two objectives plays an important role in transforming cleavages into political support bases and alternative policy frameworks. The Congress failed to respond to this challenge. In Bihar, the electoral mobilization and voter alignments revolve around caste and the social coalition of the predominant party era has disappeared. The questions of identity

and empowerment have left the Congress bewildered. Instead of the strategies of persistence and innovation it has chosen the path of accommodation and surrender.²⁵ So, chances of its re-emergence as a major player in state politics appears dim.

Table 1

Percentage of votes polled and seats obtained by the Congress in Bihar during five Lok Sabha elections

Election	1989	1991	1996	1998	1999
Percentage of votes	28.1	24.2	13.6	7.2	10.00
Seats	4	1	2	5	4

NOTES AND REFERENCE

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