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BATTLEGROUND BIHAR 2020

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EMPLOYMENT, EQUALITY AND EMPOWERMENT... BATTLEGROUND BIHAR

BY ADVAITA SINGH

The deeply entrenched caste fragmentation makes Bihar's socio-political fabric complex and interlaced. Historically, the direction of Bihar elections have been determined and governed by identity politics. This was exacerbated during the Laloo Yadav government, that hijacked the electoral conversation solely around caste-politics, breeding the era of populist policies.



Even though identity politics is coming to a slow decline, it still remains a critical factor for the electorate. One factor that contributed heavily to the subtle decline of caste politics in Bihar — Nitish Kumar. The 16th assembly under Nitish Kumar brought about the conversation of development and changed the tune of elections to come. While identity still exerts a heavy influence on the voting patterns, the population of Bihar is demanding more than just representation on grounds of caste and religion... it is demanding development.



The 2020 legislative assembly elections are around the corner as the state is still reeling from the shock of floods and the raging pandemic. Amid the corona-chaos and the flood-furore, the developmental issue that seems to be gaining momentum is the issue of unemployment. As of this election season, the call for employment is echoing in every constituency and district.



Unemployment is a socio-economic issues that cuts across caste and class. With the alarmingly high rate of unemployment of 10.2% (as compared to the national average of 5.8%), no wonder every coalition is promising jobs. The RJD-INC Mahagathbandan has promised 1 million jobs if elected. Despite Nitish Kumar's dismissal of this promise on grounds of practicality and irresponsible allocation of resources, the NDA alliance countered with the vow of 1.9 million jobs.



However, Bihar's unemployment crisis extend beyond the superficial issue of the level of employment. Over the years, Bihar has struggled to provide quality employment — only 10% of all jobs are salaried jobs as the main source of employment remains to be agriculture. The lack of proper employment opportunities has forced young Biharis in every

generation to leave home and scour the nation for employment. As a result, 35% of Bihar's GDP is made up of worker remittances.

As issue that plagues every caste and religion, the ubiquitous job crisis in Bihar has become one of the leading issues highlighted in the election. Unfortunately, other important issues have been sidelined as a result, a key one being flood management.





The untamed Ganga that blesses the Bihar soil with fertility and sparks the growth of civilisation also wrecks havoc almost periodically with flooding. The recent August floods claimed 27 lives in districts of Muzaffarpur, Darbhanga, Saran, Siwan and more. Meanwhile over 83.62 lakh people suffered as a result of rising water levels. However, this is not a one-time calamity. Bihar is a flood-prone region and these floods have plagued the state since times immemorial. On average, 73.6% of the geographical area is flood-affected which means that around 76% of the population in North Bihar lives with the looming threat of floods.



The issue of floods is a recurring problem. Every year, the destruction and devastation is of comparable levels to the years before, which means that state solutions have not been very effective. Solutions implemented are in terms of temporary relief measures, however, they are not sustainable. For example, even this year, temporary aid was extended in the form of Rs 6000 gratuitous relief to the flood-affected families, however, not all families have received this aid.



The state has explored structural solutions of embankments which are cheaper in nature. However, they are short term in nature. In contrast, the more expensive, long-term measures such as building dams, canals etc. have not been as popular, despite their high-efficiency. In a state where 77% of employment comes from agricultural sector, it is surprising that irrigation and flood management is not the priority during elections.





Every day the people of Bihar battle the demons of poverty, illiteracy and poor health care. Their daily struggles are worsened with the wrath of floods that destroy agricultural produce, houses and lives of loved ones. As the pandemic brews a state of troubling times to come, the results of the election and the future of governance in Bihar become all the more important. The election has made Bihar a battleground of politicians, which unfortunately overshadow the battles fought by the common man every day.





PAIGAM (People's Association In Grassroots Action and Movement) is an aggregator of activists, researchers, practitioners and organisations that aims to bring together social efforts at the local, national and global levels through media advocacy and action research.

They wish to bring a seamless bridge between academia, activism, policy and public through our media, advocacy, research, grassroots fellowship and mobilization channels.

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