

Bihar Voters Speak Truth to Power

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The Bihar election is historic, redemptive, and a defining moment in the assertion of free speech and expression – all flying in the face of a debilitating national politics of hate that exceeded all limits with impunity. There are of course many, many layers that this massive drubbing represents. Ordinary citizens see mirages for what they are. Resplendent silks, brocades and designer embroidery, corporate largesse, perennial red carpet pravasi hospitality, a severely compromised, hysterical electronic media, and the substitution of public transport and dusty roads by airlifts cannot stand in for a convincing, physical, emotional and material contact with the everyday lives of people.

Analyses of the election results in the print media state “over-exposure” of Prime Minister Modi by the BJP as one of the reasons for the defeat. This is a rather inane explanation that masks the facts. What has happened is much larger and with far-reaching consequences. It is the *exposure* of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, his party and its ideological combine by the people of Bihar, in concert with the wave of resistance that swept across the country, the Anupam Kher Circus notwithstanding.

While I remain uncomfortable with a reductionist reading of the Bihari-Bahari binary, the politics of insider-outsider (us-them) that the Sangh Parivar has lifted to dangerous heights has come back home to roost ripping through Sangh complacency like Sahitya Academy awardee late Nabarun Bhattacharya’s *fyataru*. A closer look at “Bihari-Bahari” of course reveals to us the many layers of what is in fact not a binary. It is a juxtaposition of the two worlds – one lived in real time, in extreme deprivation, grinding impoverishment, everyday violence that must be negotiated, resisted and rebuilt from day to day; the other, an ephemeral, distant pageant that bears no relation to the everyday, except to perpetrate that very callous deprivation and the violence that is being resisted in the first place. The “Emperor’s New Clothes” Revisited.

Everyone is talking of beef. The price of Kalyani Biryani in Hyderabad will soar now. The question by a youngster on a television channel immediately after the result was declared -- “If we want to eat beef, why should we go only to Pakistan? Why not to the US or Canada or any other country?” – is a wise question that we need to ponder about. Except that we don’t really need to leave the country. Kerala will welcome us with open arms, since even the BJP leader there refused to make beef an issue. Without digressing however, since when has beef embodied an India-Pakistan/Hindu-Muslim distinction? The first renewed debates on the consumption of beef had to do with university campuses and the assertion by Dalit students on their right to choice of food, triggering beef festivals across the country. The spate of writing over diversity in food

habits was triggered by dalit writers and poets, with beef at the centre. Despite the fact that food is in a sense a syncretic issue of culture across religious lines, the Sangh parivar has manoeuvred a vicious shift from beef consumption to cow slaughter -- moving dalits out of the radar of violence on this account and focussing on the minorities. We witnessed this treacherous game and its consequences in Dadri and its aftermath. Tied to this was the BJP articulation of the reservation issue, pitting caste against community yet again. But people straddle these distinctions daily and are acutely aware of the continuities and the separations, the solidarities and the hostilities that they negotiate from day to day. Arrogance, ignorance and disregard for the intelligence of the crowds that gather to hear your truths can be your undoing. Indeed it has been.

There is another very critical aspect of the Bihar elections: the victory of the CPI-ML (Liberation) in the three seats of Balrampur, Darauli and Tarari, and the routing of the All India Majlis Ittehadul Muslimeen in all six seats in the Muslim dominated Seemanchal region.

The history of extreme violence against dalits at the hands of the dominant castes, and their support of the CPI-ML at enormous personal cost of life and livelihood forces us to examine afresh the character of resistance to caste violence, discrimination and atrocity. Can we forget the massacre of 58 people in Laxmanpur Bathe in 1997 and the 2013 Patna High Court acquittal of the accused in that case? The immediate trigger: dispute over wages and standing crop and a demand for an increase in wages from one-and-a-half kilos of food grain to three kilos. As a party that has consistently supported landless dalits in Bihar and one that dalits in that state have supported despite gruesome episodes of targetted violence, mass murder and displacement, the victory of the CPI-ML in this historical conjuncture is momentous. This raises another aspect of the analyses of the Bihar elections. Nobody needs to "play a caste card" for an election – not in Bihar, not anywhere in India. The caste card is ever in play – by the dominant, landed castes in every single utterance and action, and also in the silences and complicities. Rip off the corporate veil and you will see the violent play of caste in all its nakedness. What we are witnessing is a resistance to caste dominance by people incarcerated by poverty and violence.

Whether there will be crackers in Pakistan, whether Shahrukh should find a new home, whether Professor Irfan Habib is patriotic – are questions that have been decisively answered by the voters in the Seemanchal region, who have rejected the AIMIM as representing the Muslim voice, and have refused to be "cowed down" by the BJP. The rejection of religious fundamentalism and the exacerbation of communal rhetoric and politics by both parties by a largely Muslim electorate forces us to vigorously contest this politics elsewhere in the country as well. This is a vote against intolerance and the politics of hate. It is a vote against systematic and systemic violence and injustice. It is a vote that embodies a hope for a new world. It is now for the winners of this election to deliver.

The protests by poets, writers, filmmakers, intellectuals, research scholars of all persuasions; protests by conscientious resisters with or without awards; and the

exercise of freedom of expression through the vote -- have been extremely important because they crystallise a rare moment of solidarity and common cause. We can scarcely forget that women have been the movers in this election despite their conspicuous absence in the wise men's debates post election. Most important of all, this entire churning and its stunning results demonstrate an unprecedented cascade of free speech and expression at a time when it is most under threat. This is speaking truth to power, is it not?

Note:

Kalpana Kannabiran is a sociologist based in Hyderabad. This article was written on the morning of 9th November 2015.