

By Sidharth Mishra



The politically illiterate middle-class of the national capital region has blamed the role of caste for the “catastrophe in Bihar.” They feel that by having voted Nitish Kumar back to power, the electorate in the state may have committed mass hara-kiri. The social media is full of inanities like comparisons between the Canadian cabinet and Bihar’s council of ministers. Before we discuss the role of caste, it would be worthwhile to let history judge whether Biharis had committed mass hara-kiri or given a lesson to the BJP at the Centre to get out of the campaign mode and move towards the serious business of governance. Coming to the question of caste, it does play a role in the electoral battles in the state. But is it that strong a factor in determining social relationships also?

Is it correct to say that Bihar has not gone liberal on caste matters merely on the basis of an electoral outcome? I largely disagree with the social belief that caste is fundamental to all social and political arrangement in the state. Social evils like caste discrimination have been part of the social fabric of almost all the states. However, there is no reason to single out Bihar.

It’s true that social reforms movements from the medieval times have failed to erase caste contours. But the changing social needs of the 21st century have definitely left a lasting impression. Taking up the case of Bihar, where poor job opportunities and education facilities from the 1970s to the beginning of the 21st century ensured migration on a large scale, the changes in social relationships is there for everyone to see. The outwards movement of people from the state has proved to be the most important factor in making a dent into the caste super-structure.

While the outward movement did bring a certain amount of social exposure for migrants, it is the older generation among social elites, who are custodians of conservative societal norms, which has decided to cross the traditionalist medians. Three-and-half decades ago when my grand-mother passed away at her huge mansion in Patna, all alone, her death went unnoticed for few hours. She wouldn't allow anybody other than her Brahmin maid inside the bedroom.

Last week when my mother bade goodbye to the world in the same house, where she too was living all by herself for a decade after my father's death, she had a retinue of attendants standing beside her to bid adieu. The end came suddenly to her, but her tribal-Christian maid ensured that she had a gulp of Ganga water before she passed out. My mother had tutored her all these years to give her basil leaves and holy water in her last moments as she did not expect her migrant children to be then present. My mother indeed had planned well as we were not there when she breathed her last.

For my mother, Agnes, the maid, was the Annapurna, the Goddess who ensures food for all. Then there was the old-time chowkidar, Dubey Paswan. A Dalit daily wage earner, he kept night vigil at the house and ensured there were enough flowers every morning for her puja. He would give a miss to his daytime wage-earning job if he felt his service could be needed in the household. And her driver had ensured a 'safe drive' to each doctor she visited and got her pension renewed and bank passbook updated.

None of them were born in her immediate family. They did not belong to her caste or religion. But the four maintained a very strong bond. I wonder when sociologists and political scientists have written tomes on divisive trends due to prevailing caste system in Bihar, why no one bothered to examine such relationships built completely on humane and compassionate considerations.

The readers of the notebook can feel assured that my mother's is not an isolated case. Today in Patna, aged parents of migrant children have taken the lead in breaking social barriers and allowing people from communities other than their own into their inner apartments. Some may say that compulsions and needs of care in old age may have forced them to give up their conservative ways. This may be true, but nonetheless it indeed has started a trend of social inclusion.

This brings us to the point that if there are cases of such social inclusion available, whatever the compulsion, then why does caste continue to play such a dominant role in electoral battles. One of the reasons is the continuation of caste-based quota. According to sociologist Satish Deshpande, unlike development, reservations cannot remain blind to caste. There is a need to ask whether the social inclusion policy was stifling chances of any social bonding happening on account humane considerations.

Thinkers like Deshpande agree that we need to question the system with the redressal of caste inequality not because the reservation system is no longer needed but because it is no longer enough. If the premise is that quota has not served the purpose of ending caste inequality, then thinkers like Deshpande also need to find out what adverse effect it has had on the process of social inclusion. That would give us the complete picture. So let's leave Bihar to its own, it would certainly show light to rest of the country.

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