

As Bihar votes, Lalu regains campaign centrestage

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By Sidharth Mishra



Bihar Assembly polls have never witnessed such spotlight since Independence. In fact not since 1987, when Rajiv Gandhi went campaigning in West Bengal with the slogan of 'Nutan Bengal', has any state Assembly election seen a duel between the sitting Chief Minister of the state and the ruling Prime Minister of the country. Jyoti Basu gave Rajiv Gandhi a bloody nose, which marked the beginning of a decline for the charismatic leader. And now, in 2015, Prime Minister Narendra Modi has locked himself in a similar battle with Bihar CM Nitish Kumar.

With campaigning concluding on Saturday for the first of five-phase polls for the 243 seats, an apparent difference between the script of West Bengal polls of 1987 and Bihar polls of 2015 is coming to the fore.

The battle of Bihar is increasingly coming to be seen as a fight between Modi and erstwhile Bihar CM and debarred to contest leader Lalu Prasad Yadav. 'Bade Bhai' (elder brother) to his new found poll ally Nitish Kumar, Lalu has come to acquire a position where he suits scripts of both the contesting alliances.

The Grand Alliance of Nitish and Lalu, is banking on the votes of the Other Backward Class (OBC), the bedrock of which is the Muslim Yadav (M-Y) alliance, to which Lalu Yadav claims a patent ownership right. Thus no wonder Nitish Kumar has allowed him space as a star campaigner.

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On the other hand, the BJP-led NDA knows that their best chances are in the anti-Lalu votes consolidation. No wonder the Prime Minister in his rallies has charged that if Nitish Kumar came to power, Lalu Yadav would rule by remote, reminding people of the 'Jungle Raj' of Lalu-Rabri's 15-year regime.

In the free for all diatribe unleashed by both the sides, the Prime Minister has called Lalu Yadav 'Shaitan' (devil) to which he retorted by calling Prime Minister 'Brahma Pisach' (super devil). The issue of beef eating too has had its share in the exchange of fire between the two sides.

As campaigning peaked, Lalu Prasad's "Hindus also eat beef" remark was hotly debated, with Prime Minister Narendra Modi seeking to turn the tables on the RJD boss. Modi vigorously stirred Bihar's melting electoral pot by accusing Lalu of "insulting" the "Yaduvanshis" (Lalu's own Yadav caste), who rear cattle, by his comment.

Modi's remarks provoked accusations of trying to communalise the elections. "The real Modi on display — brazen attempt to add communal texture to Bihar polls, but deafening silence on deplorable incident of Dadri," said Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar. The BJP-NDA issued rebuttal with equal venom.

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