

New Social Coalitions and Electoral Politics: Trends from Panchayat Elections 2001 in Bihar

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Abstract

The rise of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) on the electoral map of Bihar is generally attributed to the failure of Lalu Government in Bihar. Lalu Prasad Yadav had risen to power on the plank of a new social-engineering in the favour of poor and the deprived on the one hand, and on the other hand, taking strident positions against the right-wing organizations on the alleged communal politics in the state.

These two core issues, however, remained confined to electoral rhetoric. Lalu enthralled the lower/backward class and castes and the Dalit communities in the initial days of his tenure. These castes took pride in him being the Chief Minister of the state. However, this euphoria did not last long. Lalu Prasad Yadav succeeded in giving a dignified identity to the Dalit castes but failed to empower them in terms of equitable share in economic spheres. His Dalit agenda for all practical purposes got reduced to caste-agenda and that too subsequently did not go beyond Yadavas, a powerful backward caste to which he belongs. The Muslim-Yadav combination worked for him in elections for one and a half decades. But gradually, other castes polarized against the Rastriya Janata Dal (RJD) government. Certainly, the second success of the NDA under Nitish Government in the assembly elections was due to its performance but the first government of the NDA was the result of a new coalition between the upper castes and the Dalits that emerged against the caste coalition pursued by the RJD and failure of its governance. And its trends can be gauged in the results of Panchayat elections. This paper endeavours to delve into the realm of this new coalition to show its myriad dimensions and exhibit how it worked in the Panchayat elections and further setting a favorable platform for the NDA in the ensuing assembly elections in Bihar.

KEYWORDS: NDA, RJD, Panchayat, Mukhia, Dalits, Mandalization Zila Parishad, Gram Panchayat, Gram Sabha, Panchayat Samiti]

Though Bihar justly takes pride in introducing the first 'Republic'¹ to the world in ancient time, it never earned the distinction of being the role model for other states in democratic governance in the post-independence India. On the contrary, the state always attracted the attention of the national media, both print and electronic, more for violence, booth capturing, murder, riggings in elections and corruption. This has been true for all elections; from parliamentary elections to state assembly to panchayat at the grass root level. Legitimacy of elections and representative character of institutions of local governance in Bihar thus have always been attracting controversy and debates.

Rampant poverty, illiteracy driven ignorance, caste-bitterness; being located in the whirlpool of a pre-dominantly feudal socio-economic order, never allowed a great chunk of population of the state to realize the value of equality and human dignity, leave alone their status as an equal partner in the political process.

Though elections took place, yet the marginalized groups in socio-economic hierarchy by and large, remained passive onlookers. Their votes either got purchased or subverted to manufacture popular will by the dominant castes and classes. For many decades, *Dalits* and lower castes did not see the ballot papers, especially in rural Bihar. Their votes were cast, but not by them but by the upper castes dominant in the areas through the process of rigging. And to ensure this, all tactics ranging from capturing of polling booths to engaging them deliberately at workplace in the fields, on the day of elections were applied. Interestingly, in several cases the daily wage earners on agricultural land were deliberately sent on work by the land owning castes on the day of elections so as to prevent them from voting.² The result was obvious. The grassroots politics of Bihar for several decades virtually remained under control of the upper castes, and some dominant castes within the Other Backward Castes (OBCs). This premise finds evidential stamp if one looks at the caste composition of elected representatives to the assembly and the parliamentary elections in the state from 1950s onwards. *Bhumihar, Brahmins* and *Rajputs* from the upper castes and *Yadavas, Kurmis and Koeris* from the OBCs, dominated the electoral politics in Bihar, and the panchayat too were not an exception to it.

Though panchayats in Bihar were in existence prior to the Balwant Rai Mehta Committee³ but a truly representative and responsive panchayat came into existence only after the Panchayati Raj Act was passed in 1961 by the state legislative assembly in response to the recommendations of B. R. Mehta committee and its subsequent approval by the National Development Council (NDC). This was the era of hysterical euphoria for democratic decentralization. The states were in competitive race against each other to introduce the Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs). However, in Bihar, it well served the interests of the dominant upper castes which had refashioned its role as an intermediary power between the political elites at the higher level and a common man in villages. The upper castes found in the panchayat a good opportunity to legitimize their representative role at the grassroots level as well as to draw the economic benefits flowing from it. The caste character of the local bureaucracy and proximity of the upper castes with them enabled these dominant castes to draw the maximum benefits from the system. They used to bag all contracts pertaining to the rural development projects at the local level and they virtually controlled the entire public distribution system (PDS) at the panchayat level. They exercised this to oblige the rural poor and carved out a new patrimonial identity for themselves in the new political set up. The supply of sugar beyond the ration quota or kerosene on festive occasions or during the functions in the family was enough to earn accolades and salute from the poor lots. In return, these people showed allegiance to the head of the village panchayat, '*Mukhiaji*' by rallying behind his directions on whom to vote at the time of elections.

Mukhia, in fact, acquired a new social and political status in the society. In the initial decades of democratic experiment when democratic consciousness had yet to register the penetration at the bottom level, contestants for the assembly or parliamentary elections did not campaign door to door, from village to village but by visiting the influential people of a locality- of which *Mukhia*, of course, was one of the most influential components. *Mukhia*, in fact, emerged as a central political figure at the panchayat level. He was a credible interface between the rural mass and the local bureaucracy on the one hand and political representatives of assembly and parliamentary constituency on the other.

Though panchayat elections were not allowed to be contested on party symbols⁴, every political party was engaged in the exercise of ensuring the victory of people who had political allegiance to their party. In fact, the symbols were not there but political parties were, of course, intensely involved in the electoral battle.

It was the Congress, of course, that took the lead due to several historical factors on its side such as organizational structures, reputation it earned during the freedom movement, financial resources as well as human resources due to Congress being in power in both the states and the centre. People from the dominant caste and dominant family of villages and areas usually went into contesting the election which gave them additional edge in the social profile due to political importance. But this profile subsequently became the route to rot in the system. It was the growing importance of *Mukhiaji* as a political entity at the grassroots level that attracted the entry of violence and politicization of the panchayat. Those elements who used to capture booths for others realized that why they themselves should not enter the fray rather than working for others. This brought criminal elements in the electoral fray.

Thus, the grassroots democracy which was likely to bring about a revolutionary change at the village level dissipated in oblivion without leaving any positive transformation. Neither had it served the purpose of democratic recruitment and training at the local level, in absence of popular people participation, nor did it cater to the needs of socio-economic change in rural areas. The idea of decentralized administration did not come true and the entire exercise met the similar fate of that of the Community Development Program of 1952 against which it was conceived and designed. The upper castes and dominants within the OBCs which had feudal and landlord background dominated the representative institutions and the last man of Gandhi virtually remained at the periphery. This by and large continued till Bihar went for Panchayat polls after the Janata Party assumed power in the state.

Elections for panchayat in 1978 in this respect were different. Karpoori Thakur, the then Chief Minister of Bihar, after assuming power, immediately announced the elections for panchayat. Announcement of the panchayat elections was not without meaning and purpose. Thakur wanted to ride on the crest of anti-Congressism wave which was reflected in the electoral defeat of the party in most of the states in North and Central India and brought Janata Party Government in these states as well as at the centre. Thakur wanted to cash on the political build-up and humble the Congress Party at the grassroots

level as well. The frustration of the middle class with the Congress, fissures within the upper castes which traditionally voted for the Congress on the issue of political allegiance, and simmering discontent among the rural poor had created a fertile terrain for the Janata Party.

Karpoori Thakur used this opportunity. By invoking reservation policy he broke the social coalition of the Congress which had earlier ensured victory for the party in elections. Protests by the upper castes on the issue of reservation activated *Dalit* mobilization and it got political articulation in the form of vote against Congress. Now, Congress, whose leadership came primarily from the upper castes and support base from the poor and the ignorant, landed up in a 'catch 22 syndrome'. It neither could publicly support the reservation for the backward castes nor could it openly approve it.

Moreover, by that time, a new generation which had been exposed to the anti-Congress rhetoric from the very beginning had reached the age of voting. The compound effect of all this dented the popular base of the Congress severely. *Dalits* and backward castes had experienced a new kind of political empowerment in the assembly elections and they were quite enthused to repeat the same in the panchayat' elections. As a result, the backward castes representation improved significantly in the elections. The backward castes, for the first time, outnumbered the upper castes by capturing around 42.06 per cent seats of *Mukhias*, almost 1.14 per cent more than the representation of the upper castes, though the representation of the Scheduled Castes (1.3 per cent), and lower backward castes with 3.9 per cent was very poor⁵. The reasons for under-representation of the lower backward castes and the Scheduled Castes were primarily because of educational backwardness and socio-economic under-development of these communities.

Meanwhile, from 1978 to 2001, Bihar went through a major socio-economic and political transformation. Though Congress bounced back to power in assembly elections of 1980, it could not muster the courage to go for fresh panchayat elections. As a result, the people who got elected to the posts of *Mukhias* in 1978 continued to hold the positions till 2001 as Bihar went to the polls after a gap of twenty-three years. Needless to say, the continued political exposure of these people, especially *Dalits* not only enhanced their individual status and position in the society but also strengthened their collective confidence. They started realizing the power of politics and significance of participation in the political process. Agrarian conflicts and labor movements in several parts of Bihar, which degenerated into caste conflicts and other vices at later stage, created a new consciousness among the *Dalits*. More importantly, on economic fronts *Dalits* became less dependent on the agricultural wages.

Though Bihar did not realize the industrialization and rapid agricultural growth over the last two decades, it witnessed a heavy migration of wage earning population from the state to the far-flung states like Delhi, Gujarat, Maharashtra and Assam where they engaged themselves in manual labor. It led to a new phenomenon of 'money order capitalism' in rural Bihar which altered the social equation as well as property relations in villages. While the upper caste peasants started selling their landed property partly due to agricultural unrest and partly in order to meet the educational cost of their children

studying in metro or bigger urban centers, *dalits* started purchasing their landholdings from hard earned money in cities. Though it did not empower them much in economic terms, it of course gave them the social space denied to them so far.

With the ascendancy of Rashtriya Janata Dal in Bihar and the subsequent *Mandalization* of administration, this process got further momentum and strength. Redistribution of 'Gairmajarua(*unauthorized*)and *parati*(vacant) land holdings', which so far had been under the control and use of upper castes brought a new social polarization in rural Bihar. With the application of the provisions of the Mandal Commission this social polarization got further accentuation. It resulted into good political dividends for the Rastriya Janata Dal(RJD) in the coming assembly and parliamentary elections. Lalu gave them the social identity, and *Dalits* in return empowered him with absolute majority in the legislative assembly. This coalition was, of course, against the upper castes but this new polarization of diverse social variables did not last long. Fractures started appearing in this coalition due to 'caste competitiveness' subsequently leading to caste conflicts within and amongst the OBC categories itself on the issue of power sharing. Yadavas were already the land owing caste in many regions of Bihar and they directly came into conflict with lower categories within the *Dalits*. In the district of Jehanabad they took help of Ranvir Sena, a private army of land owing upper castes in Bihar to suppress the *Dalits*. The RJD Government in the state showed indifference to agrarian conflicts in the districts of Nawada, Jehanabad, Aurangabad, Patna, Bhojpur, etc where low castes landless peasants were in conflicts with the upper castes.

The caste conflicts and rivalry did not stop here. The social justice campaign of Lalu Yadav in the subsequent years got restricted to 'justice to Yadavas' only in true sense. The Yadavas not only found disproportionate and favored representation in administration, both through recruitment and promotions, they also emerged to be the biggest beneficiaries of allotment of contracts of all kinds – ranging from irrigation projects to building of roads, to control of public distribution system. This brought resentment within the 'other OBCs' and Scheduled Castes in Bihar. Thus, in subsequent years, a fissure developed within the monolithic *Dalit* category which had emerged with the rise of Lalu Prasad Yadav as a new messiah of *Dalit* interest in Bihar in the post-Mandal era. The lower caste *Dalits* did not find appropriate representation in the state administration. Lalu worked more on Muslim-Yadav (M-Y) combination along with some fractional support from Rajputs and Brahmins rather than working for a consolidated OBC vote bank. This forced many *Dalit* leaders to part ways from the RJD and simultaneously work towards a new social coalition in panchayat elections as well as legislative assembly elections in the state.

The 73rd Constitutional Amendment (1992-93)

The 73rd amendment of the Constitution was a milestone in democratic governance at the grassroots level in many respects. It was a comprehensive attempt to compensate the democratic deficit which the panchayat had been facing for decades. If, on the one hand, this amendment attempted to resolve the functional ills of the panchayati raj institutions by providing for greater financial and administrative devolution of powers, it made a far

more positive step, on the other, by making provision for holding of elections constitutionally mandatory. However, the biggest and probably the most important aspect of this act was a sincere endeavor on part of the government to widen the democratic character and representative base of these institutions. It emanated from a genuine realization that the Panchayati Raj Institutions so far had failed to reflect the democratic governance due to under-representation of women and *Dalits*. To address this lacuna, the new Panchayati Raj Act made it mandatory to give 30 per cent reservation to women at all levels- from village panchayat up to *Zila Parishad*. The state governments were given discretion to give the same proportion of women reservation for the posts of executive heads at different levels. All these provisions altered the democratic base of the Panchayati Raj Institutions and Bihar in no way was any exception to this. The elections for panchayat in 2001 thus took place in a different socio-political ambience altogether. It was an election in the post-new social renaissance in Bihar and its impact on panchayat's results was obvious.

Women Representation

Women representation in democratic process in Bihar at the grassroots level prior to panchayat election of 2001 had been pathetic. A miniscule number of women members were present both in the state assembly and parliamentary politics, but even this representation broadly covered the elite group amongst the women. The participation by common women in electoral process in the state was almost negligible. While the feudal mindset of the upper caste men restricted them to allow their counterparts to participate openly in the election process, *Dalit* women remained victims of illiteracy, economic inability, social incapacity and lack of political awareness. Women from the lower castes though for few decades from 1978 onwards had started coming out of homes to vote, women as contestants or political activists from these castes were shockingly negligible. The position of the upper caste women was also not different. The feudal background of the society, lesser exposure to education, occupational immobility and economic dependence of women prevented them from free participation in electoral process. As a result, the grassroots-democracy in Bihar remained un-represented for half of its population for decades.

The elections for Panchayat in 2001, however, displayed a different scenario and trends altogether. There was a massive turn out of women both as candidates and electorates in the elections. The female representation increased significantly though under-proportionally. They got 0.9 per cent, 10.7 per cent and 18.9 per cent seats of *Mukhia*, *Block Pradhan*, (chief at the block level) and chairmanship of *Zila Samiti* respectively⁶. Thus, though due to no reservation in posts for *Mukhia*, women candidates constituted roughly around 1 per cent of the total seats of *Mukhia*, their representation as members at different levels of panchayat improved significantly. Out of the total 116,029 members of Gram Panchayat, nearly 40,472 women candidates won the elections. Out of these 40,472 women candidates, the Scheduled Caste women numbered 8,515, thus constituting around 45.6 per cent representation compared to their male counterparts in the same category, i.e., the SC category⁷. The condition of the ST women was at its best. Out of 866 seats at panchayat level they captured 505 seats, i.e., 58 per cent of the Gram Panchayat membership and 53.4 per cent of the *Panchayat Samiti* seats in their category,

though they could not have representation as chairman of *Zila Samiti* at all. And all the women who occupied the chairmanship of the *Zila Samiti* came from the general castes⁸.

The representation of upper caste women was also not less impressive this time compared to earlier elections. They put off veils, stepped out of their homes to contest, campaign and to vote in the elections. Of course, in majority of the cases, the upper caste women responded to the calls of their husbands, especially where their husband were unable to contest due to reservation of seats, and their election campaigns were also primarily managed by them. Women largely confined to village households in their campaigns and that too primarily during the night time. As a result, there have been incidents of proxy representation. For instance, it is the husband who later was seen participating in meetings, assisting his wife with his physical presence in such meetings, entering into informal deals, or making informal decisions on behalf of his wife. Such a practice became a common phenomenon at the panchayat level.

In many cases, on being asked as what motivated them to contest the election, the upper caste women initially attempted to answer the questions in parroted forms such as sensitivity to the local issues, eagerness to do something for the betterment of the village poor, etc. but exploration more into it through informal chats proved the fallacy of such articulation. It was found that in most of the cases it was not that they had undertaken the job on their own but that had been thrown up by their husband. The restricted participation of women was largely due to continuance of social taboos and prevalence of male predominance in the society. The male members were found to discourage their female counterparts from contesting the elections. It is interesting to note that the same husband encouraged their wife to come out to vote at the village level. This is evident from the fact that the turnout of the upper caste women in the panchayat election was phenomenal. The higher turnout could be attributed to as an attempt to counter a real threat to their dominance by the lower caste at the grassroots level. Moreover, the new generation women, though not fully exposed to higher education yet not illiterate either, found it easier to respond to the new political challenges posed before the respective communities. The zeal among the lower caste women emanated from other reasons. First, the lower caste women were attracted by the possible social status attached with the membership of panchayat and the economic benefits accruing from it. Secondly, the women of the lower castes were also encouraged by participation of upper caste women in election campaigns. This convinced them to come out of the old social dogmas.

However, it does not mean that there were no women who did not act as free citizens and that none of them exercised their independent wisdom. There were several such women who fought against the ongoing course, contested against heavy-weights, campaigned on their own and also won elections with heavy margins⁹. In many cases, they did not care about protest from their husband and resisted the filthy grapevine at the village level. In some of the cases, these candidates tried their luck in assembly and council elections too¹⁰. The factor which brought this difference was the impact of educational empowerment of women of new generation. It would be worth to mention that those women who won the elections had been exposed to middle to secondary education and represented relatively the younger generation. Their participation was more compared to

the uneducated women. The educational empowerment thus facilitated accelerated the pace of political empowerment.

Panchayat and the Younger Generation

One important aspect of the panchayat elections was the participation of the youth, both as electorates and candidates. As the 2001 panchayat election was held after a gap of twenty-three years, the generation which had actively participated in 1978 panchayat elections was almost on its way out, vacating a space for the new generations to occupy the political positions. Contrary to the assembly elections, over and above 74.8 per cent people who won the seats of *Mukhias* in panchayat elections fell in the age group of 21-50. Only 25.2 per cent of the candidates who emerged victorious in the elections of *Mukhias* belong to the age group above-50. Between the age group of 21-40 there were 46 per cent candidates who got elected to the posts of *Mukhias*. Similarly, at the block level, 77 per cent chairpersons fell in the age group of 21-50. In the age group of 21-40, the percentage was 56. This trend continued even at the district level where 59.4 per cent chairmanship of *Zila Samiti* went to the candidates belonging to the age group of 21-40. The youth percentage in the age group of 21-50 constituted to be 81. The statistics suggest that at all levels of panchayat, older people had lesser representation¹¹.

The participation of the youth carried immense significance. Of course, this did not lead to a direct correlation between the panchayat leadership and the leadership for the forthcoming assembly elections, but, in many cases, the young people became the new mobilizing instruments, at least at the community level, in the assembly elections. Many youth fought the assembly elections too. This new participation was seen both in case of upper castes and lower castes though the reasons for both these categories were different.

For the upper castes, it was more an opportunity to grab power at the grassroots level for economic and political benefits as well as to retain the hold on grassroots power politics, whereas for the lower castes it was an opportunity for realization of political empowerment. *Mukhia* of Kanap Gram Panchayat, Shravan Kumar, a low-caste Hindu made it clear that his primary objective behind contesting the panchayat election was to break the political monopoly of the upper castes and to invoke a sense of political membership among the people coming from the lower castes. Though Shravan Kumar did not explicitly talk of caste conflicts, he termed the growing political consciousness among *Dalits* as a new sign towards renewed social consciousness among the lower castes. The enthusiasm of the younger generation was driven by a variety of reasons; from socio-political status to economic gains. Again, the participation of the Dalit youth in the election process was comparatively higher than the youth representation from the upper castes. This development could be attributed to the growing social and political consciousness among these underprivileged sections of society, especially due to spread of education and affirmative action initiated by the state.

Caste Representations

Figure III (in the appendix) makes it amply clear that there was a general decline in the representation of upper castes in the panchayat elections of 2001. However, this decline

was not very sharp, but a modest one. The only exception was Rajputs who suffered by 3.2 per cent. By and large upper castes retained their relative predominance. The upper castes got seats disproportionate to numerical strength of their communities. For instance, in elections of *Mukhia* the Bhumihars, the Brahmins and the Rajputs suffered merely by 1.4, 1.5 and 3.2 per cent respectively; their strength in elections of chairman of *Zila Parishad* remained not that bad. These three castes won 8.2, 13.5 and 13.5 per cent of seats respectively¹². The lower representation of the Kayasthas could primarily be seen owing to their urban concentration. The continued predominance of the upper castes at different levels of panchayat displays the art of political maneuverings and drawing a new social equation with the support of the lower castes. Surprisingly, among the upper castes it is the Rajputs who suffered the most with the decline of 3.2 per cent of seats for *Mukhias*. It is the Rajputs about whom there was a general impression that this caste did not confront the RJD in Bihar and derived benefits from government. In fact, from amongst the upper castes, it is the Rajputs which had larger number of ministers in the RJD Government in Bihar.

Figure IV (in the appendix) reflects the general resurgence of the OBC as their representation of *Mukhia* increased from 42.06 per cent in 1978 to 45.7 per cent in 2001 (Singh 2005).¹³ Even at the block and district levels, the OBC performance increased significantly. The OBCs outnumbered the upper castes by grabbing 58.7 and 56.7 per cent of chairmanship of *Yadavass* and *Zila Samitis* respectively¹⁴.

But, a careful scrutiny of statistics displays some interesting trends. First, even within the OBC category, the dominant castes had disproportionate representation irrespective of their numerical strength of population. And the lower backward castes and SCs, as usual, remained under-represented. For example, the Yadavas got a quantum jump from 20.2 per cent in 1978 to 24.2 per cent in 2001, a 4 per cent gain in elections for *Mukhias*. The percentage representation of the Yadavas for elections of executive heads of *Zila Parishad* (at district level) increased to 35.1 per cent. The other significant castes within OBCs such as the Koeris and the Kurmis registered only a modest increase of seats such as 1.1 per cent and 1 per cent respectively. The biggest gainer was the Muslim community which appropriated roughly around 15.6 per cent of total seats of the *Mukhias*, an increase of almost 5.2 per cent. Some of the reasons for under-representation of SCs and STs can be attributed to Laloo's focus on the M-Y factor, their overall socio-economic and educational backwardness, absence of constituency-wise numerical concentration as is the case with the upper castes and dominant Hindus, due to the absence of immovable landed property.

Panchayat Elections, 2001 and Legislative Assembly Elections, 2005

It is interesting to see that the panchayat election of 2001 witnessed a new social coalition in which the members of the lower castes supported the upper castes rather than backing the Yadavas. It was primarily because of this reason that the upper castes, particularly the Bhumihars and the Rajputs retained their disproportionate strength in the elections. The new social coalition broke the monolith *Dalit* category and heralded a new socio-political combination in the state. This coalition acted against the M-Y factor in general. This is evident from the fact that where lower backward castes have effective electoral strengths

to influence the electoral decisions, the Janata Dal (United) and Bharatiya Janata Party (JDU-BJP) combination won the elections. It was the shift of the votes of the lower OBCs in favor of the JD (U) and BJP that derailed RJD's attempt to reclaim the state after unbroken stint of fifteen-year rule in the state. It is significant to know that the social base of Laloo did not decline as his party got 24.1 per cent votes in the elections held in December 2001. Thus, it was just a decline of 0.9 per cent of votes compared to what RJD had got in the preceding panchayat elections in February 2001¹⁵. The matter of fact is that it was not the major slide in the RJD vote bank that led to the fall of the Rabri government but an effective polarization and coming together of the upper castes and economically backward castes, which instead of backing Ram Vilas Paswan opted for the National Democratic Alliance. The lower Dalits who earlier had voted for Paswan deserted him in order to defeat the RJD.

Concluding Observations

The enormous turn out of the voters and contestants for the panchayat elections in Bihar implied two developments. First, the attraction for power and concomitant benefits associated to the Panchayati Raj Institutions at the grassroots levels, and secondly, the deepening faith and trust for democratic participation among the people. The 73rd amendment thus compensated the democratic loss in significant ways. Women participation not only has disciplined the working of the Panchayati Raj Institutions, it has also catered the long cherished goal of political empowerment of women. This has started delivering results as well. The survey conducted by an NGO reflects that the willingness of the women to participate in democratic polity has increased enormously. Women are now more articulate about their rights. The Bihar Panchayati Raj Act had no provision for representation for women for the executive posts. Women protested against it. Nearly 2, 000 women representatives of panchayat took to streets under the banner of the Hunger Project demanding 30 per cent reservation for them at all levels of the panchayat. The new government in Bihar yielded to this protest positively by giving them fifty per cent of reservation¹⁶. The increased women activism is more than satisfactory given their rural background. That is the reason that Mani Shankar Aiyar, the then Minister of Panchayati Raj, Government of India stated that after Tamil Nadu, women panchayat representatives in Bihar have carved out an identity for themselves more than anywhere else in the country.

Needless to say, the 73rd amendment coupled with new social renaissance, both of which have supplemented each other, have altered the traditional form of authority and paved the way for a new leadership consisting of all classes, except for the lower caste *Dalits* who still stand under-represented. The panchayat as an instrument for redistribution of political power in favor of landless castes and lower *Dalits*, have not come true so far. Moreover, though social base of the panchayat has increased, its effectiveness as an institution of democratic decision-making and the agency of decentralized development has failed because unfortunately panchayat are being managed by people who are unable to take active part in decision-making as many of them are still illiterate. Politiking, caste conflicts and violence in the panchayat elections have belied the idea of panchayat working as a cohesive community.

Moreover, the panchayat of 2006 are not the panchayat of 1959 or the panchayat of 1993. If the communication revolution and expanding market economy has turned local into international and vice versa, rising socio-political awakening has placed panchayat into the new setting altogether. If the changing social dynamic have expanded the democratic social base of the panchayat, this new setting has thrown far more challenges for these institutions. The functional and mediational role of the panchayat has increased enormously. Educationally empowered and more informed citizenry is bound to exercise far more pressure on the panchayat representatives to prove themselves truly accountable, responsive, effective and people-friendly. Though with the expansion of social base, the feudal inertia has sublimated to a great extent, yet the panchayat are yet to prove their functional efficacy and model for democratic governance at the grassroots level. After all, the terminal value of democracy does not lie in physical representation but in cohesive co-operation.

Notes and References:

1. Vaishali, a place just 15 km away from Patna across the river Ganges is believed to have given the first 'republic' to the world way back in the 6th century B.C.
2. There were several other measures as well employed by the dominant castes such as managing the polling booths in their villages so that they could maneuver the voting. See, Mukul Sharma (2001), "Making of a Panchayat Election", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXXVI, No 9, p.1577.
3. Way back in 1922, after introduction of dyarchy in the provinces, a new legislation was also introduced which conceived the idea of village panchayats. For details, see S N Mishra (1984), *Panchayati Raj, Bureaucracy and Rural Development: A Comparative Study of Gujarat and Bihar*. Delhi: IIPA.
4. Ashok Mehta Committee had recommended for organizing the panchayat elections on the party symbols which was rejected by the Central Government.
5. Shaibal Gupta (2001), "New Panchayats and Subaltern Resurgence", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXXVI, p.2742.
6. National Informatics Center: Bihar State Unit.
7. Ibid.
8. Out of 37 districts in Bihar, the woman candidates won the chairmanship only in seven districts. These districts were – Buxar, Bhagua, Muzaffarpur, Siwan, Munger, Khagardia and Lakhi Sarai. See, *EDP Cell, State Election Commission*.
9. Anita Rampal (2005), "Revaluing Education" in Radhika Chopra and Patricia Jefferay (eds.). *Educational Regimes in Contemporary India*. New Delhi: Sage, pp.240-241.

10. Ibid.

11. See Figure II in the Appendix.

12. Ashok Kumar Pankaj and Mahendra Prasad Singh (2005), “The Changing Socio-Political Profile of Local Political Elites in Bihar: A Study of the 1978 and 2001 Panchayat Elections”, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, Vol.39, No.3, p.415 & p.422.

13. Ibid.

14. State Election Commission data produced in National Informatics Center: Bihar State Unit.

15. Data from internet, [http://II search.msn.com/results](http://II.search.msn.com/results).

16. The Government of Bihar brought the ordinance to this effect on 14 January 2006 and the State Election Commission wrote to all the District Magistrates in this regard on 19 January 2006.

Appendix

Chart I: Age Profile of *Mukhias*

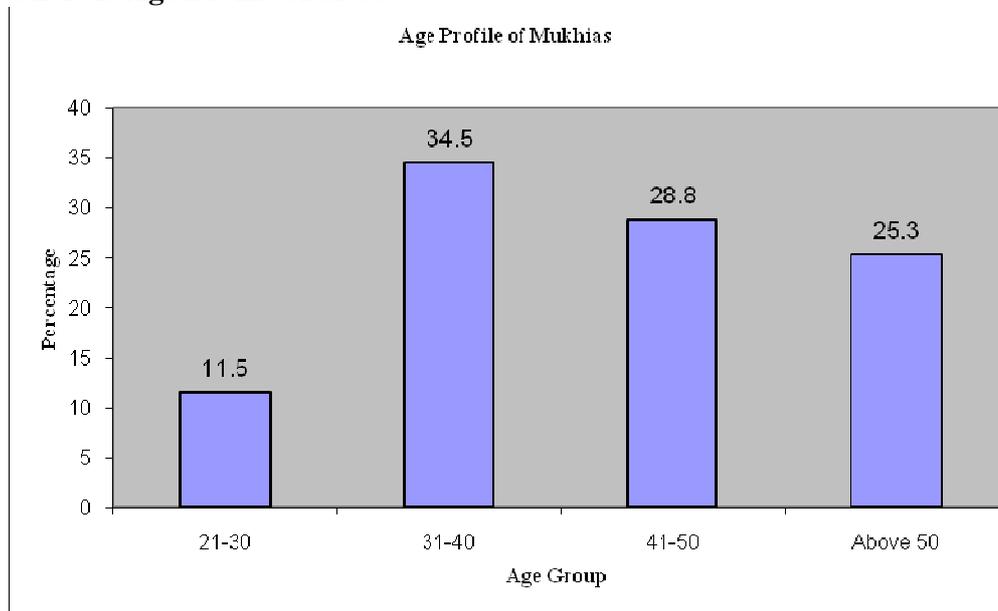


Chart II: Education Profile of Mukhias

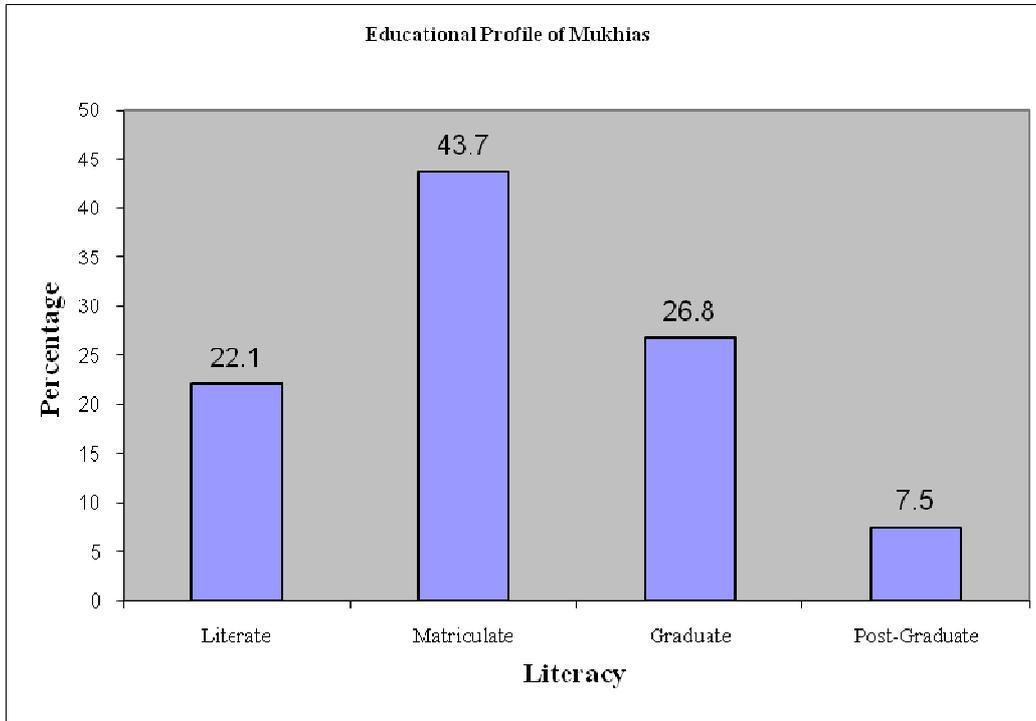


Chart III: Upper Caste Representation in Panchayats in Bihar

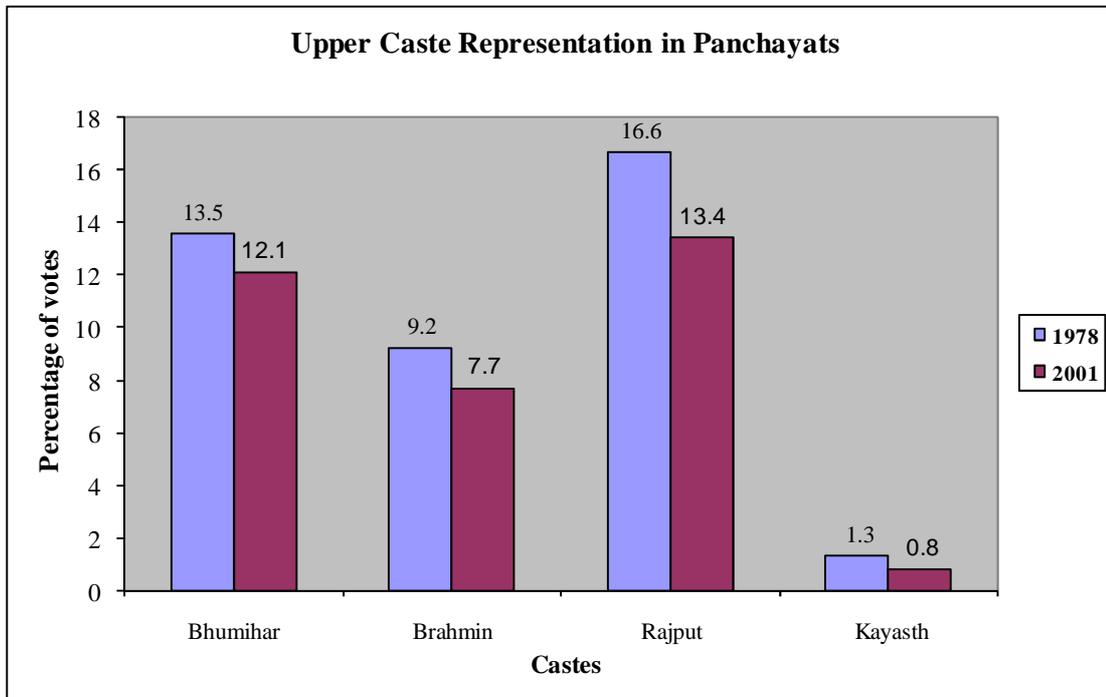


Chart IV: OBC and Muslim Representation in Panchayats in Bihar

