

The Nitish echo

Nitish Kumar's pragmatic choice reinforces a fraught idea — of Hindu consolidation and Muslim peripherality



Bihar CM Nitish Kumar and Deputy CM Sushil Kumar Modi wave at gathering after their swearing-in ceremony recently. (Source: PTI Photo)



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The significance of [Nitish Kumar](#)'s embrace of the BJP cannot be overstated. The BJP's stunning victory in UP, and now its return to power in Bihar, undoubtedly consolidates its hold over Indian politics. But is that all?

Over the last few days, it has repeatedly



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been said that ideology has ceased to matter in Indian politics, and a full-blown political marketplace, where the price of victory and defeat is calculated with the finesse of a stock-broker, has emerged. It has also been suggested that the so-called millennials, those born in the decade of the 1990s, are less ideologically inclined and more interested in economic aspirations and India's glory on the world stage. They are ushering in an ideological erosion in Indian politics.

While it is worth figuring out what the millennials want, Nitish Kumar's calculations may have little to do with it.

India's OBC politics, which nurtured Nitish (as well as Lalu Prasad and [Mulayam Singh Yadav](#)), has always combined ideology and pragmatism. When politics was dominated by the Congress, the various Janata or Samajwadi parties, which represented OBC politics, often sought coalitions with Hindu nationalists: As during the days of the Samyukta Vidhayak Dals (SVDs) in the late 1960s, when real opportunities for non-Congress state governments first emerged; as also during the Janata days, 1977-80. After the late 1980s, some of these parties teamed up with the BJP, others with the Congress. Mulayam and Lalu have been closer to the Congress, while the likes of Nitish and George Fernandes have mostly allied with the BJP.

This coalitional history at one level is paradoxical. The OBCs constitute about 43-45 per cent of the country's population, higher than any other caste grouping. Yet a political party representing them all has not emerged. The ideologies of OBC parties have also been roughly similar. Caste-based social

justice, seeking higher representation of lower castes in political power, bureaucracy, police and education, has been their key argument. They have always said that upper castes, not more than 15-16 per cent of India, have controlled power, dominated opportunities, and treated lower castes shabbily. Finally, they also believe that state power is the best way to correct historical wrongs; movement politics would take too long. They would rather be in power than outside the state, agitating. **Also [read](#) | I don't react to statements... 2019 still far away: Sharad Yadav**

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Despite ideological similarities, these parties have a history of splits. One reason is structural, the other personality-based. The so-called “graded inequalities” of the caste system constitute the structural reason. The three-fold characterisation of the caste order — upper, OBC, and Dalit — is an abstract aggregation. Each category is marked by internal hierarchies. There

are upper OBCs and lower OBCs. It is not simply the upper castes that have looked down upon the lower castes; those placed higher among the OBCs have not treated those ranked lower well either. The idea of a united OBC party thus runs into structural difficulties, even at the state level.

Second, for reasons not fully understood, all OBC parties rely on charismatic leaders and dynasties. They often clash and split their units away. This phenomenon marks even the more institutionalised OBC parties like the southern Dravidian parties. Take Lalu and his family away from the RJD, and the party would fall apart. Take Nitish away from the JD(U), and the organisation would wither away.

Because the OBC platform remains fragmented, these parties seek alliances in search of power. With few exceptions, the ideology of alliance partners has historically been less important for them than the prospect of acquiring, or remaining in, power. Nitish's latest move does not constitute a historic novelty. It is consistent with his past, as well as in correspondence with the tradition of such parties. If they believed in movement politics, not state power, these parties would be ideologically purer.

Though not a surprise, the future implications of Nitish's move are very serious. One has already been extensively commented on. He has expressed "no confidence" not only in Lalu, but also in Rahul Gandhi. Lalu's power in Bihar is a threat to him; and he has given up on Rahul's ability to be a more effective national leader.

Since Nitish was widely expected to be a leading figure in a potential grand alliance of non-BJP parties to contest Modi in 2019, his departure has a major signaling effect. More politicians are likely to give up on Rahul Gandhi and switch sides. How draining the effect is would depend on how quickly the key non-BJP parties come together and show political resolve.

They can't easily project defence of secularism as their key idea, for if secularists are tainted with believable charges of corruption, the project of secularism alone will not take the stain of corruption away. The BJP might not be incorruptible. Indeed, the Vyapam scandal reveals its corruption. The BJP also has its favourite capitalists. But in the court of public opinion, the narrative of secular corruption has stuck. In the short run, this problem can be overcome only if the Opposition can credibly demonstrate that the BJP, too, is corrupt. And the people have to believe that assertion.

One more implication of Nitish's move has not been noted. In terms of long-term reconfiguration of Indian politics, it could be far and away the most serious. It is the idea that the Muslim vote can be rendered irrelevant. The UP elections showed that. Bihar, too, has a large Muslim population and Nitish heavily relied on it in 2015. Does he, after UP, think that election victories in Bihar can be constructed with the votes of upper castes, segments of OBCs and parts of the Dalit community? He can't possibly be unaware that an alliance with the BJP at this political moment implies erosion of the Muslim vote.

Historically, the Muslim vote has been electorally significant in UP and Bihar. If what happened in UP is repeated in Bihar, non-BJP politicians in other states too might take the cue and strategise on the assumption of Muslim peripherality. The BJP is dominant today, but if the idea of Hindu consolidation and Muslim irrelevance becomes a political reality, the BJP will move from dominance to hegemony. It is not the end of ideology in Indian politics. Nitish's act of pragmatism might make the ideological questions more fraught.

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