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BATTLEGROUND BIHAR 2020

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WINNERS AND LOSERS: WHOSE VOTE COUNTS?

BY ADVAITA SINGH & AMAN KHULLAR

It is during political elections that the collective spirit of a country's citizens comes alive. The essence of democracy exudes from the campaigning rallies, waving party flags and serpentine voting lines. Heterogeneous voices echo in a state that grants universal adult franchise against the fault lines of

society. Beyond the ordinary life of oppression and social hierarchies, only during an election does every voice count the same. Or does it?

As the Bihar elections unfold in the month of November, various social groups are gearing up to inculcate their problems into the national and state conversation. Deeply ingrained inequalities and identity-politics imply that the hurdles faced by every social group are different. Even though every vote counts the same and by the sheer act of voting every adult in the





state is communicating their demands to the leaders, the 'majority rule' implies that certain social groups and minorities are left out from the meta-narrative. As the wishes and demands of certain groups continue to be sidelined, a binary of winners and losers is created. The question is 'who wins and who loses?' This can only be answered by exploring the demographics of Bihar and the issues faced by each community.





Paru, Bihar: Tejaswi Yadav from Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) Party address supporters of Paru Assembly Constituency at Paroo High School ground, Paroo village on October 30, 2020 before second phase of Bihar Elections



Plans for Home: Migrant Workers

Given the limited agricultural land and low incomes attached to farming, many workers in Bihar are forced to seek employment outside the state. As a result, historically, many natives of Bihar are not at home during election season. However, this year the COVID-19 lockdowns and quarantines across the country have forced migrant workers to flee home. Close to 25 lakh workers are back home in time for polls, with their own set of demands for the 17th Legislative Assembly.

“

All young men and women (like myself) came back to our villages. Now we are all sitting at home. The fields are clogged with water. There is no way of getting any work around. What is the other option than being poor?”

—

Ramesh, a B.Sc. student studying in Jalandhar



Back to a jobless environment, one of the top priorities for migrant workers is stable employment within the state, especially during the economically-devastating pandemic. With no remittance income, the families of migrant workers are battling crushing



economic hardships as agricultural produce has also been destroyed by floods. At the brink of subsistence, these families are turning to their government and leaders for hope.



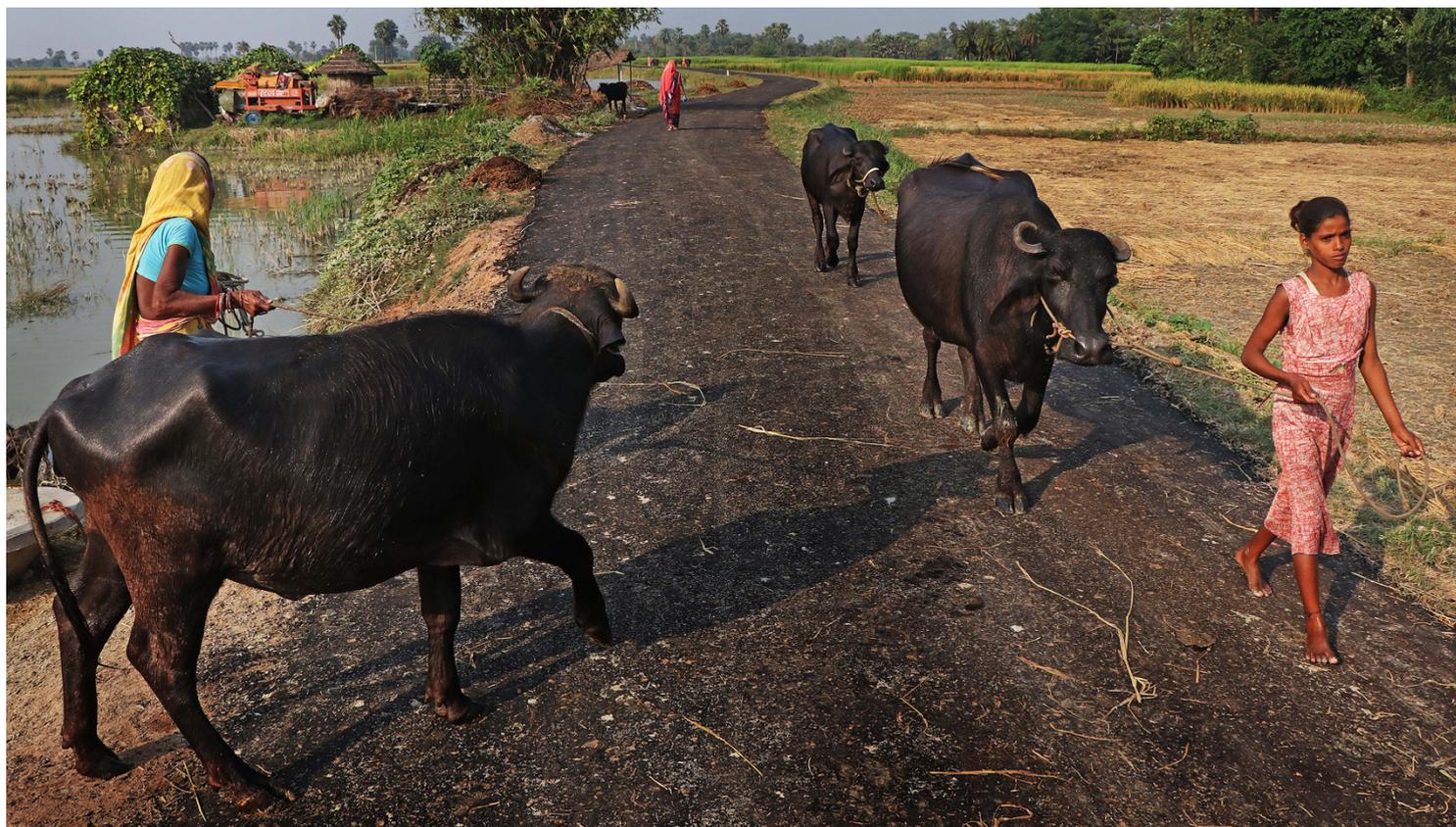
Voice of Women: Female Voters

Despite the poor sex ratio of 918 women for every 1000 men (as per 2011 census), female voters exert a considerable influence on election results. In fact, for the past few assembly elections, there has been a steady increase in the female voter turnout. The 2015 election showed that a larger percentage of women (60.48%) exercise their constitutional right of voting as compared to men (53.32%).





As 2020 welcomes 5,15,800 new female voters to its electoral rolls, the rising relevance of women in the political climate has shed some of the spotlight on women-centric issues. Nitish Kumar has tried to capture the female demographic using his female-favouring policies during his tenure. For instance, the 2016 alcohol ban, a largely unpopular move, could have gained the female vote as it was thought the cases of domestic abuse will fall. However, with the continued illegal sale of cheap liquor, it is the buyers from low socio-economic backgrounds that are being prosecuted rather than the sellers. As many husbands and sons continue to be harassed, it is possible that this policy might backfire.



However, other initiatives taken up by the JDU government such as easy credit, sanitary napkin distribution, school uniform distribution for girls and women will be politically appealing for women voters. The Lokniti-CSDS Bihar 2020 Pre-poll indicated that 41% of women were likely to vote for the NDA government, as compared to 36% of men.

While progress has been made on certain fronts, civic issues facing women have witnessed only marginal improvement. For instance, the issue of sanitation and open defecation is one still faced by many women in rural regions.





Despite the push for toilets by the PM's Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, the poor implementation of the scheme has forced women to continue defecating in the fields.

As many serious women-centric issues still plague Bihar. Even this election, each party's commitment to women empowerment has been brought into question. With the political focus has largely on employment, especially with the return of Migrant Workers, the issues faced by women have once again been given diminished attention. From the patriarchal framework of most households to the abysmal female landholding ratio, Bihar has a long long way to go to achieve gender equality.

“

Jahan bathroom hai wahan nal nahi hai, jahan nal hai wahan darwaza nhi hai. Isse achha bahar chale jaye; (Where there is bathroom, there is no tap; where there is tap, there is no door. It is better we defecate in open itself)”.

— Padma



Farmer's Plights:

Havoc rendered by the August 2020 floods, exacerbated by no remittances from migrant workers, caused many agriculture-based households to be pushed to the brink of poverty. Aid

and relief were promised of 6000 Rs, but as per our fieldwork, only 5-10% of all affected families received the entitlement. The destitution faced by these families has brought into question the entire developmental situation in Bihar.



“

“One who at least gets us 6000 rupees as aid and compensation amount for the devastation caused, gets our vote”

Starting from poor long-term infrastructure for flood control and low agricultural productivity, a poor economic environment has been constructed. This is worsened by the lack of proper roads, electricity and irrigation that limit entrepreneurship and industrial development. Rural Bihar paints a gloomy picture that makes you wonder if any form of development has tricked down over these past decades.



While identity-politics runs rampant in the state, the last few elections have witnessed a rising focus on developmental issues which gives a reason for hope. As Bihar goes to polls, the fate of the state hangs in the balance as political parties continue to promise unrealistic and glamorous policies. The weeks to come will determine which community is going to get its way for the next 5 years.

But the binary of winners and losers is only temporary. Unless the incoming government lives up to its promises, everyone's a loser and the prices will be paid in the future of the state.





PAIGAM (People's Association In Grassroots Action and Movement) is an aggregator of activists, researchers, practitioners and organisations that aims to bring together social efforts at the local, national and global levels through media advocacy and action research.

They wish to bring a seamless bridge between academia, activism, policy and public through our media, advocacy, research, grassroots fellowship and mobilization channels.

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