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Importance of Extremely Backward Classes in Bihar's Electoral Landscape

By: Aamir Raza

The EBCs have been the unsung heroes of Bihar's economy. Yet, their political influence has not matched their numbers. The 2023 caste census changed the game, highlighting their demographic significance and igniting a fierce competition among the state's political alliances to win their support.

As Bihar stands on the brink of another election, the political landscape is shifting in ways that could redefine its future. The assembly elections in November 2025 are shaping up to be a fierce battle between the ruling National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the opposition INDIA bloc, often referred to as the Mahagatbandhan. With 243 seats at stake and polls indicating a close race, one group holds the key to victory—the Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs).

Comprising 36% of Bihar's population of more than 130 million, this diverse coalition of 112 sub-castes—including fisher folk, artisans, and labourers—represents the largest social bloc in the state. Their votes, which have historically been scattered but are now gaining influence, will likely decide who takes the reins in Patna.

So, why are the EBCs so crucial? For years, they have been the unsung heroes of Bihar's economy, working as boatmen along the Ganges or as potters in villages. Yet, their political influence has not matched their numbers. The 2023 caste census changed the game, highlighting their demographic significance and igniting a fierce competition among the state's political alliances to win their support.

Chief Minister Nitish Kumar has traditionally championed the EBCs, but his declining health and frequent switches between the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) have created doubts about his reliability. Meanwhile, the INDIA bloc, led by Rahul Gandhi and Tejashwi Yadav, is making ambitious promises of justice and fairness to attract EBC voters. And Prashant Kishor's Jan Suraj party is fielding many EBC candidates. All this makes this assembly election quite unpredictable.

From Margins to Mainstream

The rise of the EBCs was kicked off in the tumultuous 1970s, when Karpoori Thakur, a barber by trade and a socialist leader, bravely took on upper-caste domination in Bihar. As the chief minister (1971-72; 1977-79), he established the Mungeri Lal Commission in 1978, which created the EBC category within the larger Other Backward Classes (OBCs) group. This was a significant step in acknowledging the unique challenges faced by smaller, marginalised groups such as the Mallahs, Telis, and Nonias, who were often overshadowed by more dominant OBCs like the Yadavs and Kurmis.

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Thakur's decision to implement a 26% reservation, including 10% specifically for the EBCs, ignited protests from the upper castes but it sowed the seeds for a social revolution. His legacy, which earned him a posthumous Bharat Ratna in 2024, continues to inspire EBC aspirations today.

Fast forward to the 1990s, when Lalu Prasad Yadav emerged on the scene, integrating the EBCs into his Muslim-Yadav coalition to challenge upper-caste authority. His party, the RJD, held sway for 15 years, but as power shifted towards the Yadavs, many of the EBCs felt they were being overlooked.

This opened the door for Nitish Kumar, a Kurmi, who took the lead in EBC representation in 2005, partnering with the BJP. Nitish's reforms were transformative—he granted an 18% reservation for the EBCs in jobs and education, increasing it to 20% in local governance. He also introduced welfare initiatives such as bicycles for schoolgirls and scholarships for Mahadalits. These efforts solidified the EBC support for him when the 2010 assembly elections came around. It resulted in a significant victory for the NDA with 206 seats in the 243-member house.

In the 2015 elections, Nitish briefly joined forces with the RJD, bringing the EBCs and Yadavs together for a decisive win with 178 seats. However, his return to the BJP in 2017 fractured this alliance. By 2020, 58% of the EBCs supported the NDA, giving them 125

seats, a narrow advantage over the Mahagatbandhan with 110 seats. Women, influenced by Nitish’s prohibition policy and cash transfers, showed strong support for the NDA, with 63% backing it compared to 59% of men.

However, the 2023 caste census brought to light a troubling reality—even though the EBCs make up 36% of the population, they only occupy 12% of ministerial positions, and are falling behind in government jobs. This disparity, along with Nitish’s perceived betrayals—like his shifting alliances and unsuccessful push for 75% reservation—has left the EBCs feeling restless and ready to assert their power at the polls.

The Numbers Game

Bihar’s electorate is a vibrant mix of castes, with the EBCs making up the largest segment. According to the 2023 caste census, they account for 36.01% of the state’s population, overshadowing Yadavs (14.26%), Muslims (17.7%), and upper castes (15.52%). With 130 sub-castes, ranging from Nishads in the flood-prone Kosi region to Kumhars in urban Patna, they hold sway over 120 seats in regions such as Mithila, Magadh, and Seemanchal.

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Back in 2020, just a 1% shift in EBC votes could have turned the tide in 10 to 15 seats, enough to alter the government’s fate. Their power is not just about numbers; it is also about their unpredictability. Unlike the Yadavs, who are firmly aligned with the RJD, the EBCs do not have a single leader, which makes them a dynamic but uncertain force.

Insights from the 2020 Lokniti-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) survey shed light on their voting patterns. While 58% supported the NDA, only 18% leaned towards the Mahagatbandhan, with a small 4% drifting to Chirag Paswan’s Lok Janshakti Party (LJP). Interestingly, women showed stronger loyalty, driven by initiatives like the Rs. 1,000 monthly aid to them.

However, there are signs of discontent. With Bihar’s unemployment rate at 7.2%, EBC youth are particularly affected, and around 20 million of them migrate to Delhi or the Gulf for jobs each year. Their remittances play a crucial role in boosting Bihar’s economy, but the lack of jobs and increasing social tensions—like land disputes and social injustices—are fuelling frustration. A shift of 5% to 7% of the EBC votes to the INDIA bloc could potentially secure 20 seats, flipping the assembly. Nitish’s Janata Dal (United) [JD(U)] is only contesting 102 seats this time.

Fragmentation brings a whole new level of complexity. Sub-castes like the Telis (2.81%) and Nishads (2.6%) are at odds over reservation benefits, especially highlighted by the 2024 Tanti reinstatement controversy. The census reveals that the EBCs make up 63% of the OBC-EBC group, which has sparked calls for “*jitniabadi, utnahaq*” (rights in proportion to population). With voter turnout historically hovering between 55% and 60%, a united EBC bloc could push that to 65%, potentially changing the game in 120 seats.

On a national scale, Bihar’s 40 Lok Sabha seats, where the NDA triumphed 30-9 in 2024, could see a surge in EBC support in 2029. This could ignite similar movements among backward classes in Uttar Pradesh.

Justice Crusade

The Mahagatbandhan, which includes the RJD, Congress, left parties, and allies like Mukesh Sahani’s Vikassheel Insaan Party (VIP), is on a mission to win over EBC votes. They are stepping outside their traditional Yadav-Muslim base to form a wider coalition dubbed “MY-BAAP” (Muslim-Yadav-Bahujan-Adivasi-Aadhi Abadi-Pichhda).

On 24 September 2025, in Patna, Gandhi and Yadav rolled out their “Ati Pichhda Nyay Sankalp Patra”, a 10-point manifesto specifically designed for the EBCs. It is a blend of policy initiatives and symbolic gestures, even calling on Thakur’s legacy to counter Nitish’s appeal.

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At the heart of their plan is the proposed “Ati Pichhda Atyachar Nivaran Adhiniyam”, a law aimed at safeguarding the EBCs from caste-based violence, inspired by existing Scheduled Castes/Scheduled Tribes (SC/ST) legislation. They are promising to boost EBC reservations in panchayats and urban bodies from 20% to 30%, extend quotas to private colleges, and ensure that 50% of the seats in

private schools are reserved for EBC, SC, ST, and OBC students under the Right to Education Act.

To push past the 50% reservation ceiling, they are looking to add quotas to the Ninth Schedule, which would protect them from judicial scrutiny. This is similar to what Tamil Nadu did with its 69% reservation. Other commitments include eliminating “Not Found Suitable” rejections in job applications (a common barrier for EBC candidates); allocating small plots of land—roughly 1,300 sq ft in urban areas and 2,200 sq ft in rural—for those without land; reserving 50% of contracts up to Rs. 25 crore for the EBCs; and establishing a Reservation Regulatory Authority to oversee caste lists.

Symbolism plays a crucial role here. In June 2025, the RJD appointed Mangani Lal Mandal, from the Dhanuk community that makes up about 2.21% of the population, as its new state president, taking over from Thakur Jagdanand Singh. Mandal, who was a former JD(U) member of parliament (MP), apparently adds a layer of credibility to the party.

Meanwhile, the Congress is pushing its EBC Nyay Yatra, led by figures such as Kunal Bihari and Shashibhushan Pandit, focusing on artisans such as Lohars and Kumhars. Yadav’s Patna rally in May, titled “Atipichhda Jagao”, criticised the NDA for its “injustices” and promised jobs and anti-corruption initiatives. The RJD is also forming alliances with the VIP to court Nishads, who represent about 9% of the population, while the left’s Communist Party of India (Marxist–Leninist) [CPI(ML)] is reaching out to landless EBCs in Bhojpur with promises of land reform.

However, sceptics question the authenticity of these efforts. In the lead-up to the 2024 Lok Sabha elections, the RJD primarily favoured Yadav candidates. It only had three EBC candidates, all of whom were defeated. A recent by-poll loss in the EBC-dominated Rupauli constituency has also been a blow. Yet, the early launch of its manifesto aims to take control of the narrative, portraying the EBCs as “bahujans” in the battle for Bihar. If it manages to swing 20% to 25% of the EBC vote, it could spell trouble for the NDA. But making this happen is a real challenge.

The Welfare Fortress

The NDA, which includes the BJP, JD(U), Chirag Paswan’s LJP (Ram Vilas), and Jitan Ram Manjhi’s Hindustani Awam Morcha (Secular) [HAM(S)], leans heavily on Nitish Kumar’s appeal among the EBCs, bolstered by the BJP’s strong organisational presence. Even without a formal manifesto, it has introduced 20 welfare schemes since July 2025, specifically aimed at the EBCs and women.

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For instance, the Mukhyamantri Mahila Rojgar Yojana provides Rs. 10,000 to 75 lakh women, with assistance of up to Rs. 2 lakh. The Nishchay Self-Help Allowance offers Rs. 1,000 a month to unemployed graduates aged 20 to 25, while Student Credit Cards make interest-free loans available. Pensions for elderly EBCs have increased to Rs. 1,100, electricity is almost free for the first 125 units, and the honorariums for anganwadi workers have doubled to Rs. 9,000, all of which resonate with Bihar’s 49% female electorate.

Nitish’s track record serves as his armour. Since 2006, the representation of EBCs in the assembly has seen a rise, with the JD(U) fielding 17 EBC candidates in 2020, all of whom won. The BJP, looking to expand its influence, has 75% of its candidates from OBC, EBC, SC, and Mahadalit groups. Modi’s Teli background and cabinet selections like Renu Devi (Nonia) and Raj Bhushan Choudhury (Mallah) reflect a commitment to inclusion, complemented by Hindutva rallies. Allies such as the LJP (20 seats) and HAM(S) (10 seats) further strengthen the EBC base.

However, the NDA has its vulnerabilities. Nitish’s 2023 effort to raise reservations was struck down by the Patna High Court, marking a major political setback. Tensions over seat-sharing—such as Paswan’s demand for 40 seats—are straining alliance unity.

On its part, the CPI(ML) Liberation – an important force in Bihar --sees the struggle for better conditions of the EBCs as a vital part of the fight for social justice. These communities are often caught in a cycle of poverty, landlessness, and lack of representation in both jobs and education. The recent 2023 caste survey sheds light on the harsh realities faced by EBCs—34% of their households earn less than Rs 6,000 a month, with very little access to land or government jobs. The CPI(ML) is pushing for land redistribution, reservations in the private sector, increases in MNREGA wages, and a stronger 65% quota to uplift EBCs. They also criticize the BJP-Nitish alliance for their superficial gestures and divisive communal strategies. For the CPI(ML), empowering EBCs through ongoing grassroots movements is a crucial step toward breaking down the inequalities created by neoliberal policies.

Jan Suraj and Other Disruptors

Prashant Kishor's Jan Suraj is fielding 75 EBC candidates who are promising to "end exploitation". With a focus on Nitish's stronghold across 100 seats, this move could snag 5% to 10% of the EBC votes, potentially splitting the bloc. The recent voter roll purges, which have wiped out 3.5 lakh names, has hit migrant EBCs the hardest, upsetting the balance between rural and urban voters. The new players on the field this time add a layer of unpredictability to an already tense race.

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The EBCs confront several formidable challenges. Internal rivalries—such as disputes between Teli and Tanti groups—continue to undermine their cohesion. Large-scale migration to cities has further diminished the electoral clout of rural EBC communities. Meanwhile, the promises made by both alliances depend on securing central approval to add specific clauses to the Ninth Schedule—a move the BJP could obstruct.

Still, if Bihar manages to secure these changes, it could trigger a nationwide ripple effect—fresh demands for a caste census, extension of quotas to the private sector, and a renewed contestation of the 50% reservation cap established by the 1992 Indra Sawhney judgment.

With its 40 Lok Sabha seats, Bihar remains a political bellwether ahead of the 2029 Lok Sabha elections, heightening the stakes even further.

The Verdict Awaits

Bihar's 2025 elections are shaping up to be a crucial referendum on empowering the EBC community. The INDIA bloc is pushing a narrative of justice while the NDA is flexing its welfare machinery, both vying for the support of this significant 36% vote bank. Jan Suraj's rise adds an interesting twist to the tale, but the burning question remains—will the promises made actually lead to real change?

The decisions the ECBs make next month will not only determine who leads Bihar, but also mark a pivotal moment in the evolution of caste politics in India.

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