

Nitish Kumar's Leadership in Bihar: Balancing Social Justice with Development-oriented Governance

Dilip Kumar

Abstract

This study provides a critical analysis of Nitish Kumar's leadership in Bihar, who has emerged as a significant regional leader in Indian politics since the 1990s. His political journey, marked by frequent shifts in alliances and an emphasis on governance, provides a significant case study for understanding leadership in the context of India's fragmented party system. This article attempts to investigate the interaction between charisma and institutional strategies, the interface between populism and policy-oriented governance, as well as changing patterns of coalition-building in Bihar.

Keywords: *Good governance, Identity politics, Politics of patronage, Social equity, Social justice*

Introduction

Nitish Kumar's political journey has extended over four decades, commencing with his participation in the Jayaprakash Narayan movement during the 1970s, advancing through his ascent within the Janata Dal, and culminating in his numerous terms as Chief Minister of Bihar. His standing as a leader who introduced 'sushasan' (good governance) to the state and significantly altered Bihar's political narrative in the mid-2000s. His ability to integrate governance

reforms—such as enhanced infrastructure, law and order, and women’s empowerment—with pragmatic coalition politics distinguishes him as a notable figure among India’s regional satraps (Thakur, 2015).

However, Nitish Kumar’s leadership is not devoid of contradictions. Although he projected himself as ‘*Sushasan Babu*’ at the beginning of his term, from 2005 to 2013, his frequent shifts in position – alternating alliances with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) – were seen as a sign of political opportunism rather than ideological coherence (Jha, 2017). Thus, an examination of Nitish Kumar’s leadership is significant as his leadership reflects a distinctive combination of pragmatism, social justice politics, and developmental vision, positioning him as an important figure for understanding how regional leaders negotiate complex caste hierarchies, coalition politics, and governance challenges. By analyzing Nitish Kumar’s political trajectory, this article attempts to investigate the interaction between charisma and institutional strategies, the interface between populism and policy-oriented governance, as well as changing patterns of coalition-building in Bihar.

Here a few questions crop up for consideration: How has Nitish Kumar balanced social justice politics with the agenda of development-oriented governance? Does his leadership reinforce democratic values in Bihar or perpetuate patronage-based politics? In what ways has his leadership reshaped caste-based politics in Bihar? To what extent has coalition politics contributed to sustaining his leadership? In this article an attempt has been made to answer these questions.

Why Study the Leadership of Nitish Kumar?

The newly exalted position of the states and state-level parties within the Indian political framework has shifted attention towards the significant power and influence held by state-level political leaders (Kumar, 2013). Renowned scholar Atul Kohli (1987) has established key links between political leadership and economic development, revealing that the implementation of pro poor policies is contingent on the different political regimes of states. Furthermore, Harriss (1999) posits that this scenario serves as a ‘laboratory’ for comparative policy analysis, highlighting “the growing importance of state-level politics in the face of India’s economic reforms” (p. 3367)

Nevertheless, leadership as a study remains surprisingly understudied, particularly with regard to state-level leadership. Banerjee (2010) identifies three reasons for this oversight. First, the dominant focus has been on national leaders who supposedly influenced India's postcolonial trajectory. Second, this dominance of the nationalist narrative diminishes the importance of 'regional' leaders. Finally, the authors argue that the vigorous promotion of identity politics in the context of elections obscures discussions about individual leaders by presenting them as part of a broader group phenomenon.

The influence of such a leader is significantly enhanced by his or her solid support among the numerically and economically dominant community or group of communities in the state or region to which that leader is associated. Given that the nature of democracy in India remains patrimonial, patronage and clientelism continue to prevail even after elections (Chandra, 2004). This phenomenon explains why castes and communities, functioning as "political" entities, tend to remain loyal to their "own" leader, regardless of the political party to which they belong, with the realistic expectation of receiving both direct and indirect allocations of public funds (Kumar, 2013, p. 103). In Bihar, a significant increase in a caste's or community's share in public employment, government contracts, lucrative positions, and service delivery has been observed when a leader of that caste or community successfully assumes the position of prime minister or even minister.

Focusing on Nitish Kumar's leadership is particularly instructive for several reasons. First, Nitish Kumar, a prominent state-level leader from a regional party with national aspirations, has attracted attention for his remarkable electoral successes and reputation as an effective administrator (*vikas purush*). Kumar has received widespread praise for orchestrating a transformation in a state previously considered a 'failed state' by many, including its own citizens. Secondly, an analysis of Nitish Kumar's leadership inevitably brings to light the significant political changes that have transpired in Bihar over the past two decades. It is important to remember that Bihar, once viewed as a well-administered and peaceful state during the era of Nehruvian India, has since transformed into a region characterized by extreme poverty and economic stagnation, social inequalities, caste and communal strife, political greed, pervasive corruption, and criminal activities. The pervasive fear of lawlessness in the 1990s deterred many from traveling through Bihar (Nambisan, 2008).

Cultural decline, along with political and electoral violence, was widespread (Das, 1992). Thirdly, once labeled by the media as 'India's cesspool' due to its 'extreme poverty, caste conflicts, chaotic politics, corruption, and lawlessness', Bihar has also been identified as the leading Bimaru (sick) state (Mitra, 2006). Past practitioners of caste-driven divisive politics effectively governed a regime often referred to as 'Jungle Raj'. The transformations in Bihar under Nitish Kumar's administration, regardless of whether they have occurred in political or economic spheres to the extent frequently asserted, have undeniably shaped the public's view of the state's standing on a national scale. Nitish Kumar is recognized as an 'unconventional leader' in Bihar, having successfully established a broad-based secular constituency focused on reforms and development, even while depending electorally on similar lower castes and a core minority support base.

Moreover, there is an urgent need for a deeper and more realistic assessment of Nitish Kumar's leadership approach. Considering the vital impact of leaders at the state level, it can be argued that scrutinizing their actions, principles, rhetoric, policies, and strategies yields valuable insights into the comprehension and elucidation of political transformation and progress within a particular state during the leader's tenure (Kumar, 2013). Furthermore, investigations into leadership contribute to the analysis of the evolving social composition of the political elite and the traits of representation within the relevant state (Jenkins, 2004).

Finally, it is important to note that Nitish Kumar has adopted a more insightful and strategic method for managing caste dynamics and social engineering, effectively bridging social divides. His partnership with the BJP has provided the support of powerful upper castes, especially Bhumihars and Rajputs, while also drawing in backing from the most backward castes among Hindus (Extremely Backward Class) as well as Pasmanda Muslims, who were formerly aligned with the earlier regime. The Kurmis and Koeris, two upper backward castes, constitute his 'natural' constituency.

The Concept of Leadership

Prior to examining the leadership of Nitish Kumar and the diverse theoretical and practical dimensions associated with it, it is pertinent to first explore the concept of 'leadership'. It is widely recognized that leaders have a profound

impact on political outcomes, governance structures, and social transformation. Leadership goes beyond simply holding a position; it embodies a dynamic relationship between leaders and their followers within a socio-political context (Bass, 1985).

Leadership has been interpreted in various ways by scholars, yet there is a shared understanding that it signifies the ability to affect others. James MacGregor Burns defines leadership as the “reciprocal process of mobilizing, by persons with certain motives and values, various resources, in a context of competition and conflict, in order to realize goals independently or mutually held by both leaders and followers” (1978, p. 425).

Harold Lasswell (1965) characterizes leadership as “the interplay of power and personality” (p. 19). In a similar vein, F.E. Fiedler (1967) underscores the organizational dimension, defining leadership as the process of directing and coordinating group activities. These viewpoints underscore leadership as both a psychological and political phenomenon, integrating authority, persuasion, and decision-making.

Leadership of Nitish Kumar

Nitish Kumar's leadership in the perspective of politics of social justice and development-oriented governance warrants examination across three major theoretical dimensions i.e Max Weber's framework of charismatic, traditional and legal-rational leadership, James MacGregor Burns transformational and transactional leadership and Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony- because his political career exemplifies the relationship between personality, power, and institutional structures in Indian democracy.

Good Governance and Nitish Kumar's leadership

First of all, it seems appropriate to look at Max Weber's model of authority so that Nitish Kumar's leadership can be examined within that theoretical framework. Weber's (1978) classification of authority into charismatic, traditional, and legal-rational types offers a valuable framework for assessing Nitish Kumar's leadership. Kumar's leadership is predominantly legal-rational, gaining legitimacy through compliance with institutional delivery (road, electricity, law and order), effective governance, and bureaucratic proficiency. His initiatives aimed at enhancing infrastructure and maintaining law and order

illustrate a commitment to rule-based administrative authority, rather than depending exclusively on personal charisma. His leadership strategy as Witsoe (2013) writes, focused on revitalizing bureaucracy, which served as a stabilizing element against the dominance of political class. His governance framework is heavily based on the belief that 'good governance' could evolve into 'good politics'. This viewpoint became particularly apparent during the 'Nyay Yatra', which took place before the 2005 assembly elections. The campaign embodied the call for governance and development, establishing the principle that effective governance should correspond with sound political practices (Jha, 2022). Nitish Kumar's direct engagement with the populace during the Yatra underscored these fundamental realities. As a result, governance-centered politics emerged as the foundational structure for the state's development agenda.

During his initial term in office (2005-2010), Nitish Kumar gradually redirected the political idioms/vocabulary of the State from 'backward caste empowerment' to 'development.' Although he began his political journey with a socialist perspective focused on social justice, he progressively aligned himself with more liberal economic principles, especially after forming an alliance with the BJP. While Lalu's political discourse centered on dignity and social justice, Nitish Kumar's emphasis was on *Sushasan* (good governance), illustrating the influence of neo-liberal rhetoric. As a leader who evolved from socialism to a neo-liberal, development-focused stance, Kumar viewed pro-business policies as crucial for promoting economic growth and reducing widespread poverty (Jha, 2022).

In light of Nitish Kumar's focus on 'Good Governance' as part of his policy agenda, the media fondly referred to him as '*Sushasan Babu*,' which translates to the man of Good Governance. Drawing from the neo-liberal perspective that 'good governance is crucial for development,' Nitish Kumar promoted the idea of 'development with social justice' through '*Sushasan*' (good governance), which he envisioned would lead to a 'Resurgent Bihar' (Sinha, 2011). During his second term in 2010, Nitish Kumar reiterated his commitment to governance by introducing an extensive initiative for *sushasan* (good governance), which was officially released in the Bihar Gazette on December 16, 2010. The Government under the leadership of Nitish Kumar pledged to ensure greater transparency, implemented the Right to Public Service Act in 2011, and adopted a zero-tolerance policy towards corruption. Weber emphasises that "under legal-

rational leadership the authority of the most rational type is based on the belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands” (1978, p. 217). This perspective aptly fits Nitish Kumar's governance style.

In contrast to previous administrations, Nitish's leadership focused on four essential areas: improving administrative efficiency by selecting reliable officers; reinstating law and order through the establishment of fast-track courts; expediting infrastructure development, especially in road connectivity; and creating channels for direct feedback and communication between citizens and political leaders (Mukherjee & Jha, 2017). These initiatives aimed to render governance more attuned to the populace's needs.

The paradigm of governance under the leadership of Nitish Kumar exemplified a development strategy led by the state. This governance framework was predominantly top-down, with political leadership of Nitish Kumar steering the bureaucratic apparatus to work around the core areas. Hence, development initiatives were crafted to demonstrate a departure from previous political practices and to focus on specific areas which were neglected (Kumar, 2013). Nitish Kumar has been advocating for the concept of Bihari Asmita (Bihari Identity), with the objective of fostering pride through effective governance and development. This represented a notable shift away from politics driven by caste to moving towards a framework centered on governance.

Furthermore, reforms targeting law and order were implemented to dismantle entrenched political-criminal ties, while initiatives such as “Jaankari,” an ICT-enabled governance innovation, were launched, allowing individuals from any region of Bihar to submit an RTI application by calling the Jaankari call center to enhance transparency. In spite of encountering resistance, Nitish Kumar's resolve and political will fostered momentum for continuous governance reforms in Bihar. These reforms have received enthusiastic support from the urban middle class within the state and have also been positively embraced by a considerable segment of the rural poor, as evidenced by Kumar's significant electoral mandate in the 2015 and 2020 elections. This challenges the dominant notion that casteism is the only factor influencing political success in Bihar.

Nitish Kumar has consistently demonstrated his commitment to transformation (parivartan) and development (vikas). Among the various administrative

reforms aimed at promoting effective governance within the state, the most notable has been the creation of a rapid trial mechanism intended to restore law and order in a state where kidnapping and extortion had become entrenched 'industries' due to the collusion of politicians, law enforcement, and criminals (Thakur, 2015). The Government has initiated measures to improve policing, which include new recruitment efforts, enhanced training, the provision of advanced weaponry, and the establishment of model police stations. As noted by Abhay Singh (2022), the restoration of law and order has created a more favorable environment for private capital investment, the execution of developmental projects, and the encouragement of tourism. Furthermore, it has inspired contractors to undertake the construction of roads and bridges that connect Bihar's rural areas with urban centers.

Corruption has emerged as a considerable obstacle to development, as public resources are frequently underutilized or misappropriated due to deeply rooted corrupt practices. The implementation of the Right to Information Act and the Right to Service Act signifies a dedication to improving transparency and fostering a level of accountability. Initiatives have been launched to identify corrupt officials possessing disproportionate assets, alongside efforts to confiscate their real estate holdings (Jha, 2014).

From the above discussion, it is obvious that Nitish Kumar's leadership style since he became the chief minister in 2005 and down to the present (2025) reflects a blend of legal-rational and charismatic traits and these traits set him apart from leaders who predominantly depend on, to put in the words of Max Weber, personal charm or traditional patronage systems.

At this juncture, it needs to be remembered that the concept of *sushasan* in Bihar became closely associated with Nitish Kumar's leadership following 2005. His governance was initially viewed in stark contrast to the previous Lalu-Rabri regime characterized by 'jungle raj.' Initially, Nitish Kumar's dependence on bureaucracy was praised as a corrective response to a politically biased administration. Nevertheless, as the years went by, this bureaucratic centralization diminished participatory decision-making and limited institutional independence. Sanjay Kumar argues that governance in Bihar became excessively reliant on the Chief Minister's Office, sidelining local institutions and diminishing citizen involvement in policy formulation. The

discourse surrounding good governance increasingly conflicted with the reality of a closed and centralized system (Kumar, 2018).

Data from the State Crime Records Bureau (SCRB) indicate that the overall crime rate in Bihar has risen markedly since 2015, with an 80% increase in the number of crimes recorded from 2015 to 2024, in contrast to a 24% increase observed nationally during the same timeframe (Das, 2025). Likewise, violent crime, particularly homicides, has also escalated: for instance, between January and June 2025, there were roughly 1,376 murders, averaging 229 per month, compared to a total of 2,786 murders in the entirety of 2024 (The Economics times, 2025).

The liquor prohibition policy enacted in 2016 was presented as a moral and social reform. However, its ineffective implementation resulted in the emergence of illegal liquor networks, rampant corruption within enforcement agencies, and substantial revenue losses (Tiwari, 2022). Instead of reinforcing the *sushasan* narrative, prohibition became a symbol of political maneuvering overshadowed by unintended repercussions (Times of India, 2024). Despite the advancements in infrastructure, electricity, and education attributed to Nitish Kumar's administration, Bihar still falls short in terms of industrial development, healthcare services, and job creation. The ongoing migration of youth remains a significant socio-economic issue.

The erosion of good governance under Nitish Kumar illustrates the challenges of maintaining a reform-driven governance model without accompanying institutional changes. Although his 2005 to 2013 period in office marked a departure from Bihar's tumultuous history, the following years revealed several shortcomings: political opportunism, concentration of authority, unsuccessful initiatives such as prohibition, and a failure to implement structural economic reforms. Consequently, Nitish Kumar's legacy embodies both the potential and the vulnerabilities of governance-focused politics in a state grappling with entrenched socio-economic difficulties.

Nitish Kumar: Transformational and Transactional leadership

Nitish Kumar's leadership is frequently associated with transformational and transactional leadership, a concept developed by James MacGregor Burn (1978).

Transformational leaders motivate their followers to adopt a collective vision and strive for enduring societal transformation, while transactional leaders focus on alliances/shifting coalitions and caste balancing to keep social groups aligned. It is indeed true that since the 1990s, the political landscape of Bihar has been significantly influenced by the assertion of backward and marginalized castes. Lalu Prasad Yadav's discourse on social justice emphasized the symbolic representation of OBCs and Dalits, although it frequently encountered criticism regarding governance shortcomings. In contrast, Nitish Kumar presented himself as an alternative leader committed to the principle of *Nyaya ke saath Vikas* (development with justice). Nitish integrated the Mandal logic with what Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph refer to as "the politics of development" (2008, p. 221), thereby creating a hybrid political framework. His approach specifically targeted non-Yadav OBCs and EBCs, commonly known as the 'Most Backward Classes,' thus broadening the social justice agenda beyond the Yadav-centric base of Lalu Prasad Yadav.

At this point in the analysis, it is important to note that the Bihar Jaati Adharit Ganana (2023) has shown that Other Backward Classes (OBCs) constitute 27.13% and the extremely backward classes sub-group accounts for 36%, together making up an impressive 63% of the state's total population of 13.07 crore. In contrast, Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) combined represent just over 21%. Considering this fact, Nitish Kumar's engagement with Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs) signifies a Post-Mandal phase of caste politics in Bihar. His approach to social engineering has transformed backward class politics by redirecting attention from dominant castes to the most marginalized groups within the OBC category. By integrating welfare governance with caste-based inclusion, Nitish Kumar has established EBCs as a vital political constituency.

It is relevant to mention here that Nitish Kumar's leadership demonstrates transformational qualities in his emphasis on developmental reforms, including enhancements to public infrastructure, the expansion of electricity access, and initiatives aimed at empowering women. It is worth noting that programs such as the 'Mukhyamantri Balika Cycle Yojana' and 50 percent reservation for women in local governance not only met immediate demands but also articulated a wider vision for social advancement, thereby establishing legitimacy that transcends mere short-term political benefits. These women-

centric welfare policies reflect Amartya Sen's (1999) concept of development as the expansion of capabilities, particularly for marginalized communities. By connecting social justice with gender empowerment, Nitish set himself apart from the strictly caste-based mobilization strategies of his predecessors.

Nitish Kumar merged redistributive justice with a focus on governance and infrastructural enhancement. His administrations prioritized reforms in law and order, rural road development, electricity provision, and educational improvements. This approach resonates with Partha Chatterjee's differentiation between 'political society' and 'civil society,' as Nitish endeavored to reconcile clientelist politics with technocratic governance (2004, p. 40). Unlike Lalu's performative approach to social justice, Nitish's strategy aimed to provide reassurance to both marginalized castes and the aspirational middle classes, thereby broadening his political coalition.

In the theory of distributive politics, political leaders allocate benefits to specific groups to ensure loyalty. Nitish Kumar's focus on prioritizing 'Bihar youth' in employment aligns with this principle. It is important to note that in Bihar, many candidates, often young graduates, view government teaching positions as limited, stable, and desirable, and have advocated for preferential treatment (or exclusive rights) for those identified as Bihar domiciles. In 2020, the Nitish Kumar government introduced a domicile policy for the recruitment of schoolteachers, fulfilling part of his electoral commitments. However, this policy was abolished in 2023, resulting in widespread protests. By mid-2025, the Nitish Kumar administration publicly announced the reinstatement of domicile preference for teacher recruitment, which is scheduled to be implemented from TRE-4 onwards (The Indian Express, 2025). Indeed, Nitish Kumar's reference to domicile in the context of teacher recruitment reflects transformational rhetoric yet remains transitional in its application.

Moreover, in the past few months, Nitish Kumar has launched a variety of initiatives designed to enhance the welfare of the underprivileged and marginalized groups within society. These initiatives encompass the formation of a commission focused on the holistic socio-economic development of sanitation workers, the implementation of a program that provides 125 units of complimentary electricity to around 1.86 crore consumers, and an improvement of the State's journalist pension scheme, which has been increased from

Rs.6,000 to Rs.15,000 monthly. Furthermore, there has been a rise in salaries and honorariums for grassroots public service providers; for example, ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activists) workers will now experience a monthly increase from Rs.1,000 to Rs.3,000. In a similar vein, Mamata workers, who provide assistance during childbirth at government health facilities, will see their remuneration for each delivery increase from Rs.300 to Rs.600 (The Hindu, 2025).

In a similar context, the NDA government in Bihar, led by Nitish Kumar, has raised the monthly honorarium for midday meal cooks in government schools from Rs.1,650 to Rs.3,300. Additionally, physical education and health instructors have seen their monthly salaries increase from Rs. 8,000 to Rs. 16,000. On July 3, 2025, the Cabinet of the Nitish Kumar administration approved the Mukhyamantri Kalakar Pension Yojana (Chief Minister Artiste Pension Scheme), which provides Rs. 3,000 per month to senior artists facing financial difficulties who have made notable contributions to Bihar's cultural heritage (The Hindu, 2025).

Nitish Kumar exhibits transactional leadership within the realm of coalition politics. His calculated partnerships with the BJP, RJD, HAM and LJP illustrate calculated exchanges of political backing and authority, placing electoral survival above ideological steadfastness. Let us explore the intricate fabric of his political decisions and partnerships to understand the complexities that have shaped Nitish Kumar's political leadership.

The multiparty federal system in India often requires regional leaders to engage in strategic coalition-building to maintain their power (Kumar, 2019). Kumar's skill in managing these alliances showcases his adaptive leadership, as he balances ideological stances with pragmatic considerations. It is remarkable to note that following his split from Lalu Prasad Yadav in 1994, Nitish Kumar sought to gain support from the Left parties, which ultimately rejected him. He contested his initial election in coalition with the CPI(ML) in 1995, but subsequently aligned with the BJP-led NDA, which enabled him to assume the role of chief minister in 2005 (Apoorvanand, 2022). In 2005 and 2010 Nitish Kumar's had headed a JD(U)-NDA coalition government.

The JD(U)-BJP coalition regained control in the Bihar assembly elections of 2010. During this period, Nitish Kumar developed his image as '*Sushasan*

Babu'. Nevertheless, in 2013, he severed his 17-year relationship with the BJP in response to the party's choice to nominate the then Gujarat Chief Minister Narendra Modi as their candidate for Prime Minister (Aron, 2025). It is important to acknowledge that Nitish Kumar's partnership with the BJP from 2005 to 2013 not only enabled governance reforms but also required the integration of right-wing national policies.

In the general elections of 2014, Nitish Kumar opted for the JDU to run independently. However, he was compelled to resign on ethical grounds after the JD(U) suffered a defeat in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, subsequently appointing Jitan Ram Manjhi as his successor. Yet, within a year, conflicts emerged between the two leaders, prompting Jitan Ram Manjhi to leave the JDU and form his own party, the Hindustani Awam Morcha (Aron, 2025). Nitish Kumar regained the position of chief minister on February 22, 2015, just eight months before the forthcoming assembly elections.

To counter the influence of the Modi wave, Nitish Kumar formed an alliance known as the Mahagathbandhan with the Congress party and Lalu Prasad Yadav's RJD during the assembly elections of 2015. This coalition once again secured him the chief ministership in 2015 (Sinha, 2024). His temporary partnership with the Mahagathbandhan from 2015 to 2017 enabled him to counteract BJP dominance while preserving electoral viability. This showcased his adaptive leadership, where flexibility and pragmatic coalition-building allowed him to retain power. However, two years later in 2017, he set aside his opposition to Modi and rejoined the NDA. The JDU-BJP coalition also participated in the state assembly elections of 2020 under the NDA banner. This alliance regained power on November 20, 2020. However, five years later in August 2022 Nitish Kumar quit the NDA and joined the Mahagathbandhan, only to rejoin NDA in 2024 (Aron, 2025). Thus, his leadership can be viewed as transactional and survivalist, prioritising political longevity over ideological clarity.

Nitish Kumar's leadership: Looking through the Prism of hegemony

Since the early 2000s, Nitish Kumar has emerged as one of Bihar's most influential leaders, exercising a form of leadership often described as hegemonic. His leadership extends beyond elections and policy implementation to shaping public consent, forging new social coalitions, and altering the state's political

narrative. Using Antonio Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony, Kumar's leadership can be understood as a mix of persuasion, coercion, and ideological dominance, which has redefined Bihar's sociopolitical landscape for nearly twenty years.

Gramsci's idea of hegemony emphasizes not just control but also the ability of leaders to secure widespread acceptance by making their vision appear natural to society. Nitish Kumar's leadership fits this frame as he legitimized his rule through the themes of *sushasan* (good governance), social equity, and inclusive growth—blunting caste-based hostilities and weakening opposition.

By incorporating women, Extremely Backward Classes (EBCs), Mahadalits and segments of upper castes into his political coalition, Kumar has forged a hegemonic bloc that contests the traditional dominance of Yadavs and Muslims under Lalu Prasad Yadav's RJD (Kumar & Chaurasia, 2024). In contrast to the previous prevalence of caste-based mobilization, Nitish Kumar aimed to validate his leadership through the concept of 'sushasan' (good governance). His focus on infrastructure development, enhancement of law and order, initiatives for girls' education, and rural electrification fostered a narrative of development that served as a cohesive ideology across various caste groups. This governance narrative acted as a unifying force, enabling Kumar to rise above limited caste identities and present himself as a leader of modernization.

As mentioned in above paragraphs, Nitish Kumar's shifting alliances—with the BJP-led NDA and subsequently with the RJD-Congress Mahagathbandhan and then NDA—illustrate his pragmatic approach to politics. Nonetheless, these shifts also highlight his capacity to maintain his hegemonic coalition within Bihar by negotiating power with national entities while preserving his regional authority. His fluctuation between 'Hindutva politics' and 'secular alliances' signifies a strategic maneuver aimed at ensuring the stability of his coalition in a politically fragmented environment.

Despite his achievements, Nitish Kumar's hegemonic initiative has encountered obstacles. The revival of the RJD under Tejashwi Yadav, and the changing tone and tenor of leaders like Jitan Ram Manjhi, Chirag Paswan and Upendra Kushawaha present significant challenges to the stability of his coalition. Furthermore, an over-reliance on developmental rhetoric without consistent implementation threatens to undermine his consensual legitimacy.

Conclusion

Nitish Kumar serves as a prime example of the intricacies involved in regional leadership within the context of India's federal democracy. He does not fit neatly into the categories of a strictly ideological leader or a purely populist figure; instead, he embodies a pragmatic politician who skillfully navigates governance narratives while employing survival strategies in the realm of coalition politics.

References

- Apoorvanand. (2022, August 26). Nitish Kumar's new innings: What is in it for Bihar? *The Indian Forum: A Journal – Magazine on Contemporary Issues*. <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/nitish-kumar-bihar>
- Aron, S. (2025). *Satraps, coalitions and power games*. Vitasta Publishing.
- As Bihar heads to poll, crime wave fuels law and order concern. (2025, July 14). *The Economics Times*.
- Banerjee, M. (2010). Foreword. In P. Price & A.E. Ruud (Eds.), *Power and influence in India: Bosses, lords and captains* (pp. xv–xvii). Routledge.
- Bass, B. M. (1985). *Leadership and performance beyond expectations*. Free Press.
- Burns, J. M. (1978). *Leadership*. Harper & Row.
- Chandra, K. (2004). *Why ethnic parties succeed: Patronage and ethnic head count in India*. Cambridge University Press.
- Chatterjee, P. (2004). *The politics of the governed: Reflections on popular politics in most of the world*. Columbia University Press.
- Das, A. (2025, July 21). As Nitish Kumar govt. faces questions over recent spate of killings in Bihar, the numbers show why. *The Indian Express*.
- Das, A. N. (1992). *The republic of Bihar*. Penguin.
- Fiedler, F.E. (1967). *A theory of leadership effectiveness*. McGraw-Hill.
- Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks*. Q. Hoare & G. Nowell Smith (Eds.). International Publishers.

- Harriss, J. (1999). Comparing political regimes across Indian states: A preliminary essay, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 34(48), 3367-3377.
- Jenkins, R. (Ed.). (2004). *Regional reflections: Comparing politics across India's states*. Oxford University Press.
- Jha, G. (2014, January 21). Nitish battles corruption. *India Today*.
- Jha, H. (2022). Interrogating settled terrains of state capacity: Explaining governance reforms in a low-capacity milieu, *The Journal of Indian and Asian Studies*, 3(2). DOI:10.1142/S2717541322400046
- Jha, P. (2017). *How the BJP wins: Inside India's greatest election machine*. Juggernaut.
- Kohli, A. (1987). *The state and poverty in India*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kumar, A. (2013). Development focus and electoral success at state level: Nitish Kumar as Bihar leader, *South Asia Research*, 33(2). <https://doi.org/10.1177/0262728013487>
- Kumar, M., & Chaurasia, M. (2024, June 5). Allies may change, but Nitish remains axis of Bihar politics. *The Times of India*.
- Kumar, S. (2019). *Elections in India: Reshaping the nation*. Routledge.
- Kumar, S., Alam, M. S., & Joshi, D. (2008). Caste dynamics and political process in Bihar, *Journal of Indian School of Political Economy*, 20(1&2) (January-June), 1-32.
- Lasswell, H. D. (1965). *Power and personality*. W.W. Norton.
- Lloyd I. R., & Rudolph, S.H. (2008). *Explaining Indian democracy: A fifty-year perspective, 1956–2006*, Vol. II. Oxford University Press.
- Mitra, S. (2006). *The puzzle of India's governance: Culture, context and comparative theory*. Routledge.
- Mukherjee, R., & Jha, H. (2017). Bureaucratic rationality, political will, and State capacity, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 52(49), 53-60.
- Nambisan, V. (2008). *Bihar is in the eyes of the beholder*. Penguin.

- Nitish Kumar announces domicile policy, new Welfare Schemes in Bihar. (2025, August 4). *The Hindu*.
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- Singh, A. (2022, September 30). Bihar CM Nitish Kumar allays investor's fears on law and order. *Times of India*.
- Sinha, A. (2011). *Nitish Kumar and the rise of Bihar*. Penguin.
- Sinha, S. K. (2024). *Nitish engineering: Reconstructing Bihar*. Kalpas Publication.
- Thakur, S. (2015). *Single man: The life and time of Nitish Kumar of Bihar*. Harper Collins.
- Tiwari, A. (2022, November 15). Bihar's prohibition policy is not working. *The Hindu*.
- Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology*. G. Roth & C. W. Berkeley (Eds.). University of California Press.
- Witsoe, J. (2013). *Democracy against development: Lower-caste politics and political modernity in post-colonial India*. University of Chicago press.