Making the Dalit votes count in Bihar

The community’s strength could influence results in 15 of the 40 Lok Sabha seats

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With the Lok Sabha election just days away and seat sharing between alliance partners poised to be finalised, all political parties in Bihar have staked claim to Dalit votes. Accounting for 16% of the total population, Dalits could influence results in 15 of the 40 Lok Sabha constituencies.

In the NDA block, the BJP recently organised meetings of senior party leaders in Dalit areas to listen to Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s Mann Ki Baat and encouraged Dalit voters to take advantage of Central and State government welfare schemes. Union Minister for Social Justice and Empowerment and Dalit leader Thawar Chand Gehlot has been a frequent visitor to the State as BJP leaders celebrated birth anniversaries of Dalits leaders.

Nitish’s play

The State government also launched welfare schemes, with Chief Minister Nitish Kumar making it a point to hoist the national flag from a Dalit village every Independence Day along with the eldest person in the community.

Earlier, Mr. Kumar declared 21 of the 22 Dalit castes Mahadalits. But later, when the Lok Janshakti Party, led by Ram Vilas Paswan, joined the NDA, he declared the remaining Paswan caste too Mahadalit.

The Lok Janshakti Party claims to have the support of 4.5% of the Paswan caste. “One can go to any Dalit village and ask them how much the Nitish Kumar government has done for their welfare and how empowered they feel in this regime,” JD(U) leader Neeraj Kumar said.

Claims to the Dalit vote and support have come in equal measure from the RJD-led Opposition. Alliance partners such as Jitan Ram Manjhi’s Hindustani Awam Morcha (Secular) claim to have the support of Dalit votes, especially the 5% of Musahar caste. And Mr. Manjhi has staked this support base to demand five Lok Sabha seats.

The Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) too has a sizeable influence in districts bordering Uttar Pradesh, including Gopalgunj, Sasaram, Kaimur, Buxar and Bettiah.

The RJD and the Congress have been organising party programmes in Dalit villages. “The Nitish Kumar government has only cheated Dalits to get their vote ... on the ground, nothing has been done for their development ... there have only been false promises to get their vote,” said senior State Congress leader Prem Chandra Mishra.

Exchange offer

Out of 40 seats in Bihar, six – Gopalgunj, Sasaram, Hajipur, Samastipur, Jamui and Gaya – are reserved for the Schedules Castes. In the 2014 Lok Sabha poll, the BJP and alliance partner Lok Janshakti Party each bagged three of these seats.

This time, the BJP is likely to exchange two of its winning reserved seats – Gaya and Gopalgunj – with alliance partner JD (U), while they may change their candidate Chhedi Paswan from Sasaram constituency.

The Lok Janshakti Party in all likelihood would repeat its candidates, Chirag Paswan from Jamui and Ramchandra Paswan from Samastipur, but it may change party chief Ram Vilas Paswan from Hajipur seat as he is set to enter the Rajya Sabha.

Apart from these six reserved seats, Dalit voters could influence the results in Ara, Jehanabad, Buxar, Ujjiyarpur, Khagaria, Karakat, Nalanda, Nawada and Aurangabad, where the number of Dalit voters are above three lakh.