

Policies & Perspectives



VIVEKANANDA INTERNATIONAL FOUNDATION

The world of Indian politics is complex. If it is to be viewed in binary terms, then not only will there exist scope for errors but also that blunders will inevitably happen in understanding it. When even truth as we have understood it for ages is no longer in black and white, it is naive to believe that political developments can be reduced to such simplistic levels. Mahatma Gandhi's 'experiments with truth' were socio-political-moral in nature. Contemporaneous politics is experimenting with truths of a different kind, and they are rooted to the need and convenience of the moment. There is, if one does not make the folly of being seated on a moral high perch, a method in the madness of today's politics. The trick is in recognising the grey areas. This compass will help us realise the direction in which the country's politics is moving and the purpose behind. In courts of law, the guilt or innocence of a person is established on the basis of evidence before the judges, not on an abstract sense of right and wrong. Similarly in politics, the decisions of a political leader or party are to be judged by the gains or losses in real terms — both short-term and in the long run.

Let us apply this contention to arguably the most explosive political development of the past week: The upheaval in Bihar. Responses to it have been in the extreme, ranging from a full-scale condemnation of Nitish Kumar to full-throated praise of the Chief Minister. Both ends of the commentary have followed predictable patterns after Nitish Kumar ended his alliance with Lalu Prasad and the Congress, and returned to the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) fold — a grouping led by the Bharatiya Janata Party. Those against the break-up have accused Nitish Kumar of being opportunistic, of having betrayed the people's mandate of 2015, of backing 'communal forces', of having turned his back to secularism. And those in favour have complimented him for having exited an unnatural alliance, of having finally called a spade a spade, of having demonstrated courage to take on corruption, of refusing to succumb to blackmail tactics of a larger alliance partner. For the first group, the devil itself had entered into Nitish Kumar; for the second, the devil had been exorcised. Both sides claim morality for themselves, and exclusively so.

If idealistic posturing were to help in arriving at an undisputed conclusion, then either side can claim victory but neither side will have achieved it. In other words, the applicability of 'ideology' and 'morals' to unravel the developments would be about as effective as the use of a bucket of water to douse flames that have engulfed a multi-storeyed complex. We have to get real, and, recall Chanakya's wisdom in dealing with situations. Google throws up a quote attributed to him, which is especially relevant to the present context. He had said: "Before you start some work, ask yourself three questions: Why am I doing it? What might the results be? Will I be successful?" If someone were to turn around and claim that Chanakya never said it, that's fine — the wisdom still stands. Besides, there cannot be any disputing the fact that they would apply to any astute politician. And Nitish Kumar is certainly among the most shrewd.



Without going into details of his political career, it can be assumed without running the risk of being totally off-mark, that he kept these questions in mind as he crafted his political persona over the last three decades, right down to the present. From the late seventies and through the eighties, he was subordinating himself to Lalu Prasad because the latter was charismatic while he was a novice and wanted to shape up. That answered the first question. The result that he wanted to get was growth in stature, and emergence out of Lalu Prasad's shadows one day. The answer to the third question was clear as daylight to Nitish Kumar. Given Lalu Prasad's unsavoury reputation, it was only a matter of time before Nitish Kumar got his chance to succeed. The latter prepared for that day, by remaining scrupulously clean in public life and cultivating the image of an articulate and mature public figure. Nitish Kumar may not have crafted his political career with the precision that we can comment upon today with the benefit of hindsight, but he certainly did not work without a plan. At the first opportunity, he dumped Lalu Prasad with little remorse, and along with a bunch of senior and less senior leaders, became part of the Samata Party, which later metamorphosed into the Janata Dal (United). The use of morality to explain Nitish Kumar's 'betrayal' of his mentor Lalu Prasad in the late eighties and through the nineties, is redundant because it explains nothing. The voters certainly were not enamoured of ideological presumptions or enraged by Nitish Kumar's betrayal or teary-eyed over Lalu Prasad's hurt at being 'stabbed in the back'. For over 15 years, Nitish Kumar, in collaboration with the BJP, ruled Bihar — and provided by all accounts good governance. He also became a Union Minister. His critics kept accusing him of having sold his soul to 'communal forces' but the people couldn't care less — and for two reasons. The first was that Nitish Kumar had done personally nothing that could attract the taint of communalism. And the second was that he provided sound governance in alliance with the BJP.

The second half of 2013 heralded a new turn in politics for Nitish Kumar — or more accurately it witnessed a turn towards the old. Suddenly, Nitish Kumar had ideological problems with the BJP, once Narendra Modi was declared the party's prime ministerial candidate. He broke off the partnership, reached out to Lalu Prasad's party and remained in power in Bihar. In the first Assembly election after the break-up, Nitish Kumar tied up with the tainted Lalu Prasad (fodder scam etc.) and the equally tainted Congress (2G Spectrum, Commonwealth, coal block allocation irregularities etc.), and the new grand alliance registered an emphatic win, with the BJP biting the dust. Many commentators then had questioned Nitish Kumar's anti-corruption credentials, his opportunism etc. But nothing succeeds like success — and when it is a landslide electoral success coming just over a year after facing a rout in the Lok Sabha election, the taste has the tendency to suppress every other flavour. Then too, the application of ideology or morality never led any political observer anywhere.

We now come to the present. The first charge against Nitish Kumar is that he has demonstrated opportunism by going back to the BJP-led NDA. It's difficult to substantiate this allegation. His Government had not been under threat — not if he were to overlook the dubious activities of Lalu Prasad and his family members, two of whom were Cabinet Ministers. Nor was his position as Chief Minister being challenged in any real way. All he had to do, therefore, was to let things happen the way Lalu Prasad and group wanted them to



happen, and complete his term. In any case, if Nitish Kumar's critics are determined to flog the 'opportunism' card, then both the RJD and the Congress must explain their respective positions too. The RJD was driven by the anti-Congress socialist agenda of JP Narayan and Ram Manohar Lohia since its inception. The Congress claims to be opposed to casteist politics — which Lalu Prasad represents. Yet they are friends today.

The second accusation is that he has betrayed the people's mandate of 2015, which was for the grand alliance, popularly known as 'Mahagathbandhan'. It's true that the mandate was for the JDU-RJD-Congress rule, but it was for the rule of law and not to look the other way as serious allegations of corruption break out against an alliance partner. Nitish Kumar was feeling stifled in Lalu Prasad's company, more so when the RJD chief did not forget to mention at the drop of a hat that Nitish Kumar was where he was because of his munificence. He was looking for a way out, and the graft charges which Central probe agencies are investigating against Lalu Prasad and family, came in handy. Besides, the ideological lament of betraying public mandate is hollow — after all, when Nitish Kumar dumped the BJP and aligned with Lalu Prasad to continue in power even before fresh election was held, the RJD never saw that as an 'act of betrayal' by Nitish Kumar of the people's mandate which had then been for the JDU-BJP alliance.

Stung by the developments, a rather amateurish attempt is being made by the RJD supremo to pit 'corruption' and 'casteism' against 'communalism'. Not just Lalu Prasad, even the Congress and the Left believe that communalism is the greatest evil of them. In here, a silly play at ideology is being engaged in, where it's okay to be corrupt or casteist, as long as you are fighting 'communal' elements. Thus, 'secularism', 'communalism', 'opportunism', 'corruption', 'casteism' etc. have become word games, to be played by various quarters on suitable occasions. Free from the clutches of terminologies, the haze over why Nitish Kumar did what he did thus lifts, and the picture clearly emerges. Its reality and not morality that we need to bear in mind. Forever 15 years, Nitish Kumar and the BJP got along famously in Bihar. There was coordination, mutual respect and an understanding that comes with trust. When the alliance ended in the second half of 2013, it had nothing to do with any issue of governance, but was a sudden play of 'ideology' and morality'. Naturally, this had to fail! Also, there wasn't any morality in aligning with a convict, after all. And, when the BJP-JDU alliance was struck again the past week, there was no morality or ideology either.

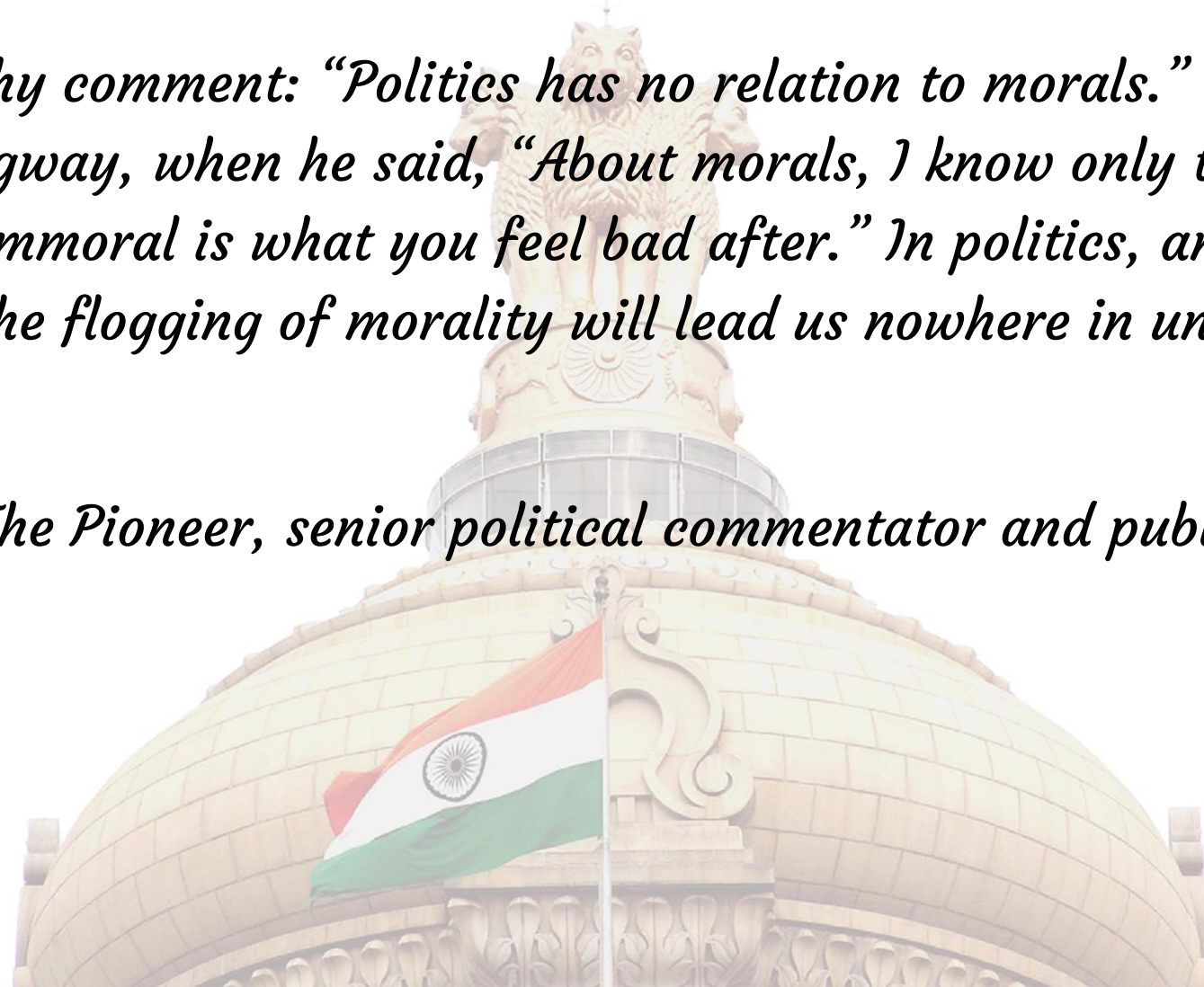
The situation is better understood from another perspective. Nitish Kumar could have achieved the same end he wanted by a different method: He could have sacked Lalu Prasad's tainted son Tejashwi Yadav. That would have led to the withdrawal of support by the RJD; the Government would have fallen; and the BJP would have stepped in with support and revived the Nitish Kumar regime. The Chief Minister didn't do that. Instead, he resigned, thereby adding for himself the halo of an individual who quit office on principles. There is a difference in leaving office on one's own and being ousted. The tactic suited Nitish Kumar, and it suited the BJP too.



Politics is not limited to Bihar, though; nor is the understanding of grey zones in politics confined to this State. It's being tested elsewhere. It's there in Gujarat, ahead of the Assembly election scheduled in November this year. Half a dozen Congress MLAs, at last count, suddenly defected to the BJP, just days before the crucial Rajya Sabha elections. A terrified Congress herded its remaining Legislators to Karnataka to keep them in safe custody. The BJP has been accused of throwing money to win over the Opposition MLAs. The talk of morality and ideology has begun to circulate once again. But the question to be asked is the following: Why is the Congress unable to hold on to its people? It's because there is discontent in the party against the State leadership and the high command. This has nothing to do with morality, but failure of leadership at the highest level. Regardless of whether Congress president Sonia Gandhi's political confidant Ahmed Patel gets elected to the Rajya Sabha or not, the chinks in the Congress's armour have been exposed. In the past months, the Congress had failed in Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur and Goa, and cloaked its failure by invoking morals and ideology. The technique has stopped working. The new-age voter is not obsessed with 'isms' but wants results.

Let's not forget Machiavelli's pithy comment: "Politics has no relation to morals." Equally to the point was celebrated author Earnest Hemingway, when he said, "About morals, I know only that what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after." In politics, and in Indian politics even more so in an era of coalitions, the flogging of morality will lead us nowhere in understanding developments.

(The writer is Opinion Editor of The Pioneer, senior political commentator and public affairs analyst)



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