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Media Control through Government Advertisements in an Indian State, Bihar

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Background of the research project

Nitish Kumar came to power in the politically unstable state of Bihar, India, in November 2005, and has remained there for nearly 15 years (with a 9-month interruption). His tenure as Chief Minister of Bihar is quite remarkable, given that a large majority of chief ministers in India tend to not hold office for so long. This is even more notable given that he is neither an heir to a political dynasty, a politician from a dominant caste group, nor a leader of national parties such as the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Congress Party. There is no doubt that without considerable political skills, he would not have persisted in his office.

Nitish Kumar's great political sense lies in the fact that during his tenure of office, he has often shrewdly flip-flopped on major issues according to political circumstances. For example, his government at first eagerly promoted liquor sales to increase revenue from excise duties before reversing and promising total prohibition during a campaign for the State Assembly elections in 2015. After returning to power, despite an estimated loss of Rs 4,000 crore on excise revenue, his government enacted the Bihar Prohibition and Excise Act to make Bihar a dry state in 2016. It was commonly perceived that Nitish played the prohibition card to woo women voters in the elections and thereafter.

It is also worth remembering that, while his party—the Janata Dal (United) [JD(U)]—has stayed in power in Bihar since November 2005, it has changed sides no less than three times. In June 2013, the JD(U) cut ties with the BJP, its longtime ally, because Narendra Modi was likely to be nominated as the BJP's prime ministerial candidate for the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. In 2015, after the debacle of the general elections, the JD(U) joined with its archrivals, Lalu Prasad Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal and the Congress Party, and the so-called Mahagathbandhan (Grand Alliance) won the State Assembly elections against the BJP and its allies. However, within 2 years Nitish

had deserted the alliance and returned to the BJP to form a new coalition government. In the course of the political juggling, he has successfully retained the office of chief minister, except for the period between May 2014 and February 2015.

The recent controversy over the Citizenship Amendment Act is another example. An editorial in *The Hindu* accused Nitish Kumar of “trying to run with the hare and hunt with the hounds” because he “impelled his party to support the Citizenship Amendment Bill in Parliament and later called for a national debate on the issue.” It also made a scathing remark about his party’s opportunistic behavior not only in this particular case but in general, “Opportunism is easily forgiven, and often celebrated as pragmatism in politics, and the JD(U) has mastered it to perfection. The party has always been little more than a personal fiefdom of the Bihar Chief Minister...” (*Hindu* 2020). In other words, opportunism is an integral part of his political survival strategy.

Whereas inconsistency is deeply embedded in the political behavior of Nitish Kumar and his one-man party, his regime has shown great consistency in one particular area since its inception: control of the media, especially via government advertisements.

Main findings

In this research project, I present both qualitatively and quantitatively that the Nitish Kumar government has taken advantage of government advertisements and exerted enormous pressure on the media to report on the government’s version of the truth. In Bihar, private commercial advertisements from local businesses are scarce, and the media depends heavily on government advertisements for revenue. It is against this backdrop that the media has shrewdly avoided important issues that are inconvenient to the powers that be and, thus kept people in the dark. Nevertheless, although the government has had the upper hand, it is not only the media in the state but also the chief minister who has needed government advertisements for survival. He needs advertisements to overcome his political weakness, especially lack of solid constituencies and effective party machinery to mobilize popular support.

This research focuses exclusively on the case of Bihar under the Nitish Kumar government, but it is commonly perceived that the central and state governments abuse advertisements across India. In June 2019, for example, it was reported that the Modi government cut off advertisements to at least three major newspaper groups in retaliation for unfavorable reports (*Reuters* 2019). For the past few years, moreover, Kashmir has become the focus of attention in this regard (Dev 2019, Mir 2019, Raafi

2019). This serious threat to the Indian democracy is expected to grow further, given the commercialization of the media, linkages between politics, business and the media, and declining newspaper readership (Auletta 2012, Dev 2019, Guha Thakurta 2012).

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