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What the Bihar model got right, and where it missed the mark

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Last summer, Kamal Manjhi, a 'ward member' in rural Bihar, spoke of the troubles he faced

WRITE FOR TOI BLOGS





MR Sharan

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implementing development projects. The village mukhiya refused to release funds earmarked for his ward. Manjhi ran from one government office to another till someone pointed him to Bihar's recently launched grievance redressal system. A member of the government himself, Manjhi filed a complaint under the system and was called for three hearings by a grievance redressal officer who, in turn, ordered the mukhiya and the BDO to attend the hearings and release funds. The mukhiya complied and Manjhi's ward finally got access to piped water.

This story incorporates many elements of a narrative one can weave around Bihar's development story over the past five years and more. This is not the only story, but it is an important one. It encapsulates the possibilities and limitations of Bihar's state-led development model, which has achieved some success in the provision of a range of public goods (roads, electricity, water) and private assets (cycles for girls), but has had less success in tackling deeper structural policy issues (health and education). This story has three broad elements:

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decentralisation, project-based development and responsive governance.

Bihar has always had a robust local government system comprising mukhiyas and ward members. But the power equation between the two was lopsided, with the mukhiyas being the traditional elites and the ward members being merely glorified citizens. Ward members were never given access to the state's funds and their role in village governance was restricted to monitoring development projects as opposed to implementing them. This changed in 2016-17 when the implementation of two key government schemes under their flagship 'Saat Nischay' bouquet of schemes — 'Har Ghar Nal Ka Jal' (piped water) and 'Ghar Tak Pakki Gali-Nali' (village lanes and drains) — were handed over to the ward members. In one fell swoop, the state government had begun a process of decentralisation, diffusing power (and funds) to people like Manjhi, who belong to and represent the most marginalised castes.

This project-based development process is very visible to anyone who has spent time in the villages of Bihar these past few years. The

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government's own data shows that by May 2020 over 2.3 lakh projects had been initiated across the state. And these were not 'ghost projects': we randomly audited projects across five districts in Bihar and found nearly all of them.

And yet, remarkable as these achievements appear to be, these schemes aren't seen as successes. Why may this be the case? First, quantity is not quality. The construction of a tap does not guarantee running water. Land-related issues abound: laying a pipe and an electric line for the pump that draws water often requires digging through private land, which creates disputes, complaints and litigation, causing projects to stall. A second reason for haphazard implementation is a direct consequence of decentralisation: the mukhiyas, who were never happy to be sidelined in the first place, continue to create operational hurdles for ward members. Finally, as Yamini Aiyar and Neelanjan Sircar of the Centre for Policy Research have argued, even when these projects are a success, they don't translate to votes because voters mistakenly assume it to be the work of the central government.



A final element of Bihar's recent development is a foray in the direction of responsive government. Take the grievance redressal mechanism, which enjoys enormous political will: over 100 Bihar Administrative Service officers were specifically tasked with listening to people's complaints and resolving them swiftly. Separate offices were built in every subdivision. The back-end software was carefully designed. This has shown dividends: over 8.5 lakh complaints have been filed since its launch in 2016. An audit we ran in 2018 suggested that about a third of the complaints were fully resolved — a considerable achievement given that such systems have notoriously low redressal rates and Bihar has a history of poor state capacity. Nearly three-quarters of complainants were happy with their experience with the system. Manjhi, therefore, was not an outlier.

Why, then, the disenchantment among voters? By focusing on a project-based development model, the government has both raised aspirations among voters and simultaneously failed to tackle the underlying structural causes that need fixing to satisfy these aspirations. For instance, both the education and healthcare



systems need near-complete overhauls (not tinkering), private investment is lacking and the state's finances appear overstretched. The Covid-19 crisis has created a massive jobs problem, one the opposition parties exploited to their advantage. To build on the work of the past 15 years, Bihar needs to design nuanced public policy and find some money: I wouldn't envy Nitish Kumar.



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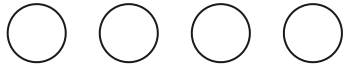


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