

UNCOMMON GROUND ROHINI NILEKANI

NEXT WAVE OF VOLUNTARISM?

In parts of Bihar, such as the district of Gaya, ironically famous for its Buddhist tourism, Maoists have threatened to chop off the hands of anyone who dares to vote. This is slightly more of a deterrent than the rainstorms most of us can expect. For Maoists in Bihar, such threats are routine but necessary. They have much to lose from a free and fair poll. Especially in these elections.

This is because things have been changing quickly in the state in the past few years. Aspiration has been set free and along with it, renewed hope. And when the young and restless population casts its vote, it will be interesting to see which members it will send to the next Parliament to recast the idea of Bihar for the nation.

Bihar has always drawn me, ever since I was a child, brought up on the stories about my grandfather Babasaheb Soman. When Gandhiji issued a clarion call to citizens in 1917 to help with the community work after the Champaran agitation, my paternal grandfather was among the first to respond. He left his home, and his pregnant wife in Belgaum, to spend several months in Bihar, helping establish Gandhiji's first *ashram* in Bhitiharva, now in West Champaran district. Along with Kasturba Gandhi, and a clutch of other volunteers, my grandfa-

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ther, whose "infectious energy" Gandhiji alludes to in his autobiography, built the *kuti* where they would live, conduct a school for the neighbourhood children and generally help expand the idea of *satyagraha*. By the time he returned home, his daughter was already born and appropriately named Champa.

My grandfather passed away in 1946, too early to see his dream of an independent India being realized. But the choices that people like him made are especially meaningful as we stand at a crucial point in our democracy, threatened by internal division, external terror and a global financial crisis at least partially caused by people

who, unlike Gandhiji and his followers such as Babasaheb, did not put community before self.

I have wanted to visit Bhitiharva for many years, but was able to go there, on Arghyam work, only in 2007, exactly 90 years after my grandfather. It was a moment to remember, as I stood outside the *ashram* building, reading my grandfather's name duly misspelt on a wall plaque. Predictably, the whole site looks terribly neglected. Only a few diehard Gandhi tourists actually make the long journey to see this first *ashram* of the Mahatma in India.

Bihar as a whole continues to beckon me. Just a few weeks ago, I was in Patna again, this time for the work of Pratham Books. We participated in an effort by the government to stock good books for young children in every single government school across all 37 districts of the state. To ensure that the book distribution went smoothly across Bihar, we had to temporarily hire several young men. I caught up with them over a celebratory lunch. They had come from all corners of the state, all of them in their early 20s, armed with degrees or studying in college. Most of them were from agricultural families, but not one of them wanted to work on their farms. Sadly, they saw no future for themselves in agriculture, what with small landholdings, large families and the repeated threat of flooding in many districts. That's what committed them to their education, they said. "We have to develop our skills or we will be drowned," said one young man from Khagaria district in north Bihar, which is particularly prone to high waters. They shared how much they had en-

joyed working in our project, reaching out to their communities, discovering their leadership potential. They also confessed that they badly needed good jobs that would allow them to stay on in Bihar. They wanted to know how we could help.

The truth is we are not sure we can, though we are trying. But the issues they raised are important not just for the new incoming MPs and the current state government of Bihar, but for all of us as Indian citizens. For India's sake as much as its own, Bihar needs to be strong again, less vulnerable to the many forces that would deny democracy and curtail choice. Its people are its strength, and have many skills that other states have benefited from. Now they need more opportunity to deploy those skills on home territory, to create a vibrant, inclusive economy that redefines Bihar on its own terms.

Some progress is evident in the recent past. But that has led to an undeniable longing for much more participation, better access. Having observed, however briefly, the complex challenges among some of its poorest communities, I believe Bihar could do with another wave of the solid and selfless voluntarism that drove my grandfather to this state.

Rohini Nilekani

Rohini Nilekani works with and supports many non-profit endeavours, especially in water, through Arghyam Foundation. Comments are welcome at uncommonground@livemint.com