

Lalu Prasad targets Sharad Yadav ahead of Bhagalpur by-polls

Targeting Bihar's ruling Janata Dal-United (JD-U) ahead of two parliamentary by-elections, Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) chief Lalu Prasad claimed that in 1990 when he was chief minister he was asked by JD-U president Sharad Yadav not to arrest Bharatiya Janata Party chief L.K. Advani during his 'rath yatra'.

'He telephoned me and advised me not to arrest Advani as it would lead to the collapse of the central (V.P. Singh) government in which he was minister. But I told him that we will not allow Advani to create hatred and disrupt communal harmony,' Lalu Prasad said in Bhagalpur during campaigning for the by-election. By polls are being held in Bhagalpur and Nalanda Nov 6.

The raking up of a 16-year-old issue by the Railway Minister - when he was ruling Bihar - is an obvious move to tarnish the JD-U as well as woo the sizeable Muslim community there.

Advani was arrested in Bihar's Samastipur district in 1990 while on a campaign to press for constructing a Ram temple at Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh. The arrest led to the fall of the V.P. Singh government in which the BJP was a coalition partner. Lalu Prasad was lauded for preventing possible communal clashes.

Chief Minister Nitish Kumar was also part of the RJD chief's barb when he said: 'The current state home secretary Afzal Amanullah, who was made district magistrate of Dhanbad (now in Jharkhand) by me during my first tenure as chief minister, refused to arrest Advani. He was made home secretary by Nitish Kumar as a gift by inviting him from central deputation.'

During the assembly elections in the state last year, central Steel Minister Ram Vilas Paswan, chief of the Lok Janshakti Party (LJP), and Sharad Yadav had claimed that it was not Lalu Prasad who had arrested Advani. Paswan claimed that Advani's 'rath' chariot was stopped by then prime minister V. P. Singh's government, not by Lalu Prasad.

The by-elections in Bhagalpur has turned into a three-cornered contest with BJP candidate Shahnawaz Hussain, a former central minister, being supported by the JD-U as a NDA candidate. The United Progressive Alliance and the RJD are divided. The RJD has put its own candidate Shakuni Chowdhary, while the Congress, LJP and the Nationalist Congress Party support Communist Party of India-Marxist CPI (M) candidate Subodh Roy.

Bhagalpur, known as the silk city, was badly hit by communal riots in 1989 when the Congress-led government was in power in the state.

Interestingly, in Bhagalpur all are eyeing the Muslim vote bank and their support as it will decide the final outcome of the by-elections.

Shanawaz Hussain is eyeing to corner Muslim votes with the backing of the JD-U leaders who have accused Lalu Prasad of doing nothing for Muslims. The CPI-M candidate is hopeful of garnering Muslim votes as the Congress, LJP and NCP are supporting him.

But more than anyone, the prestige of Lalu Prasad's RJD is at stake because the Bhagalpur result will show whether his traditional social support base among Muslims and Yadavs is intact or has

eroded further in comparison to last year's assembly elections.

The number of Muslim voters in Bhagalpur is 350,000 while the Yadavs number less than 200,000. Dalit voters are around 100,000. Besides, kurmi-koeri agrarian castes account for over 150,000.

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