The Psychological Ecology of Elections: An Emotion-Centric Study of Voter Behaviour in Bihar, 2025

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Abstract—
Background: Democracy in India functions not merely as a constitutional framework but as a complex psychological ecosystem shaped by emotion, identity, and social persuasion. The Bihar Assembly Elections 2025 provide a crucial context to examine how voters' emotional orientations, caste identities, and media-generated narratives influence political behaviour.

Objective This study explores the psychological ecology of elections by analyzing the interplay of affective responses, social identity salience, and propaganda exposure among voters in Bihar. It aims to understand how emotions shape political choices and how identity and media jointly mediate this process.

Methods: A mixed-method political-psychological investigation was conducted with 300 voters across ten districts of Bihar. Standardized tools the Political Emotion Index (PEI), Civic Reasoning Scale (CRS), and Media Exposure Index (MEI) were used to measure emotional arousal, democratic cognition, and susceptibility to propaganda. Quantitative findings were complemented by focus group discussions and thematic analysis for deeper contextual understanding.

Results: Emotional arousal particularly fear, pride, anger, and hope emerged as a significant predictor of voting preference. Caste identity served as a mediating variable that structured emotional meaning and shaped political alignment. Exposure to emotionally charged media content amplified cognitive bias, heightened affective polarization, and reduced policy-based evaluation.

Conclusion: Voter behaviour in Bihar reflects a pronounced emotional–identity–media nexus operating within the broader psychological ecology of Indian elections. Strengthening emotional literacy and civic reasoning may support more reflective, ethical, and resilient democratic participation.

Index Terms—**Political psychology; emotional priming; voter behaviour; Bihar elections; social identity theory; democracy and emotion**

I. INTRODUCTION

The study of voter behaviour has traditionally been grounded in theories of rational choice, issue-based evaluation, and policy preference. However, advances in political psychology increasingly demonstrate that electoral decision-making is profoundly shaped by emotions, social identities, and symbolic communication. In the Indian context where caste, community belongingness, and affective political messaging dominate public discourse understanding voter behaviour requires moving beyond rational cognition into the domains of emotion, perception, and mediated influence.

Democracy operates not only through institutional mechanisms but also through the psychological processes of its citizens. Voters interpret political information through emotional narratives, identity-based meanings, and media-constructed realities. The Bihar Assembly Elections 2025 offer a compelling opportunity to study these dynamics, given the state's intricate social landscape comprising caste stratification, religious heterogeneity, rural–urban divides, and rapidly evolving media exposure.

Recent electoral cycles in India illustrate a decisive shift toward emotional persuasion. Campaigns increasingly deploy themes such as pride, fear, hope, anger, and group belonging to mobilize political support. These emotional appeals often intersect with caste and community identities, reinforcing group loyalty through shared affect rather than deliberative reasoning. As a result, the electoral arena becomes a site of affective contestation where political cognition is filtered through emotional resonance and identity-based interpretation.

Although the emotionalization of politics is a global phenomenon, its intensity and social embeddedness in Bihar make it particularly salient for psychological

inquiry. Here, voters routinely rely on emotional cues transmitted through political speeches, campaign symbols, interpersonal networks, and digital media narratives. Caste identity continues to function as a powerful psychological anchor, shaping the interpretation of political events and influencing electoral preferences.

Against this backdrop, the present research investigates what may be termed the psychological ecology of elections a conceptual framework describing how emotions, identities, cognition, and media interact to shape democratic decision-making. By integrating perspectives from political psychology, social identity theory, and media studies, this study aims to illuminate the affective foundations of voter behaviour in Bihar.

The specific objectives of this study are:

1. To analyze the relationship between emotional arousal and voter preference.
2. To examine the mediating role of caste identity in emotional decision-making.
3. To assess the influence of media-driven propaganda on voters' emotional and cognitive processing.
4. To explore how these factors collectively shape democratic reasoning among Bihar voters.

Through this inquiry, the paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how democratic processes unfold within a complex emotional and social landscape revealing that elections are not merely political events, but psychological experiences shaped by affect, identity, and mediated meaning.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The study of voter behaviour has undergone a significant conceptual transformation over the past four decades. Early scholarship emphasized rational calculation and issue-based evaluation, but contemporary research positions emotions, identity, cognition, and media persuasion as central determinants of political choice. This review synthesizes major theoretical and empirical contributions that inform the present investigation into the emotional and psychological ecology of elections in Bihar.

2.1 From Rational Choice to Affective Politics

Classical rational choice theorists conceptualized voters as utility-maximizing actors who assess policy options through cost–benefit reasoning. Downs (1957) proposed that electoral choice is rooted in instrumental rationality, shaped by ideological alignment and expected material gains. However, subsequent research challenged this assumption by demonstrating that most voters possess limited political information and instead rely on heuristics or emotional cues.

Kuklinski and Quirk (2000) argued that mass publics rarely exhibit stable, well-structured policy preferences and often rely on cognitive shortcuts. A growing body of political psychology suggests that emotions significantly influence information processing, memory recall, and evaluative judgment, thereby challenging the traditional rational model.

2.2 Affective Intelligence and Emotional Priming

One of the most significant contributions to modern political psychology is the Affective Intelligence Theory (AIT) developed by Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen (2000). AIT posits that emotions operate through two systems:

- Disposition System (enthusiasm, anger): Reinforces habitual loyalty to political actors and signals stability.
- Surveillance System (fear, anxiety): Heightens attention, increases information seeking, and disrupts routine voting patterns.

Brader (2006) further demonstrated that emotional cues in campaign advertisements particularly those invoking enthusiasm or fear can alter candidate preferences and mobilize voter turnout.

Empirical studies in India echo these findings. Sharma and Kumar (2022) observed that emotional contagion through speeches and digital media significantly shapes voters' political attitudes, especially among youth populations. Their results confirm that emotional priming remains a potent force in election campaigns where symbolic narratives take precedence over policy discourse.

2.3 Social Identity Theory and Caste-Based Political Behaviour

Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provides a powerful framework for understanding group-based voting behaviour. It argues that individuals derive their self-concept from group memberships and consequently display ingroup favouritism, outgroup bias, and identity-consistent

political preferences.

In the Indian electoral context, caste identity has historically functioned as a deeply embedded social and psychological category influencing political alignment. Studies by Ahuja and Chhibber (2012) and Jaffrelot (2015) highlight that caste affiliations shape perceptions of candidate legitimacy, distribute political trust, and provide voters with emotional and symbolic reassurance.

Research specific to Bihar suggests that caste-linked pride, recognition, and status expectations strongly influence electoral participation. Rao and Banerjee (2018) found that Bihar voters frequently frame political choices through narratives of historical injustice, community representation, and collective dignity. These identity-based emotions often override rational cost–benefit calculations.

2.4 Cognitive Dissonance and Motivated Reasoning

Leon Festinger's (1957) Cognitive Dissonance Theory explains how voters maintain psychological equilibrium by avoiding or rationalizing information that contradicts their pre-existing beliefs. Subsequent research shows that political partisans selectively process information to reduce emotional discomfort.

Taber and Lodge (2006) argued that motivated reasoning leads individuals to accept congenial evidence uncritically while dismissing opposing facts. This phenomenon is exacerbated in emotionally polarized environments, such as competitive state elections in India.

Bihar-specific studies indicate that voters often reinterpret policy failures or corruption allegations to sustain emotional loyalty toward preferred political leaders. Emotional consistency, rather than factual accuracy, becomes the primary driver of political justification.

2.5 Media Influence, Propaganda, and Digital Echo Chambers

The rise of digital platforms has significantly altered India's political communication landscape. Iyengar and Westwood (2015) demonstrated that partisan media intensifies affective polarization, reducing cross-group empathy and increasing emotional hostility.

In India, social media has amplified emotionally charged content, often creating echo chambers where users encounter only confirmatory viewpoints. Recent studies by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS, 2023) indicate that social media exposure during elections increases susceptibility to emotional misinformation, reduces analytical thinking, and heightens political anxiety.

Research on Bihar's electoral cycles shows that digital propaganda memes, videos, WhatsApp forwards, and emotionally curated news creates rapid emotional priming. Voters often rely on affect-laden narratives rather than verified information, shaping perceptions of party competence and leadership credibility.

2.6 Civic Reasoning, Emotional Literacy, and Democratic Behaviour

Civic reasoning refers to the capacity to evaluate political issues through ethical judgment, evidence-based analysis, and democratic norms. Norris and Inglehart (2019) argue that emotional polarization weakens civic reasoning, making societies more vulnerable to populist rhetoric and majoritarian impulses.

Emerging literature on emotional literacy suggests that individuals with greater awareness of their emotional triggers are less susceptible to manipulation. WHO (2010) emphasizes that emotional regulation enhances critical thinking, reduces polarization, and supports healthy democratic participation.

Within the Indian context, few empirical studies directly examine emotional literacy, but research on political education indicates that interpersonal dialogue, deliberative forums, and fact-checking interventions improve democratic reasoning among citizens.

2.7 Gaps in the Literature

Despite substantial global and Indian research on political psychology, several gaps remain:

- Limited emotion-centric empirical research from Indian states, particularly Bihar.
- Lack of integrated models combining emotion, identity, cognition, and media exposure.
- Minimal mixed-method studies capturing both psychological variables and narrative interpretations.
- Insufficient focus on digital media's affective influence in regional elections.

The present study addresses these gaps by examining the psychological ecology of elections in Bihar

through a combined framework of emotional arousal, caste identity, civic reasoning, and media exposure.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical foundation of this study draws upon interdisciplinary traditions in political psychology, social identity research, cognitive science, and media studies. The present investigation conceptualizes voter behaviour as an outcome of interacting emotional, cognitive, and social forces a framework described here as the Psychological Ecology of Elections. This section outlines the key theories that inform the analytical structure of the study.

3.1 Affective Intelligence Theory (AIT)

Affective Intelligence Theory, developed by Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen (2000), provides a foundational lens for understanding how emotions guide political judgment. According to AIT, emotions operate through two complementary systems:

1 Disposition System

- Governs habitual engagement through emotions such as pride, enthusiasm, and anger.
- Reinforces stable political loyalties and encourages continuation of past voting behaviour.

2 Surveillance System

- Activated by sensations of fear, uncertainty, and anxiety.
- Prompts voters to seek new information and reassess prior political commitments.

The Bihar electoral environment characterized by emotional appeals to pride, fear, and anger illustrates how these systems remain highly active during campaign periods. AIT thus explains why emotional arousal (e.g., hope, resentment, insecurity) functions as a key predictor of voter preference.

3.2 Social Identity Theory (SIT)

Developed by Tajfel and Turner (1979), Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive a significant part of their self-concept from group memberships. These group identities shape perception, judgment, and interpersonal behaviour. In electoral contexts, SIT suggests:

- Voters categorize political options as extensions of ingroup–outgroup dynamics.
- Emotional solidarity within caste or community groups strengthens political allegiance.
- Political competition is perceived as a contest for recognition, dignity, and status.

In Bihar, caste identity acts as a deeply embedded psychological anchor. Voters often interpret political messages through caste-based emotional frames, such as group pride, historical grievances, and perceived threats to group honour. By shaping emotional meaning and political cognition, caste identity mediates the relationship between emotional arousal and voting behaviour.

3.3 Cognitive Dissonance Theory

Festinger's (1957) Cognitive Dissonance Theory explains how voters respond when confronted with information that contradicts their beliefs or emotional commitments. To maintain psychological equilibrium, individuals:

- Avoid contradictory evidence
- Reinterpret negative information
- Rationalize past decisions
- Display selective attention and motivated reasoning

In highly emotional political environments, such as Bihar elections, cognitive dissonance reinforces pre-existing loyalties even in the face of policy failures or scandals. The theory clarifies why emotional attachments, once formed, persist despite conflicting facts.

3.4 Emotion Priming and Media Psychology

Emotion priming theory (Brader, 2006) suggests that emotionally charged stimuli such as speeches, images, slogans, and digital content activate underlying affective schemas, thereby shaping political judgment without conscious deliberation. Two processes are central:

3.4.1 Affective Conditioning

- Repeated exposure to emotional messages associates political actors with specific feelings.

3.4.2 Cognitive Accessibility

- Recently activated emotions (anger, hope, fear) become the default filter for interpreting political information.

In Bihar's increasingly digital electoral landscape, social media platforms act as amplifiers of emotional priming. Echo chambers and algorithmic curation

selectively expose citizens to emotionally stimulating content, shaping perceptions of political performance and legitimacy.

3.5 Civic Reasoning and Democratic Cognition

Civic reasoning involves reflective thinking, ethical judgment, evaluation of evidence, and policy-based reasoning. It draws on concepts from:

- Democratic cognition models
- Critical thinking research
- Deliberative democracy theory (Habermas, 1996)

Empirical literature demonstrates that heightened emotional arousal often suppresses civic reasoning, increasing reliance on heuristics and group-based cognition. In Bihar, moderate civic reasoning scores indicate a partial displacement of rational assessment by emotional and identity-driven cues.

3.6 Integrated Model: The Psychological Ecology of Elections

Drawing from the above theoretical traditions, this study proposes an integrated framework the Psychological Ecology of Elections consisting of three interacting pillars:

1. Emotional System (Affective Integration)

Emotions such as fear, pride, anger, and hope shape political attention, motivation, and evaluation. These emotions are activated by campaign messages, interpersonal discussions, and symbolic cues.

2. Identity System (Social Anchoring)

Caste identity, community belongingness, and group-based recognition provide cognitive and emotional templates through which political information is interpreted. Identity frames mediate emotional intensity and direct voters toward group-consistent choices.

3. Cognitive System (Democratic Reasoning)

Rational evaluation, ethical thinking, and policy-based judgment are moderated by emotional arousal and identity salience. High emotional engagement and caste centrality reduce the influence of civic reasoning.

4. Media Environment (Affective Amplification)

Traditional and digital media intensify emotional states, shape narrative frames, and create echo chambers that reinforce group identity and weaken analytical judgment.

3.7 Conceptual Proposition

Based on the integrated model, the study advances the following conceptual proposition:

Voter behaviour in Bihar is the outcome of an affective–identity–media nexus in which emotional arousal drives political preference, identity shapes emotional meaning, media amplifies affective cues, and civic reasoning moderates (but often weakly) these interactions.

This theoretical framework guides the formulation of research questions, hypotheses, methodology, and interpretation of results in the subsequent sections.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-method political-psychological approach to investigate the emotional, cognitive, and identity-based determinants of voter behaviour in the Bihar Assembly Elections 2025. The methodology

integrates quantitative measurement with qualitative thematic exploration to capture both the measurable and interpretive dimensions of the psychological ecology of elections.

4.1 Research Design

A descriptive–correlational, mixed-method design was used. The rationale for combining quantitative and qualitative approaches was to:

- measure emotional arousal, media influence, caste identity, and civic reasoning using standardized psychological scales, and
- interpret the deeper meanings, narratives, and emotional experiences underlying voters' political choices.

The quantitative component identified statistical relationships among variables. The qualitative component provided contextual richness and helped triangulate quantitative results.

4.2 Study Area and Population

The study was conducted across ten districts of Bihar, representing a diverse socio-political environment:

Patna, Gaya, Nalanda, Muzaffarpur, Bhagalpur, Purnia, Darbhanga, Samastipur, Rohtas, and Siwan.

The population comprised adult voters (18 years and above) who had voted previously or intended to

participate in the 2025 Assembly elections.

4.3 Sample Size and Sampling Procedure Sample Size:
N = 300 voters Sampling Technique:
A multi-stage stratified random sampling method was used:

- Stage 1 – District selection:
- Ten districts were selected purposively to represent Bihar's geographical, cultural, and political diversity.
- Stage 2 – Constituency selection:
- In each district, one urban and one rural constituency were chosen.
- Stage 3 – Participant selection:
- Respondents were selected through stratified random sampling from electoral rolls and local voter lists.

Demographic Profile of Participants

Variable	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	158	52.7
	Female	142	47.3
Age Group	18–25 yrs	82	27.3
	26–40 yrs	108	36.0
	41–60 yrs	78	26.0
	Above 60 yrs		10.7
Education	Secondary	92	30.7
	Graduate	126	42.0
	Postgraduate	82	27.3

Caste Group	General	68	22.7
	OBC	132	44.0
	SC/ST	76	25.3
	Minority	24	8.0
Residence	Urban	134	44.7
	Rural	166	55.3

The diversity of the sample enhances the generalizability of findings across Bihar's varied socio-political landscape.

4.4 Instruments
The following standardized and adapted instruments were used:
1. Political Emotion Index (PEI)
A 24-item scale developed for this study assessing emotional arousal across four domains:

- Pride
- Fear
- Anger
- Hope

Response format: 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree)
Reliability: Cronbach α = 0.86

2. Civic Reasoning Scale (CRS)
Adapted from democratic reasoning inventories to measure:

- policy evaluation
- ethical judgment
- cognitive reflection
- analytical political thinking

20 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale
Reliability: Cronbach α = 0.81

3. Media Exposure Index (MEI)
A 15-item scale measuring:

- frequency of political media consumption
- exposure to digital vs. traditional media
- degree of emotional content encountered
- susceptibility to propaganda

Reliability: Cronbach α = 0.79

4. Caste Identity Salience Scale (CISS)
A 10-item scale adapted from Cameron's (2004) identity centrality framework assessing:

- identity importance
- emotional attachment to caste
- group-based political meaning

Reliability: Cronbach α = 0.83

5. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) Guide
Semi-structured guide covering:

- emotional triggers in politics
- identity-based voting
- media influence
- perceptions of parties and leadership
- political meaning-making

Ten FGDs (one per district), with 8–10 participants each, were conducted.

4.5 Data Collection Procedure
Data were collected from January to May 2025 using a hybrid approach:
1. Quantitative Data Collection

- Conducted both online (Google Forms) and offline (paper survey).
- Trained field investigators administered questionnaires in rural areas.
- Average completion time: 20–25 minutes.

2. Qualitative Data Collection
- FGDs were conducted in Hindi for natural expression of emotions.
- Each session lasted 60–90 minutes.
- Audio recordings were transcribed into English for analysis.
- Special attention was given to emotional expressions, narratives, and identity-related themes.

3. Ethical Considerations
- Informed consent obtained from all participants.
- Confidentiality and anonymity strictly maintained.
- Data stored securely and used only for research.
- Ethical approval obtained from Child Concern Research Ethics Committee.

4.6 Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a two-level approach:

4.6.1 Quantitative Analysis Performed using SPSS Version 27. Analytical steps:

1. Descriptive statistics (mean, SD) For emotional arousal, media exposure, caste identity, civic reasoning.
2. Pearson's correlation analysis to examine relationships among variables.
3. Multiple regression analysis to identify predictors of:
    - voter preference
    - civic reasoning
4. Composite Index Construction
    - Voter Preference Index (VPI) combining emotional vs. rational indicators.
    - Standardization techniques applied (z-scores).

All statistical assumptions (normality, linearity, multicollinearity) were tested and met.

4.6.2 Qualitative Analysis

Conducted using thematic analysis following Braun & Clarke (2006):

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics (N = 300)

1. Familiarization with data (reading transcripts)
2. Initial coding (emotion, identity, propaganda themes)
3. Category clustering (pride, fear narratives, digital echo chambers)
4. Theme development
5. Reviewing and refining themes
6. Narrative synthesis

Triangulation ensured consistency between qualitative insights and statistical results.

4.7 Research Questions and Hypotheses Research Questions

1. How do emotional arousal and caste identity influence voter preference?
2. Does exposure to emotionally charged media increase affect-based decision-making?
3. What is the relationship between civic reasoning and emotional priming?
4. How do emotion, identity, and media collectively shape voter behaviour?

Hypotheses
- H1: Emotional arousal positively correlates with caste identity and media exposure.
- H2: Emotional arousal and caste identity jointly predict voter preference more strongly than civic reasoning.
- H3: High emotional exposure negatively correlates with civic reasoning scores.
- H4: Media exposure amplifies emotional bias in political decision-making.

V. RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

This section presents the empirical findings of the study, integrating quantitative and qualitative analyses to explain the emotional, cognitive, and identity-driven determinants of voter behaviour in the Bihar Assembly Elections 2025.

5.1 Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed for all major variables: emotional arousal (PEI), caste identity salience (CISS), media exposure (MEI), civic reasoning (CRS), and voter preference (VPI).

Variable	Mean (M)	SD	Interpretation
Political Emotion Index (PEI)	3.82	0.66	Moderately high emotional engagement
Caste Identity Salience Scale (CISS)	3.71	0.61	High identity-based orientation
Media Exposure Index (MEI)	3.95	0.72	High exposure to political media, especially emotional content
Civic Reasoning Scale (CRS)	2.94	0.58	Moderate analytical and ethical reasoning
Voter Preference Index (VPI)	3.78	0.63	Emotion-leaning voting tendency

Interpretation

The descriptive data suggest:

- Voters in Bihar demonstrate high emotional activation and strong caste-based identity orientation.
- Media consumption is widespread and emotionally saturated.
- Civic reasoning remains moderate indicating partial displacement of rational evaluation by emotional and identity-based factors.
- Voting decisions appear predominantly emotion-centric.

5.2 Correlation Analysis

Pearson's correlation coefficients were computed to assess the relationships among the major variables.

Table 2: Correlation Matrix

Variables	PEI	CISS	MEI	CRS	VPI
PEI (Emotions)	1.00	0.58**	0.62**	-0.46**	0.69**
CISS (Caste Identity)	0.58**	1.00	0.55**	-0.39**	0.61**
MEI (Media Exposure)	0.62**	0.55**	1.00	-0.42**	0.64**
CRS (Civic Reasoning)	-0.46**	-0.39**	-0.42**	1.00	-0.51**
VPI (Voter Preference)	0.69**	0.61**	0.64**	-0.51**	1.00

Note: $p < .01$ Interpretation

- Emotional arousal shows a strong positive correlation with voter preference ($r = .69$), confirming that high emotional activation increases the likelihood of emotion-based voting.
- Caste identity also correlates strongly with voter preference ($r = .61$), indicating its powerful mediating influence.
- Media exposure correlates positively with both emotion and voter preference, illustrating the role of emotionally charged media in amplifying affective decision-making.
- Civic reasoning correlates negatively with all emotional and media variables, suggesting that rational evaluation weakens as emotional and identity pressures rise.

This confirms the presence of an affective–identity–media nexus in shaping electoral behaviour.

5.3 Regression Analysis

Model 1: Predictors of Voter Preference

A multiple regression analysis was conducted using emotional arousal, caste identity, and media exposure as predictors of voter preference.

Table 3: Regression Predicting Voter Preference (VPI)

Predictor	β	t	p
Emotional Arousal (PEI)	0.42	7.85	< .001
Caste Identity (CISS)	0.28	5.47	< .01
Media Exposure (MEI)	0.31	6.03	< .01

Model Fit:

$R^2 = 0.57$, $F(3, 296) = 129.8$, $p < .001$

Interpretation

- The three predictors together explain 57% of the variance in voter preference indicating a powerful emotional–identity–media influence.
- Emotions ($\beta = .42$) are the strongest predictor, followed by media exposure and caste identity.
- Rational or policy-based evaluation plays a much smaller role in predicting voter choices.

Model 2: Predictors of Civic Reasoning (CRS)
To determine what undermines or enhances civic reasoning, a second regression analysis was run.

Table 4: Regression Predicting Civic Reasoning (CRS)

Predictor	β	t	p
Emotional Arousal (PEI)	-0.32	-5.64	< .01
Media Exposure (MEI)	-0.28	-4.97	< .01
Caste Identity (CISS)	-0.21	-4.22	< .05
Education Level	0.24	4.81	< .01

Model Fit:
$R^2 = 0.46$, $F(4, 295) = 63.4$, $p < .001$

Interpretation
- Higher emotional intensity and media exposure significantly reduce civic reasoning.
- Caste identity also contributes to decreased deliberative capacity.
- Education is a positive protective factor, strengthening analytical reasoning and democratic cognition.

5.4 Qualitative Results: Thematic Analysis
Focus group discussions produced four major themes revealing the lived emotional experience of voters.
Theme 1: Pride and Identity as Emotional Anchors
Participants linked voting choices to sentiments of dignity, recognition, and group belonging.
―We vote for those who respect our community and make us feel proud.‖ This demonstrates how emotional validation sustains durable political loyalties.

Theme 2: Fear Narratives and Security Politics
Many respondents reported fear-based messaging related to unemployment, caste rivalry, and social instability.
―Everyone is saying if the other side wins, our community will suffer.‖ Fear emerged as a powerful emotional driver.

Theme 3: Digital Echo Chambers
Social media acted as a space where emotionally charged content spread rapidly.
―Once you watch a political reel, ten more similar videos follow.‖ Algorithms intensified emotional polarization.
Theme 4: Emotional Convenience Over Rational Deliberation
Participants revealed that emotional shortcuts were ―easier‖ than policy evaluation.
―Policies are confusing; emotions are clear.‖
This explains why civic reasoning weakens under emotional overload.

5.5 Integrated Interpretation
The combined quantitative and qualitative findings support the study's central thesis:
Voter behaviour in Bihar is shaped by a psychological ecology where emotion, identity, and media interact in a self-reinforcing loop.

Key insights:
1. Emotions especially fear, pride, anger, and hope drive voter preference more strongly than rational considerations.
2. Caste identity acts as an emotional lens that shapes interpretation and political loyalty.
3. Media exposure intensifies emotional bias, reinforcing identity-based narratives and reducing cognitive reflection.
4. Civic reasoning declines as emotional arousal and propaganda exposure increase.
5. Education is the only factor that consistently strengthens democratic reasoning.

These findings reveal that elections in Bihar are not merely political events but deeply psychological experiences governed by emotional energies, identity narratives, and mediated persuasion.

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Discussion
The findings of this study reveal a compelling psychological ecology that governs electoral behaviour in Bihar. Consistent with contemporary political-psychological theories, the results demonstrate that emotions, social identity, and media exposure form the core structural elements shaping voter decision-making during the Bihar Assembly Elections 2025.
- Emotions as Primary Drivers of Voter Behaviour
- The strong predictive power of emotional arousal ($\beta = .42$) confirms the centrality of affect in electoral cognition. Emotions such as fear, pride, anger, and hope significantly shaped political preference, often overriding policy-based or rational evaluation.

- This aligns with Affective Intelligence Theory, which holds that emotional stimuli regulate political attention and motivate behaviour. In the Bihar context:
- Fear narratives heightened conformity and risk-aversion.
- Pride and hope enhanced social cohesion and political enthusiasm.
- Anger strengthened intergroup polarization.

These emotions served as cognitive shortcuts, enabling voters to interpret political complexity through simple, affect-laden cues.

6.1.1 The Enduring Power of Caste-Based Identity

The role of caste identity as a strong predictor of voter preference (β = .28) reaffirms the enduring relevance of

Social Identity Theory in Indian electoral politics. Caste functions as both:

1. a sociocultural category, and
2. a psychological anchor that frames emotional meaning.Voters often interpreted political competition as a struggle for group dignity and recognition. Focus group narratives revealed that identity-based pride and perceived threat continue to shape political alignment more strongly than ideological or developmental considerations.

6.1.2 Media Exposure and the Amplification of Emotional Bias

The influence of media exposure (β = .31) indicates that emotionally charged media content particularly on social platforms acts as a key amplifier of affective polarization. Bihar voters reported encountering:

- repetitive emotional rhetoric,
- algorithm-driven echo chambers, and
- highly sensationalized political content.

This confirms research showing that digital platforms prioritize emotionally engaging content, thereby reinforcing bias, heightening affective arousal, and reducing opportunities for rational deliberation.

6.1.3 Civic Reasoning as a Counterbalance and Its Vulnerabilities

Civic reasoning correlated negatively with emotional arousal (r = –0.46), media exposure (r = –0.42), and caste identity (r = –0.39), revealing a tension between emotion and rational democratic cognition.

The regression analysis further showed that:

- Emotions suppress reflective thinking,
- Media reduces analytical capacity,
- Identity narrows perspective, and
- Education enhances deliberative reasoning.

Thus, while citizens are emotionally mobilized, their cognitive evaluation capacities remain fragile under emotional pressure.

6.1.4 The Psychological Ecology of Elections

The study conceptualizes elections as an ecosystem where:

- Emotions provide motivational energy,
- Identities provide interpretive structure,
- Media provides transmission and amplification, and
- Cognition often remains secondary.

This psychological ecology helps explain why:

- highly emotional narratives dominate campaign strategy,
- identity-based appeals persist despite development discourse, and
- misinformation spreads rapidly within polarized environments.

The interaction of these forces produces what this study terms the Psychological Ecology of Elections a self- sustaining emotional climate that governs voting behaviour.

VII. CONCLUSION

The present study concludes that voter behaviour in Bihar during the 2025 Assembly Elections is shaped primarily by an emotion-centric decision-making framework, supported by caste-based identity and intensified through media exposure. Emotions such as fear, pride, anger, and hope do not merely influence political judgment they constitute the foundation of political cognition for many voters.

Caste identity continues to serve as a powerful social and emotional anchor, shaping perceptions of political parties and leaders. Media narratives, particularly digital platforms, reinforce affective polarization through emotionally charged content. In contrast, civic reasoning though present is often overshadowed by affective and identity-based factors.

In summary, the Bihar voter appears as:

- A deeply emotional political actor,
- Embedded in social identity,

- Influenced by media-driven affect, and
- Balancing emotion with limited rational reflection.

This psychological ecology is both a strength (mobilization, belonging, democratic engagement) and a vulnerability (polarization, misinformation, reduced deliberation).

VIII. IMPLICATIONS FOR DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE

The findings have several implications for strengthening democratic resilience in India:

1. Emotional and Civic Literacy

Educational initiatives should cultivate emotional self-awareness, critical media consumption, and reflective decision-making.

2. Media Regulation and Accountability

Policies must address the rise of emotional propaganda and algorithmic amplification of sensational content.

3. Ethical Political Communication

Political actors should promote respectful, fact-based messaging rather than exploiting emotional vulnerabilities.

4. Voter Education Programs

Campaigns focusing on issues, evidence, and public reasoning should be encouraged at community and institutional levels.

5. Research and Policy Collaboration

Interdisciplinary research centres should examine political emotions to inform electoral policy and democratic reforms.

IX. FINAL REMARK

The study demonstrates that democracy in Bihar and India at large is not solely a political system but an emotional landscape, shaped by collective memories, identities, fears, and hopes. Understanding this emotional architecture is essential for nurturing a more reflective, ethical, and psychologically resilient democratic society.

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