

## Roll of Dalit and OBC sin the 2019 Indian Election–New dimension of Voting for Modi?

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### Abstract

In the general elections 2009 and 2014, the poor the voters were, the less BJP-oriented they were too. The situation changed in 2019, when the prime minister appeared to be equally popular among all the strata of society, including the poor. Modi's massive appeal to the poor is counter intuitive given the weakening pro-poor policies like the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act and the character of BJP. If class has lost some of its relevance for explaining the results of the 2019 elections, caste is showing some resilience, nota segregates in the garb of OBCs or SCs, but as jatis at the state level. This caste-based strategy partly explains the above-mentioned classe lement as the small OBC and Dalitjatis that the BJP has wooed are often among the poorest—and upper caste poor vote more for BJP than their co-ethnic rich anyway.

### Keywords

General election 2019, Bhartiya Janta Party, Modi, Caste, Class, Hindi belt in India

### I. Introduction

In 2014, the notion of class—that had been eclipsed by caste in the 1990s—had staged a comeback, not only because of the new assertiveness of the middle class (reflected in its turn out that jumped by 10 percentage points compared to 2009—see Table 1), but also because of the rise of what Narendra Modi called the 'neo-middle class', an aspiring social category born in the context of a high growth rate (Jaffrelot,2013,2015a).And his victory was largely due to the set wo social milieus; hence there confirmation of an old, simple line are correlation according to which, the rich erthe voters were, the more BJP- oriented they were too (see Table2).

Five years later, class has lost its explanatory power as this correlation does not operate any more. In the 2019 election, class has not made any significant impact on the voting patterns and the poor have where jatis hardly make sense—but at the state level, as we will demonstrate in the second part on the basis of voting patterns in Hindi-speaking states. However, the influence of class and caste cumulative to some extent, not only because the poor of the uppcase stand, traditionally, to vote more for the BJP, but also because the party, in 2019, has tried to woo small and poor OBC and Dalit castes against larger and more affluent ones which were aligned on state parties like the SP and the BSP.

Table 1. Class-wise Turn Out in 2009, 2014 and 2019

Class	2009	2014	2019
Poor	57	60	66
Lower	59	68	65
Middle	60	69	69
Upper	57	67	68
Total	58	67	67

Source: Lokniti-CSDS, National Election Survey (NES), 2009, 2014 and 2019.

**Note:** All the data used in this article, when not mentioned otherwise, come from the sources. In this table like in the others, the four class categories are Defined on the basis of a composite index relying on income and three background variables (occupation, type of housing and selected household assets). These indices are calculated while controlling for locality.

### The Elusiveness of Class

Traditionally, social scientists have tended not to pay attention to the role of class in Indian politics. Susanne and Lloyd Rudolph, for instance, considered that class politics never crystallized in the coun- try. In 2014, only 24 per cent of the 'poor' voted for the party, against 38 percent of the 'rich' a gap of 14 percentage points and the correlation was perfectly linear (see Table 2). E. Sridharan, therefore, tried to understand 'why did the upper middle and middle class vote for the BJP disproportionately in 2014?' (Sridharan, 2014, p.74). In 2019, the gap between the 'poor' and the 'rich' has dropped from 14 percentage points to 4, and to 2

only if we compare the ‘poor’ with the ‘middle’ stratum. While the ‘poor’ lagged behind the average performance of BJP—31 percent of the valid votes—by 5 percentage points in 2014, it was only 2 percentage points below the overall vote of BJP—37.7 percent—in 2019. In some states, the poor voted BJP even more than the middle stratum. In Uttar Pradesh, for instance, a record proportion of 50 per cent of the poor chose BJP, against 49 per cent of the middle stratum (see table 3). In Madhya Pradesh, 56.5 percent of the poor did the same, against 53 per cent of the ‘lower’ stratum (see table 5). Bihar is one of the few states in North and West India where the BJP was not the first choice of the poor—but there it was it sally, the JD(U) (see table 4). In fact, in 2019, the BJP has achieved with the poor what it had achieved with the intermediate categories. Between 2009 and 2014, the proportion of BJP supporters had jumped, respectively, from 19 to 31 percent and from 22 to 32 percent of the valid votes. In 2019, the proportion of poor voting BJP has similarly jumped from 24 to 36 percent.

**Why Have the Poor Voted More for BJP in 2019?**

The massive support that the BJP received from the poor is intriguing given the fact that the Modi government has severely undermined the anti-poverty policies that the UPA had initiated. The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) started by Manmohan Singh in 2005 is a case in point (Jenkins & Manor, 2017). The amount that the Singh government had earmarked for the pro- gramme represented up to 0.6 per cent of India’s GDP, providing work to 50 million households and bringing 14 million people out of poverty, not only by giving them an income, but also by fostering revisions of the minimum wage in rural areas (which rose from `65 per day in 2005 to `162 per day in 2013). The average growth of per capita rural income went from 2.7 per cent per year between 1999 and 2004 to 9.7 per cent between 2006 and 2011.

Yet Modi and the BJP considered the programme a disaster at once because it penalized farmers (who had to pay their workers higher wages) and because it involved welfare payments, as the wages they claimed were paid even when no work was available. In the first BJP government parliamentary budget session in February 2015, after an hour-long speech in which he posed as ‘pro-poor’ and ‘pro- farmer’, Modi concluded that NREGA was nothing but a ‘monument’ to the ‘failures’ of previous governments (*The Hindu*, 2015). The Supreme Court was obliged to intervene in May 2016 to compel the government to disburse the funds earmarked for NREGA. But local government officials in charge of the programme, grouped by state into a Whats App group, received instructions via the social network not to disburse the funds, with little concern for administrative transparency (Karat, 2016). In practice, the funds allocated to NREGA thus went down from 0.36 per cent of GDP in 2012– 2013 to 0.26 per cent in 2016–2017. As a result, the number of people who worked 100 days per year fell from 470,000 in 2013–2014 to 250,000 in 2014–2015 and to 170,000 in 2015–2016.

**Table2.** The 2009, 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha Elections: Class-wise Support for Main Parties—All-India (all figures are expressed in percentage)

Class	INC			BJP			BSP			N		
	2019	2014	2009	2019	2014	2009	2019	2014	2009	2019	2014	2009
Poor	17	20	27	36	24	16	7	5	8	6,908	3,901	11,791
Lower	21	19	29	36	31	19	7	5	6	7,566	6,686	9,894
Middle	21	20	29	38	32	22	6	3	4	4,975	7,298	5,964
Upper	20	17	29	44	38	25	4	4	4	2,932	2,322	1,814
All	20	19	29	38	31	19	7	4	6	22,381	20,207	29,463

**Source:** Lokniti-CSDS, National Election Survey (NES), 2009, 2014 and 2019.

**Table3.** The 2009, 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha Elections: Class-wise Support for Main Parties—In U.P.

Class	Cong			Congress+RLD		BJP <sup>+</sup>		BJP+AD		BJP		BSP+SP		BSP		SP	
	2019	2014	2009	2019	2014	2019	2014	2019	2014	2019	2014	2019	2014	2019	2014	2019	
Poor	4	6	19	50	32	14	42	33	37	24	22						
Lower	7	8	22	47	46	18	41	19	27	22	25						
Middle	9	10	26	49	41	20	41	19	19	23	21						
Upper	7	9	33	66	51	24	24	13	13	20	19						

**Source:** Lokniti-CSDS, National Election Survey (NES), 2009, 2014 and 2019.

**Table4.** The 2009, 2014 and 2019 LSElections: Class-wise Support for Main Parties in Bihar

Class	Congress			Congress-RJD+-		RJD <sup>+</sup>		BJP+			JD(U)		
	2019	2014	2009	2019	2014	2019	2014	2009	2019	2014	2009		
Poor	7	31	24	15	24	32	10	30	15	25			
Lower	11	30	32	22	26	42	19	28	15	24			
Middle	5	24	33	23	25	40	18	32	17	26			
Upper	8	23	47	19	13	40	17	32	23	20			

**Source:** Lokniti-CSDS, National Election Survey (NES), 2009, 2014 and 2019.

**Table5.**The2009, 2014and2019LSElections: Class-wise Support for Main Parties in Madhya Pradesh

Class	Congress			BJP		
	2019	2014	2009	2019	2014	2009
Poor	38	47	38	57	47	42
Lower	38	32	41	53	56	44
Middle	33	36	41	59	53	47
Upper	25	30	36	68	55	49

**Source:** Lokniti-CSDS, National Election Survey (NES), 2009, 2014 and 2019.

In parallel, the NREGA wages stagnated: in March 2019, in spite of the elections being around the corner, the annual hike ranged from `1 to 17, which meant that, in 33 states and union territories, the NREGA wage rate was less than the corresponding minimum wage for agriculture. The BJP did not even come to the aid of farmers, those who—unlike farm workers—own parcels of land and sell their surplus. When measures to help them were announced, beneficial effects did not follow. The crop insurance scheme against natural disasters suffered from excessive bureaucratic centralism (related to the fact that Modi was seeking to take personal credit for it) (Jakhar, 2017) and the fact is that management was handed over to a private firm, Anil Ambani’s, which profited more from it than farmers did.

The issue of farm prices proved even more problematic. In his 2014 campaign platform, Modi had promised farmers that the government would buy their products on agriculture markets at 1.5 times production cost. But the means of calculating such costs was never specified, and in fact, minimum support prices proved to be not high enough (Wagh mare, 2018). Not only poor villagers and peasants have been at the receiving end under the first Modi government, but inequalities have increased across India. A 2018 Oxfam report revealed that 10 percent of the richest Indians garnered 77.4 percent of the nation’s wealth (against 73% the year before) (The Hindustan Times, 2019) and that 58 percent of it was in the hands of India’s ‘one percent’ (while the world average is 50%).

Then the question arises: Why have the poor villagers and the farmers voted for BJP to such a great extent, given the fact that this party has not done much for the and remain associated with elite groups, as evident from the social profile of its MLAs, MPs and ministers? (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2019).

Specialized literature suggests some responses. Tariq Thachil convincingly argues that while the BJP gets the vote of the poor in areas where other components of the Sangh parivar are doing social work for them—like in Chhattisgarh (Thachil, 2014). While this variable needs to be factored in and might have played a key role in the pre-Modi era, it cannot be the only explanation today when almost 30 per cent of the interviewees declare that they are supporting BJP because of Modi (J. Mishra, 2019).

While this decision brought the economy to its knees, taking a heavy toll on the poorest of the poor, whose wages are paid in cash and who often had no bank account, cheque book or credit card, Modi claimed it was a measure against the rich. The speeches he made on the topic during the campaign for the 2017 state elections in Uttar Pradesh reveal his talent for turning the perspective around in this way, and even reversing roles. He explained that the measure was intended to fight corruption by withdrawing black money from circulation and that the rich would be much harder hit than the poor. To substantiate his claim of working for the poor, Modi often cites two initiatives, Swachh Bharat and Ujjwala Yojna. In the frame work of the first, launched in 2014, the government pledged to build toilets for the poor, who are otherwise obliged to defecate out in the open.

During the election campaign, Modi emphasized the pro-poor schemes that he had undertaken, including the building of roads, Swachh Bharat Mission, the Ujjwala Yojana, the Jan Dhan Yojana and the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, which are intended to give houses to the poor. Interestingly, while these programmes had not reached their peak yet, a large fraction of the budget allotted to them was used for publicity. Swachh Bharat is a case in point. According to the CSDS-Lokniti post-poll survey, these over-publicized schemes made some impact on the voters:

First, many non-beneficiaries were confident that Modi would deliver and that they would benefit from his policies if he was re-elected. One of them, a poor tractor driver from Rajasthan, says: ‘Our name is there in the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana. We openly defecate as we have not got money for building toilets yet. But we have full faith in Modi that if comes back to power we will get our house and toilet’. Second, the Union budget that was announced in February granted an annual income support of `6,000 to all farmer households owning 2 ha or less—that is 6 per cent of a small farmer yearly income. In fact, the Union budget was more intended to please the middle class again. The income tax exemption limit jumped from `200,000 to 250,000 and the income tax rate up to `500,000 was reduced from 10 to 5 percent. The income tax on an income of 1 million dropped from `110,210 to `75,000. But, still, the poor peasants who were in a rather desperate

situation greatly appreciated this relief awarded to them in the framework of a programme called PM-KISAN Yojana. Among farmers who had heard about India’s air strikes in Balakot, 42 per cent voted for the BJP while 17 per cent voted for the Congress. Contrary to this, among those who had not heard about the strikes, the gap was merely 3 percentage points, with 31 per cent voting for the BJP and 28 per cent for the Congress. Both things reflect sentiments typical of a successful populist repertoire, when the people adhere to a strong leader who embodies the nation and whom they trust. Indeed, in the 2019 elections, Modi has won—not the BJP—because of his appeal vis-à-vis all kinds of social groups, poor or rich. According to the NES, 24 per cent of the poor would have not voted for BJP if Modi had not been the party candidate—more than the rich (22.5%)!

A fourth decision must be taken into account: the 10 per cent quota for the upper-caste poor. But this move was naturally more appealing to the upper-caste poor—a clear indication that caste still matters. In fact for understanding the way poor voters rallied around BJP in 2019, one needs not only to factor in the discourse, policies and strategies of Narendra Modi, but also his party’s tactics regarding caste politics—not at a macro level, but at the *jati* level.

**The Uneven Resilience of Caste**

Not only class does not explain the 2019 voting pattern, as we have just seen in the previous section, but caste, captured via large aggregates (like OBCs and SCs) hardly matters. Certainly, Dalits do not support BJP as much as the average Indian voter, but all the other caste groups (and tribes) do and Dalits vote more for BJP than for any other party. Within the large aggregates of Table 6 class often does not make any big difference either. Among the OBCs, for instance, the proportion of BJP supporters is very similar, be these OBC voters poor or part of the lower and middle strata. The popularity of the party only increases significantly among the rich OBCs (44%) (See table 7).

However, in order to make sense of the role of caste in Indian politics, one needs to disaggregate the meta categories that are ‘Upper Castes’, ‘OBCs’ and ‘Scheduled Castes’, in order to look at the *jatis* and, similarly, one need to shift from pan- Indian level to the state level. When applied to Uttar Pradesh, this approach suggests a counter-intuitive conclusion: poor OBCs have voted more for the BJP than for the BSP S Palliance, in spite of the elitist image of the party: 59 percent of the ‘ poor’ OBC supported BJP, against 34 per cent who turned to the alliance (see table 8).

The fact that upper and middle class OBCs voted more for the BSP-SP alliance and that poor OBCs supported more the BJP is understandable the moment *jatis* are factored in: the SP remain Yadav party to a large extent, and Yadav stand to be richer

**Table 6.** The 2009, 2014 and 2019 LS Elections: Votes by Caste, Tribe and Religion

Parties	Congress			Congress Allies			BJP			BJP Allies			BSP		
	19	14	09	19	14	09	19	14	09	19	14	09	19	14	09
Upper castes	12	13	25	6	3	9	52	48	28	7	9	7	2	1	3
OBC	15	15	25	7	4	7	44	34	22	10	8	6	5	2	3
Scheduled Castes	20	19	27	5.5	1	6.5	33.5	24	12	7	6	3	11	14	20
Scheduled Tribes	31	28	39	6	3	8	44	38	24.5	2	3	2	2	2.5	1
Muslims	33	38	38	12	8	9	8	8.5	4	1	1	2	17	4	5.5
Others	39	23	35	4	4	8	11	20	11	12	15.5	12.5	3	3	5

**Source:** Lokniti-CSDS, National Election Survey (NES), 2009, 2014 and 2019.

**Table 7.** The 2009, 2014 and 2019 LS Elections: The OBC Vote by Class in India

Class	INC			BJP			BSP		
	2019	2014	2009	2019	2014	2009	2019	2014	2009
Poor	14	15	24	39	28	19	7	2	3
Lower	21	15	24	36	37	23	7	3	4
Middle	18	16	26	37	33	23	8	2	4
Rich	19	14	23	44	37	27	4	1	3

**Source:** Lokniti-CSDS, National Election Survey (NES), 2009, 2014 and 2019.

**Table 8.**The 2009, 2014 and 2019 LS Elections: The OBC Vote by Class in UP

Congress+ Class	Congress+			BJP+			BSP+SP			BSP		SP
	2019	2014	2009	2019	2014	2009	2019	2014	2009	2014	2009	
Poor	4	4	17	59	44	15	34	10	15	37	41	
Lower	7	8	15	47	53	25	41	8	11	23	44	
Middle	8	12	20	42	47	18	47	7	19	24	32	
Upper	7	14	21	47	46	15	41	2	8	26	45	

**Source:** Lokniti-CSDS, National Election Survey (NES), 2009, 2014 and 2019.

**Table 9.**The 2009, 2014 and 2019 LS Elections: The Yadav Vote by Class in UP

Class	Congress			BJP			BSP + SP			BS P		SP	
	2019	2014	2009	2019	2014	2009	2019	2014	2009	2014	2009	2014	2009
Poor	2	4	12	28	11	8	68	0	3	82	76		
Lower	4	6	19	24	32	6	58	6	3	49	70		
Middle	15	10	8	22	29	6	59	3	8	49	78		
Upper	7	11	5	18	26	5	66	2	5	47	77		

**Source:** Lokniti-CSDS, National Election Survey (NES), 2009, 2014 and 2019.

Than the average OBC. As the non-Yadav OBCs, who often belong to poorer strata of society, usually resent the Yadav domination, and the way in which they corner most of the reservations in particular, the BJP has successfully wooed them by nominating many candidates from this milieu. Whereas 27 per cent of the SP candidates were Yadavs in 2019, Yadavs represented only 1.3 per cent of the candidates of the BJP which, on the contrary, gave tickets to 7.7 per cent Kurmis and 16.7 per cent ‘Other OBCs’, who often came from small, poor caste groups.

The same reasoning applies to the UP Dalits, whose voting pattern has changed dramatically in 2019. In 2014, class made little difference—at least till the higher social echelon so far as the BJP vote was concerned. In 2019, a counter intuitive correlation has taken shape according to which, the poorer the Dalit voters, the more BJP-oriented they are (with one exception, the rich category), like in the case of the BSP! (see table 10). One can make sense of this state of things again by factoring *jatis* as an explanatory variable. The same way the BJP consolidated the non-Yadav voters against the SP, the party has also become the rallying point of the non-Jatav voters

**Table 10.**The 2009, 2014 and 2019 LS Elections: The Dalit Vote by Class

Class	Congress			BJP			BSP		
	2019	2014	2009	2019	2014	2009	2019	2014	2009
Poor	14	17	24	34	22	10	13	13	23
Lower	22	17	31	32	22	13	10	13	20
Middle	26	18	34	27	22	16	8	14	14
Rich	24	20	35	30.5	27	19	4	13	14

**Source:** Lokniti-CSDS, National Election Survey (NES), 2009, 2014 and 2019.

Against the BSP: once again, the BJP has cashed in on the resentment of small Dalit groups accusing the Jatavs—who are indeed better off than other Dalits (Jaffre lot & Kalaiyaran, 2019, March 2)—of exerting some domination, partly because of their access to reservations. In Uttar Pradesh, the BSP has given more than 20 per cent of its tickets to Jatavs, whereas BJP has nominated 5 per cent of Jatavs, 7.7 per cent of Pasis and 9 per cent of ‘Other SCs’ (Verniers, 2019).

**Table 11.**The 2009, 2014 and 2019 LS Elections: The Brahmin Vote by Class

Class	Congress+			BJP+			BSP		
	2019	2014	2009	2019	2014	2009	2019	2014	2009
Poor	9	13	31	67	48	48	2	2	6
Lower	13	12	33	62	65	44	1	1	3
Middle	12	15	30	66	59	51	2	3	1
Upper	10	14	32	67	59	49	1	0	3

**Source:** Lokniti-CSDS, National Election Survey (NES), 2009, 2014 and 2019.

**Table 12.** The 2009, 2014 and 2019 LS Elections: The Rajput Vote by Class

Class	Congress+			BJP+			BSP		
	2019	2014	2009	2019	2014	2009	2019	2014	2009
Poor	15	11	23	71	78	56	2	0	0
Lower	15	1	29	72	73	59	2	1	3
Middle	18	17	38	68	64	51	1	0	2
Rich	18	15	30	68	70	50	2	2	2

Source: Lokniti-CSDS, National Election Survey (NES), 2009, 2014 and 2019. 1

## II. Conclusion

While class played an important role in explaining the 2014 election results, the situation has been very different in 2019, when Narendra Modi appeared to be equally popular among all the strata of society, including the poor who did not vote for him in such large numbers 5 years before. This enigma can only be explained by the way Modi is perceived by the poor, not only as one of them who is defending them against the rich (as evident from the demonetization moment). A larger number of poor voted for Modi in 2019 also because the BJP has targeted small OBC and Dalit jatis where poor were in larger numbers.

Our case study of UP suggests that if class has lost some of its relevance for explaining the results of the 2019 elections, caste is showing some unexpected relevance. In spite of the BJP's claim that the party's ideology was allergic to any consideration which may divide the nation, its strategists have meticulously studied the caste equation at the local level in order to select the right candidates among non-Jatavs and non-Yadavs in UP. This tactic reconfirms that the role of caste in politics must be analyzed at the state level and at the jati level. For making this point, other case studies dealing with other jatis in other states are now needed.

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