



ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXX / 2019

Asia in 2019: Escalating international tensions and authoritarian involution

**Edited by
Michelguglielmo Torri
Nicola Mocci
Filippo Boni**

viella

A large, faint, light-blue mandala design is visible in the bottom right corner of the cover, partially overlapping the text and the dark blue background.

CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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ISBN 978-88-3313-490-1 (Paper) ISBN 978-88-3313-491-8 (Online)

ISSN 2385-2526 (Paper) ISSN 2612-6680 (Online)

Annual journal - Vol. XXX, 2019

This journal is published jointly by the think tank Asia Maior (Associazione Asia Maior) & the CSPE - Centro Studi per i Popoli extra-europei «Cesare Bonacossa», University of Pavia

Asia Maior: The Journal of the Italian Think Tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989 is an open-access journal, whose issues and single articles can be freely downloaded from the think tank webpage: www.asiamaior.org.

The reference year is the one on which the analyses of the volume are focused. Each *Asia Maior* volume is always published in the year following the one indicated on the cover

Paper version	Italy	€ 50.00	Abroad	€ 65.00
Subscription	abbonamenti@viella.it www.viella.it			

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When this Asia Maior issue was finalized and the Covid-19 pandemic raged throughout the world, Kian Zaccara, Greta Maiorano and Giulio Santi, all children of Asia Maior authors (Luciano Zaccara, Diego Maiorano and Silvia Menegazzi), were born. We (the Asia Maior editors) have seen that as a manifestation of Life, reasserting itself in front of Thanatos. It is for this reason that we dedicate this issue to Kian, Greta and Giulio, with the fond hope that they will live in a better world than the one devastated by the Covid-19 pandemic.

INDIA 2019: THE GENERAL ELECTION AND THE NEW MODI WAVE

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In the first part of 2019 India was shaken by two major political events. In February, a major terrorist strike hit Pulwama, in Jammu and Kashmir, which was followed by airstrikes by the Indian Air Force into Pakistani territory. This episode set the tone for the 2019 general elections, which were held in April-May. The ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), which focused its campaign on national security issues in the wake of the Pulwama attack, won a resounding victory, improving both its vote and seat share. This article argues that the main factor that contributed to the exceptional performance of the BJP was the popularity of the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi. His image as the strong leader that the country needed to both protect it from external and internal enemies as well as promoting development was crucial for many voters, who decided not to punish the ruling party for a far from spectacular economic performance over its term in office.

1. Introduction

At the end of 2018, an observer of Indian politics could have easily predicted what would be the major political event of 2019: the general elections in which Prime Minister Narendra Modi sought a second mandate. At the end of the year, however, it is clear that the general elections were only one – and perhaps not the most consequential one, in a longer term perspective – of the crucial political developments of the year. In fact, after Modi's resounding victory in May 2019, when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) obtained an even larger majority in the Lok Sabha, the newly elected government took a series of important decisions that will shape India's future trajectory for years. In particular, the decision taken in August 2019 to revoke the special status of Jammu and Kashmir, the amendment to the Citizenship Act of December 2019 and the decision, in the wake of a controversial decision of the Supreme Court in the Ayodhya dispute in November 2019, to build a temple dedicated to Ram where once stood the Babri Masjid, will likely have fundamental repercussions on India's politics and society for decades to come. This article will deal with the political and economic developments of the first part of the year, focusing in particular on the general elections. A separate article in this issue of Asia Maior will cover the events in the second part of the year.

2. *The background to the general elections*

Twelve months before the general elections, most analysts predicted that the BJP was not going for a «cakewalk»:¹ while the saffron party and its leader remained highly popular, especially in the ten crucial Hindi-belt states, a number of factors pointed towards an uphill battle for the BJP. First, the economy had not performed well, particularly in rural areas, where the majority of the voters live (as we will see below). Second, some coalition partners, like the Telugu Desam Party in Andhra Pradesh and the Shiv Sena in Maharashtra, quit the governing coalition. Third, some opposition parties seemed to be coming to terms with the idea that, to defeat the BJP, they had to bury the hatchet and strike a deal. In particular, the two historical enemies of Uttar Pradesh (UP), the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), held extensive talks during 2018 and the first months of 2019 that resulted in what looked like a formidable political alliance in India's most populous state.² Furthermore, in late 2018, the results of the state elections in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, where the Congress took over from the BJP in all three states, reinforced the belief that the 2019 general elections would indeed not be a cakewalk for Modi and the BJP.³

The economic situation seemed to be particularly problematic for the BJP. First, by the time Indian voters went to cast their vote, India's GDP growth had been slowing down for five consecutive quarters to 5% (Table 1). Considering the serious questions raised by economists about the reliability of India's GDP figures – which have been revised repeatedly during Modi's term⁴ – the slowdown was likely to be even more severe than what official data portrayed. Former Economic advisor to the Prime Minister, Arvind Subramaniam, for instance, estimates that growth between 2011/12 and 2016/17 has been inflated by 2.5%.⁵ In fact, as Subramaniam notes, most economic indicators point towards a significant contraction of economic activity over the last few years, which are not reflected in the still relatively healthy GDP growth figures. In any case, even if one was to take the official figures at face value, there is little doubt that the economy has performed poorly during the year preceding the general election.

1. Milan Vaishnav, 'From Cakewalk to Contest: India's 2019 General Election', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, Washington DC, 2019.

2. Neelanjan Sircar, 'What UP tie-ups portend for BJP in Lok Sabha polls', *Hindustan Times*, 20 March 2019.

3. Michelguglielmo Torri & Diego Maiorano, 'India 2018: political uncertainty and economic difficulties', *Asia Maior* 2018, pp. 266-273.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Arvind Subramaniam, 'India's GDP Mis-estimation: Likelihood, Magnitudes, Mechanisms, and Implications', CID Faculty Working Paper No. 354, 2019 (<https://www.hks.harvard.edu/centers/cid/publications/faculty-working-papers/india-gdp-overestimate>).

Table 1 – quarterly GDP Growth Financial years (FY) 2018/19 and 2019/20.		
Quarter		GDP Growth
FY 2018/19	Q1	8
	Q2	7
	Q3	6.6
	Q4	5.8
FY 2019/20	Q1	5
Source: CEIC. (https://www.ceicdata.com/en/indicator/india/real-gdp-growth)		

Second, as shown by a series of articles by the reputed newspaper *Business Standard*,⁶ data collected by the National Statistical Office (NSO) in 2017/18 – and never released by the government, citing «quality data issues» – show that real monthly per capita consumption expenditure (MPCE) declined by 3.7% between 2011/12 and 2017/18. This had never happened before over the previous 40 years. The aggregated data mask a sharp divergence between rural and urban areas: whereas the real MPCE grew by 2% in cities, it declined by 8.8% in rural areas. An even sharper decline was recorded in rural food expenditure (9.8% over the same six years). This might have caused an *increase* of the proportion of people below the poverty line from 31.15% to 35.10%.⁷

Third, job creation during Modi's term was exceptionally low. As shown by another *Business Standard* report, based on leaked NSO data – also not released by the government because of «data quality issues» – unemployment reached 6.1% in 2017/18, the highest figure ever recorded and three times as high the figure recorded in 2011/12.⁸ It should be noted that unemployment figures do not capture disguised unemployment or underemployment, thus underestimating the scale of the job problem. However, the jump in unemployment rates is at least partly due to the fact that a higher percentage of the youth receives an education that make them aspire to blue- or white-collar, formal jobs. Given the high growth rates seen in India over the last few decades, it is reasonable to conclude that at least part of the formally unemployed come from families that can support them through unemployment, so that they are not forced to take

6. Somesh Jha, 'Consumer spend sees first fall in 4 decades on weak rural demand: NSO data', *Business Standard*, 15 November 2019.

7. This calculation is based on the Rangarajan Committee Poverty line, which has been criticised as being unrealistically low. See S. Subramanian, 'What is Happening to Rural Welfare, Poverty, and Inequality in India?', *India Forum*, 12 December 2019.

8. Somesh Jha, 'Unemployment rate at four-decade high of 6.1% in 2017-18: NSSO survey', *Business Standard*, 6 February 2019.

up agricultural or other informal jobs. On the other hand, the inability of many educated youth to find a job that meets their expectations also resulted in a sharp decline of the Labour Force Participation Rate, signalling that a growing number of youths are not even looking for a job anymore. While these trends reflect medium-term dynamics that started before Modi came to power, it is clear the Modi's promised to create 25 million jobs per year did not materialise.⁹

Fourth, the economy performed particularly bad in rural areas. The agricultural crisis is not of BJP government's creation. Its roots lie in decades of declining public and private investments; the side-effects of climate change, resulting in a growing unpredictability of the monsoon; fragmentation of landholdings across generations; international price volatility and lack of reform.¹⁰ However, especially when compared with the terms in office of the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) (2004-14), agrarian distress certainly deepened, as shown by three crucial macroeconomic indicators.¹¹

First, nominal Gross Value Added (GVA) of agriculture – which is a good proxy for living standards of those who directly depend on agriculture for their livelihoods (about 44% of the population) – declined sharply during Modi's term, while the non-agricultural nominal GVA increased.¹² This has two implications: the first one is that the terms of trade for farmers and agricultural labourers worsened; the second is that, since nominal agricultural GVA has grown in single digit since 2014 and has grown less than real GVA (indicating deflation of agricultural prices), farmers' income has grown very slowly and, presumably, unequally.¹³

Second, and relatedly, food inflation collapsed. Over the five years of the Modi-led government, the Wholesale Price Index (WPI) for food articles increased by 15.7%. In the months preceding the elections, the WPI turned negative.¹⁴ This, of course, benefited urban consumers as well as agricultural labourers, but also hurt farmers who sell their surplus. As a comparison, between 2005 and 2012, the WPI for food articles had increased by over 120%, creating the opposite problem of hurting consumers of food and benefiting producers, while benefiting surplus-producing

9. Santosh Mehrotra, 'The shape of the jobs crisis', *The Hindu*, 11 February 2019.

10. Himanshu, 'India's Farm Crisis: Decades Old and with Deep Roots', *India Forum*, 5 April 2019; Michelguglielmo Torri, *The Agrarian Crisis in India*, typescript, 2019.

11. This section relies heavily on Diego Maiorano, 'The 2019 Indian Elections and the Ruralization of the BJP', *Studies in Indian Politics*, 7, 2, 2019, pp. 176-190.

12. R. Kishore, 'Farm policy's 3 dilemmas', *Hindustan Times*, 2 June 2019.

13. Harish Damodaran, 'Farm income growth slumps to a 14-year-low in October 2018', *The Indian Express*, 3 March 2019.

14. Himanshu, 'India's Farm Crisis'.

farmers.¹⁵ Agricultural markets were also negatively impacted by the shock of demonetisation, which, according to a World Bank study, had a severe impact on rural areas (albeit a short term one).¹⁶

Third, also as a consequence of slow food inflation, which contributed to keep wage pressures low, real wages of agricultural labourers did not grow much. Between October 2007 and October 2013, real rural wages grew on average by about 7% per year. After November 2014 (until October 2018), the rate of growth dropped below 2% per year.¹⁷ For large farmers who employ substantial labour, low pressures on wages certainly helped mitigating the effects of low prices for their agricultural products, while labourers did not see their purchasing power being eroded excessively.

To sum up, at the beginning of the year under review, the BJP's prospects did not look good. On the one hand, the party had lost three important state elections and the degree of opposition unity – a crucial determinant of electoral results given India's First-Past-The-Post electoral system – was certainly greater than in 2014, particularly in UP. On the other hand, the performance of the economy had been far from spectacular and had certainly failed to bring about the *acche din* (good days) that Modi had promised five years earlier.

3. The Pulwama terrorist attack and the electoral campaign

On 14 February 2019, a suicide bomber attacked a convoy of paramilitary forces in Pulwama district in Jammu & Kashmir, killing 40 – the deadliest attack in Jammu & Kashmir in over three decades. The attacker, Adil Ahmad Dar, a resident of Pulwama, belonged to the Pakistan-based terrorist group Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM), which claimed responsibility for the attack.¹⁸

Modi immediately blamed Pakistan for the strike, threatening that those responsible for the attack «will pay a heavy price».¹⁹ The Prime Min-

15. Author's calculations based on data taken from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry. It should be noted that the data for 2014-19 are based on the new WPI series (2011-12 prices), whereas the 2005-12 data are based on the old series (2004-05 prices). Therefore the two are not strictly comparable.

16. Robert C. M. Beyer, Esha Chhabra, Virgilio Galdo, & Martin Rama, *Measuring Districts' Monthly Economic Activity from Outer Space* (Policy Research Working Paper 8523), World Bank Group, South Asia Region, Office of the Chief Economist, July 2018.

17. Sujata Kundu, 'Rural Wage Dynamics in India: What Role does Inflation Play?', *Reserve Bank of India Occasional Papers*, 40, 1, 2019.

18. 'Kashmir attack: Tracing the path that led to Pulwama', *BBC News*, 1 May 2019.

19. 'PM Modi warns Pakistan, says terrorists will pay heavy price for Pulwama attack', *The Times of India*, 15 February 2019.

ister faced a major political challenge at that point. The attack represented a major security breach, which could have been exploited by opposition parties. In fact, the government had claimed, just a few weeks before the Pulwama attack, that there had not been any major terrorist strike since Modi came to power.²⁰ However, Modi orchestrated a major military-cum-PR operation aiming at presenting himself as the strong leader that the nation needed against its external and internal enemies. The cornerstone of that operation was the bombing, by the Indian Air Force, of a JeM training camp in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province on 26 February 2019. It was the first time that the Indian armed forces crossed the Line of Control since the 1971 war.

India's retaliation should be (also) seen as a PR operation for at least two reasons. First, it is not clear whether the targeted terrorist camp was still operational. According to documents disclosed by Wikileaks, it seems that a JeM training camp was in fact located near Balakot, where the strike occurred.²¹ However, it is likely that most training camps in the area were relocated after the 2005 Earthquake.²² Second, India's claims to have killed «a large number» of terrorists²³ could not be verified by independent sources. A series of analyses by the Australian Strategic Policy Institute,²⁴ which used high-resolution satellite data to assess the damage inflicted by the airstrikes, suggest that Indian jets might have missed the target, as no visible damage was caused to the buildings of the camp.²⁵ European Space Imaging, a private company based in Germany, also provided satellite images that show no damage in the wake of the air strike.²⁶ The magazine *India Today*, on the other hand, accessed satellite images provided by the Indian government, showing holes in the roofs of the targeted buildings.²⁷

20. This was a questionable statement, given that two attacks (in Pathakot and Uri) were defined as «major» by the government itself. 'Has there been no major terror attack in India since 2014?', *BBC News*, 23 January 2019.

21. Asad Hashim, 'At raid site, no casualties and a mysterious school', *Al Jazeera*, 28 February 2019.

22. Maria Abi-Habib, 'After India's Strike on Pakistan, Both Sides Leave Room for De-escalation', *New York Times*, 26 February 2019.

23. 'India destroyed JeM camp, killed «very large number» of terrorists and trainers: Foreign secretary', *The Times of India*, 26 February 2019; 'Pak says India committed «aggression», Islamabad has «right to respond»', *The Times of India*, 26 February 2019.

24. This is an Australian government-funded think tank based in Canberra.

25. Marcus Hellyer, Nathan Ruser & Aakriti Bachhawat, 'India's strike on Balakot: a very precise miss?', *The Strategist*, 27 March 2019.

26. 'PAKISTAN: Satellite Imagery confirms India missed target in Pakistan air-strike', *European Space Imaging*, 8 March 2019.

27. 'The inside story of IAF's Balakot strike', *India Today*, 16 March 2019.

On the basis of this evidence, it seems reasonable to assume that India wanted to react firmly to the attack by conducting an airstrike inside Pakistan territory, but, on the other hand, did not want to cause damage on such a scale that could provoke a war. The choice of the target – apparently to minimise civilian and army casualties – seems to confirm this view. The Pakistani Air Force retaliated the following day, conducting an airstrike in India's Jammu & Kashmir, causing no damage. However, an Indian jet which involved in the subsequent dogfight, was shot down in Pakistani-controlled Kashmir and the pilot captured. He was released by the Pakistani government on 1st March as, in the words of Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan, a «peace gesture» towards India.²⁸ The safe return of the pilot effectively put an end to the military confrontation between India and Pakistan.

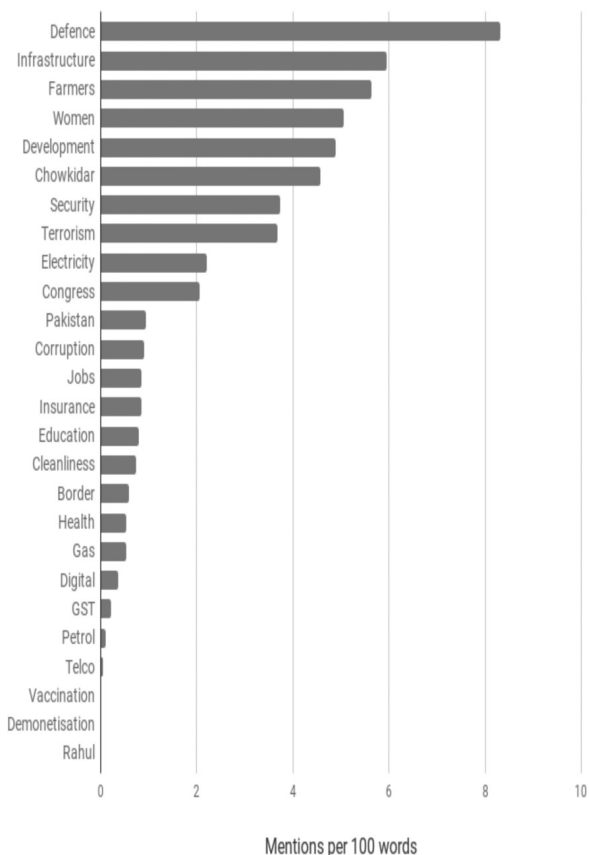
The political consequences were significant. A survey conducted immediately after the Balakot air strike, showed a remarkable jump in Modi's popularity – from 32% at the beginning of the year, to 62%. At the same time, national security suddenly became a major electoral issue – while only 4% of the voters had mentioned it as a key electoral issue in early 2019, 26% did so after the strikes.²⁹

The importance of «national security» as a key electoral issue waned in the weeks preceding the start of the polling operations on 11 April 2019, but it clearly had an impact on the BJP's strategy, which focused predominantly on the issue. In a marked contrast with the 2014 electoral campaign, when Modi presented himself as the «development man» who would bring *achhe din* («good days») to India, in 2019 Modi's (and the BJP's) campaign centred around national security. This can be seen from an analysis of Modi's speeches during the month of March, when the word «defence» was mentioned significantly more than «bread and butter» issues such as «infrastructure», «farmers» or «development» (Figure 1).

28. 'Abhinandan: Captured Indian pilot handed back by Pakistan', *BBC News*, 1 March 2019.

29. Ronojoy Sen, 'Can BJP sustain the bounce from Pulwama and Balakot?', *ISAS Brief No. 646*, 9 April 2019.

Figure 1 - Most and least mentioned topics in Modi's speeches in March 2019



Source: Diego Maiorano & Ronojoy Sen, *The 2019 Indian General Election and its Implications*, *South Asia Scan*, Issue No. 6 (February 2020, in print), Institute of South Asian Studies, NUS.

There is some evidence that the airstrikes helped the BJP. According to post-poll data collected by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), those who had heard about the strikes were much more likely to vote for the BJP, compared to those who were not aware of the strikes. Considering that as many as 76% of the voters had heard about India's attack, this might have contributed to the BJP's victory.³⁰

30. Pranav Gupta & Dishil Shirmankar, 'How Nationalism Helped the BJP', *Seminar*, Vol. 720, August 2019.

The aftermath of the Pulwama attack might have benefited the BJP also in a more indirect way because of what political scientist call «issue ownerships». Different political parties are seen by the voters as more or less competent in dealing with certain issues. This reputation is the result of long-term strategies by political parties and their leaders. Not only has the BJP made «nationalism» a central element of the party's identity since its foundation in 1980. But Narendra Modi has constructed an image of himself as a strong, hyper-nationalist leader over the course of his terms in office as Gujarat Chief Minister first and Prime Minister later. It is likely that most voters saw Modi (and the BJP) as more «competent» than any other opposition leader in dealing with terrorism and ensure national security, contributing to expanding the party's voter base.³¹

To sum up, it is likely that the Pulwama attack and the subsequent airstrikes contributed to moderating the impact of a poor economic performance in determining the BJP's electoral performance. They definitely shaped the electoral campaign, which was dominated by national security issues. According to the CSDS post-poll data, those who were dissatisfied with their own economic condition (31% of the respondents), but had heard about the Balakot strikes, were 6% more likely to vote for the BJP than those who had not.³²

4. The electoral results

While most analysts and polls had predicted that the BJP would emerge as the single largest party in the Lok Sabha, the scale of the party's victory took most by surprise. Table 2 summarises the results.

Table 2 – 2019 General election results							
Alliance (seats)	Party	Seats	Seat difference 2014-19	Vote share	Vote share difference 2014-19	Alliance seat difference 2014-19	Alliance vote share difference 2014-19
NDA (353)	BJP	303	+21	37.4	+6	+17	+5.42
	Shiv Sena	18	0	2.1	+0.2		
	JD(U)	16	+14	1.5	+0.4		
	LJP	6	0	0.5	0		
	Others	10	-	-	-		

31. *Ibid.*

32. Cross tabulation of raw data provided by the CSDS's National Election Study (NES) 2019 to the author.

UPA (92)	INC	52	+8	19.5	0	+32	-1.59
	DMK	24	+24	2.3	+0.5		
	NCP	5	-1	1.4	+0.1		
	Others	11	-	-	-		
MGB (15)	BSP	10	+10	3.3	-0.5	NA	NA
	SP	5	0	2.5	-0.8		
Left Front (5)	CPM	3	-6	1.7	-1.5	-5	-1.7
	CPI	2	+1	0.6	-0.2		
Others (78)	Others	78	-	-	-	-	-
Source: Election Commission of India. Legend: CPI: Communist Party of India CPM: Communist Party of India (Marxist) DMK: Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam INC: Indian National Congress JD(U): Janata Dal (United) LJSP: Lok Jan Shakti Party MGB: Mahagathbandhan NCP: Nationalist Congress Party NDA: National Democratic Alliance UPA: United Progressive Alliance							

Using post-poll data by the CSDS it is possible to appreciate in more detail the scale of the BJP's victory. The party not only managed to increase substantially its seat and vote shares as compared to the 2014 elections – which, at that time, were deemed «historical» because of the surprisingly good performance of the BJP – but attracted more voters from all segments of society. Table 3 provides a breakdown of the BJP's support across classes.

Table 3 – BJP's support by class (percentages of respondents)						
	Rural		Urban		Total	
	2014	2019	2014	2019	2014	2019
Poor	23	35.8	26.4	37.8	24.2	36.2
Lower	29.6	36.5	34.9	32.9	31.2	35.5
Middle	31.9	38.7	32.9	34.6	32.3	37.7
Rich	38.6	42.8	36.7	46.5	37.9	43.9
Total	30.1	37.6	32.7	36.7	31	37.4
Source: Cross tabulation of raw data provided by the CSDS's National Election Study (NES) 2014 and 2019 to the author.						

The table clearly shows the remarkable increase of support for the BJP across classes. However, it is the truly spectacular increase of support

among the poor and the lower classes – both in rural and urban areas – that is striking, especially considering that the BJP has usually been associated with a predominantly upper caste/class, urban constituency. Table 4 reinforces this point by showing the support of the BJP across caste categories.

Table 4 – BJP's support by caste category (percentage of respondents)		
	2014	2019
Scheduled Classes	22.2	31.6
Scheduled Tribes	34.7	39.9
Other Backward Classes	31.1	37.7
Upper castes	35.9	40
Total	31	37.4
Source: Cross tabulation of raw data provided by the CSDS's National Election Study (NES) 2014 and 2019 to the author.		

In short, the BJP was able to expand its support base across classes and castes, but the greatest gains were amongst the lower sections of the society (whether in class or caste terms). The only two social categories that did not increase their support for the BJP are Muslims (stable at 8% of the community) and other minorities, whose support for the BJP actually declined.³³

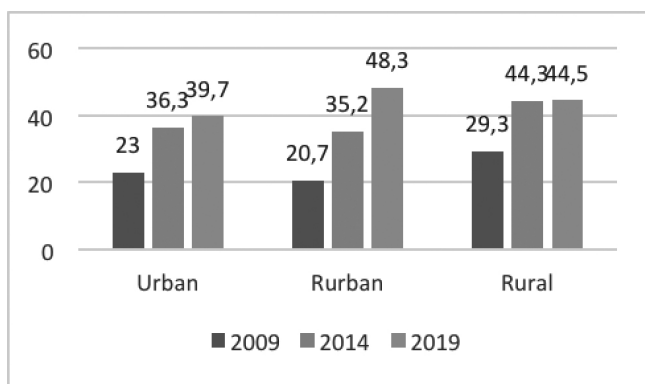
The expansion of the BJP's support base was not limited to social categories, but it also had a geographical dimension. Before the elections, several factors suggested that the BJP would not be able to replicate its 2014 performance in the ten Hindi-belt states, from where the party had won the great majority of its seats. These factors included the formation of the Grand Alliance in UP (Mahagathbandhan, a seat-sharing agreement between the BSP and the SP), which should have cut significantly the proportion of seats of the BJP in the state; and the results of the state elections in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, where the BJP had lost to the Congress party barely six months before the General elections. However, the Mahagathbandhan managed to win only 15 seats in UP, which contributed to bring down the BJP's tally in the state from 71 in 2014 to 62 (out of 80). On the other hand, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh voted massively in favour of the BJP, which pocketed 62 out of 65 seats in the three states. Overall, the BJP won 58% of its seats (or 177 out of 303) from the ten Hindi belt states, thus substantially maintaining a firm dominance over the area. In 2014, the party had won 68% of its seats from these ten states (or 193 out of 282).

33. Christophe Jaffrelot, 'Class and Caste in the 2019 Indian Election—Why Have So Many Poor Started Voting for Modi?', *Studies in Indian Politics*, 7, 2, 2019, pp. 149-60.

The (minor) losses of the BJP in the Hindi belt were compensated by gains in two states, where the party had hitherto been a marginal force. In West Bengal, the BJP increased its seat share from 2 to 18 and its vote share from 18 to 40.2% (mainly at the expenses of the CPM, whose vote and seat share collapsed). In Odisha, the BJP won 8 seats (up from 1 in 2014) with a vote share of 38.4% (over 16% higher than in 2014), effectively dislodging the Congress as the main opposition party in the state.

Finally, the BJP's victory was remarkable for another reason, namely the significant expansion of the party in rural India.³⁴ Figure 2 is constructed using a dataset compiled by Mohit Kumar from the Trivedi Centre for Political Data at Ashoka University. It maps 2011 Census data onto constituencies' borders and includes data on the proportion of residents who are engaged in agricultural activities (farmers and agricultural labourers). The dataset has the advantage of letting us classify all of India's constituencies on the basis of the proportion of residents whose livelihoods directly depend on agriculture. The figure shows the BJP's strike rate (SR), (i.e. proportion of seats that the party won out of those that it contested) and vote share (VS) in three types of constituencies: urban (defined as those where the proportion of people engaged in agricultural activities is lower than 10%), «rurban» (where the proportion is between 10 and 30%) and rural (above 30%).

Figure 2 – BJP's vote share in urban, «rurban» and rural constituencies 2009-19.



Source: Author's calculations.

As the figure shows, the BJP's performance improved substantially in all types of constituencies. However, it is significant that the party managed

34. Diego Maiorano, 'The 2019 Indian Elections and the Ruralization of the BJP', *Studies in Indian Politics*, Vol. 7, Issue 2, 2019, pp. 176-90.

to retain its support in rural constituencies, notwithstanding the ongoing agricultural crisis. The greater gains, however, were in semi-urban constituencies, where a substantial proportion of what Jaffrelot³⁵ calls «neo-middle class» live. This refers to a social group of people who have recently escaped poverty, have some form of education and aspire to join the ranks of the middle class and have been a key element of Modi's constituency since the time he was chief minister of Gujarat.

The expansion of the BJP in rural India is now a medium-term phenomenon, which accelerated remarkably in 2014, but whose origins can be traced back to the 1990s. Nti. That the BJP is consolidating and expanding its support base in rural areas is also confirmed by CSDS data (Table 5).

Table 5 – Support for Main Parties among «farmers» and «non-farmers»				
		2014	2019	Difference 2014-19
Farmers	Congress	19	20	+1
	BJP	29	39	+10
	Others	37	27	-10
Non-farmers	Congress	20	19	-1
	BJP	32	37	+5
	Others	39	30	-9
Source: Cross tabulation of raw data provided by the CSDS's National Election Study (NES) 2014 and 2019 to the author.				

The table shows how «farmers» (a category that includes both land-owners and agricultural labourers) were more likely to support the BJP than other voters. Additionally, the BJP's support among «farmers» increased dramatically between 2014 and 2019 and it is now higher than among non-farmers. This seems to be driven by the sharp decline of support by «other» parties, which in many cases are regional parties that built their support base among the farming community, especially in North India.

5. *Explaining the BJP's victory*

While complex political phenomena like elections never have a single underlying cause, the 2019 Indian general elections approximate that extreme. In fact, Narendra Modi's popularity looms large in any explanation of the electoral outcomes. The Indian case seems to be an almost

35. Christophe Jaffrelot, 'Gujarat elections: The sub-text of Modi's «hat-trick»—High tech populism and the «neo-middle class»', *Studies in Indian Politics*, 1, 1, 2013, pp. 79-95.

perfect example of what recent scholarship has called the «prime ministerialisation» of parliamentary elections, a terms that underscores the importance of political leaders in driving electoral results in Parliamentary democracies.³⁶

The importance of Narendra Modi's leadership in determining electoral outcomes is both a consequence as well as a cause of the process of marked centralisation that occurred in recent years both within the BJP and within the government. Modi and Amit Shah are firmly in control of the party apparatus, having side-lined effectively the party's «old guard» over the course of Modi's first term in office. In fact, not only was the BJP's electoral campaign extremely Modi-centric – the main slogan was *Bar, Modi Sarkar* («Once again, a Modi government») – but most candidates explicitly campaigned in the name of Modi.³⁷ On the other hand, the Prime Minister not only micro-manages the work of several ministries, but also successfully linked himself to the government's most visible policy initiatives. For instance, the government introduced (or re-branded) several welfare schemes after 2014, most of which had the «Pradhan Mantri» («Prime Minister») prefix attached to the policy's name. This, coupled with the enormous amount of resources spent by the government on advertising its policies on the media – which invariably include a picture of the Prime Minister;³⁸ – contributed to establish a link between government action and Modi. In fact, analysis of CSDS data shows that the Modi government was able to take credit for welfare policies much more than its predecessor, even for policies (like the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, MGNREGA) that were introduced by the UPA government.³⁹

The centrality of Modi is also reflected in the media coverage that the Prime Minister received. Not only did Modi receive more coverage than all other national political leaders put together during the electoral campaign, but the kind of coverage tended to be generally favourable to him and the party.⁴⁰ This is at least partly due to Indian media's business model, that heavily relies on government's advertising for their profitability and viability. A report by Reuters⁴¹ claimed that the govern-

36. Keith Dowding, 'The prime ministerialisation of the British Prime Minister', *Parliamentary Affairs*, 66, 3, 2013, pp. 617-35.

37. Sandeep Shastri, 'The Modi Factor in the 2019 Lok Sabha Election: How critical was it to the BJP Victory?', *Studies in Indian Politics*, 7, 2, 2019, pp. 206-18.

38. Akshay Deshmane, 'How Much Did Modi Govt's Advertising Blitzkrieg Cost Taxpayers?', *Huffington Post (India)*, 8 July 2019.

39. Rajeshwari Deshpande, Louise Tillin & K.K. Kailash, 'The BJP's Welfare Schemes: Did They Make a Difference in the 2019 Elections?', *Studies in Indian Politics*, 7, 2, 2019, pp. 219-33.

40. Raksha Kumar, 'India's Media Can't Speak Truth to Power', *Foreign Policy*, 2 August 2019.

41. Devjyot Ghoshal, 'Modi government freezes ads placed in three Indian newspaper groups', *Reuters*, 28 June 2019.

ment banned advertisement on at least three news groups (which publish, among others, *The Times of India*, *The Hindu* and *The Telegraph*), allegedly as a retaliatory measure against unfavourable reporting. To give an idea of how significant the ban could be for a news group, an executive of the Times Group (which publishes newspapers like *The Times of India* and *The Economic Times*) told journalists that government advertisement constitutes about 15% of the total. Many newspapers – which are sold for a fraction of their production cost – are so desperate to get additional revenues that a sting operation by Cobrapost even claimed that some of the country's leading media houses were willing to accept cash in exchange for helping the BJP remain in power.⁴²

Modi's personal popularity is also directly linked to two of the major assets of the BJP, namely financial resources and party organisation. Modi's BJP is incommensurably richer than all other political parties. Even taking into account only the self-declared income of the political parties – which is a gross underestimation of the actual financial resources available – the difference between the BJP and the second-richest political party, the Congress, is huge and widening. Before the 2014 elections, the two parties had a similar amount of (self-reported) resources at their disposal. However, in 2017-18, the Congress's income was merely a fifth of that of the BJP⁴³ and corporate donations were twenty times as high for the BJP than for the Congress in 2018.⁴⁴ In an even more staggering figure, the BJP collected 95% of the donations collected through the newly introduced electoral bonds.⁴⁵ Clearly that Modi's popularity increases the incentives of corporations to fund the BJP.

Party organisation has also been influenced by Modi's popularity, as it galvanised the BJP's party workers and attracted many into the party's fold. Under the leadership of Amit Shah, the BJP has been able to build up a sophisticated and capillary party machine. The BJP allocated every single page of the electoral rolls to party workers, with the objective of reaching out to them to canvass support.⁴⁶ The party has also created an army of party workers that bombard voters through hundreds of thousands of social

42. As is the case with all sting operations, even the findings of this one should be taken with a pinch of salt. However, it is a fact that they were important enough to deserve to be discussed by the Indian media, which hardly happened. See Justin Rowlatt, 'The story barely reported by Indian media', *BBC News*, 28 May 2018.

43. Niranjana Sahoo & Niraj Tiwari, 'Political funding: How BJP and Congress compete for every piece of the pie', *ORF – Observer Research Foundation*, 25 April 2019.

44. Milan Vaishnav & Jamie Hinton, 'The Dawn of India's Fourth Party System', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 5 September 2019.

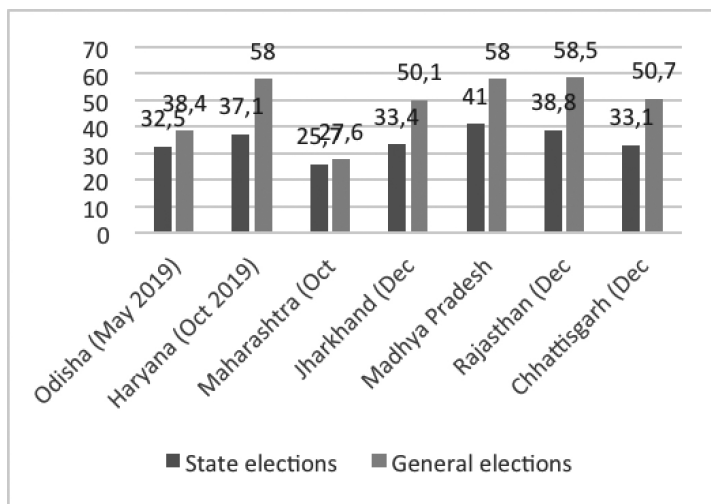
45. Ruling BJP got 95% of funds: Why there's an uproar over electoral bonds, *Business Standard*, 5 April 2019.

46. *Ibid.*

media pages and Whatsapp groups.⁴⁷ This unparalleled machine has contributed significantly to spreading the BJP's message.

The importance of Modi's leadership can also be assessed comparing electoral results at the state level, where elections were held just a few months before or after the general elections (Figure 3).

Figure 3 – BJP's vote share in state and national elections 2018-19



Source: Election Commission of India

The major differences in the BJP's vote share between state and national elections show, first, that Indian voters vote very differently for different levels of the polity, even when the two elections are held at the same time (Odisha). Second, they suggest that Modi's popularity does make a substantial difference to orient voting behaviour.

This is also confirmed by CSDS data. Sardeep Shastri⁴⁸ shows that Modi's popularity was a crucial element in the 2019 elections. Two points are worth noting. First, Modi was the preferred Prime Minister candidate by 46% of the respondents, up from 35% in 2014. Rahul Gandhi came at a distant second at 22%. Modi's lead was even higher among younger and more educated voters. Second, among those who voted for the BJP, about one third (32%) said that they would have voted differently, had Modi not

47. Prashant Jha, *How the BJP wins: inside India's greatest election machine*, New Delhi: Juggernaut, 2017.

48. Sandeep Shastri, 'The Modi Factor in the 2019 Lok Sabha Election'.

been the Prime Ministerial candidate. Among BJP-allies voters, one fourth responded likewise.

6. Conclusion

The first half of 2019 was dominated by the general elections that brought Narendra Modi's BJP back to power with an even larger majority. While the party's prospects at the beginning of the year did not look very promising, the BJP was able to impose an electoral narrative based on national security, in the wake of the Pulwama attack and India's response. This reinforced the image of the Prime Minister as the strong leader that the country needs to both protect it from threats and to bring about «development for all».

In fact, the Prime Minister's popularity rests on both elements: nationalism and development. As argued by Suhas Palshikar, Modi was able to bring the two ideas together to form a formidable ideological narrative that underpins the BJP's electoral hegemony.⁴⁹

In fact, the twin idea of nationalism and development is at the centre of the Modi «brand». This is much more than «image». A political brand, like a commercial one, tries to associate itself with certain values with which voters (customers) want to identify.⁵⁰ Modi has been able to associate his brand with values such as pride (to be Indian) and hope (for a better future). Political branding of leaders is an effective way to broaden a party's electoral support and to cut across classes and ethnic divisions, by appealing to voters' emotions, rather than canvassing support solely on the basis of the government's record.⁵¹ This might well explain why the BJP was able to draw support from virtually all social groups in India, thus overcoming one of the party's «structural weaknesses», namely its association with the urban, upper castes and classes. It also helps explaining why the BJP performed so well despite a disappointing record in the economy.

Political branding also relies on the continuous emergence of policy initiatives that resonates with the brand values. Modi's government did exactly that over its first term. The government launched innumerable initiatives like the Make in India Campaign, Swachh Bharat,⁵² Beti Bachao Beti Padhao,⁵³ Skill India, demonetisation, 'Surgical Strikes', the widely

49. Suhas Palshikar, 'Toward Hegemony', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 53, 33, 18 August 2018.

50. Eleonora Pasotti, *Political branding in cities: The decline of machine politics in Bogotá, Naples, and Chicago*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

51. *Ibid.*

52. Clean India Campaign. This is a sanitation programme.

53. Save the daughter, educate the daughters. This is a programme targeted at young girls.

publicised meetings with the diaspora in New York, London and other foreign cities, Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana,⁵⁴ bullet trains, the International Yoga day, various space missions to name just a few. Each of these initiatives (also) aimed at reinforcing Modi's brand as the man who could make Indians proud and who could fulfil their hopes and aspirations. It matters little that most of these initiatives did not result in any tangible achievement. The important point, politically, is that the grand announcements, the omnipresent publicity, the innumerable social media pages and an army of party workers bombarded the electorate with a constant flow of information about what the government was doing for the greater good of the country. As a growing body of evidence from across the world shows, voters' policy preferences or the actual performance in office matter much less than emotions in determine electoral outcomes.⁵⁵ Modi's brand struck a chord in the heart of enough Indians to bring him back firmly at the helm of India's political system.

On the other hand, the importance of Modi in determining the BJP's electoral performance also means that the party's dominance might be more fragile than what it appears. As the results of numerous state elections over the last five years show, the BJP, despite its incomparable financial and organisational power, is far from unstoppable, even in the Hindi belt, where the party is much more firmly rooted.

54. This is a financial inclusion programme, aiming at providing every household with a bank account.

55. Drew Westen, *The political brain: The role of emotion in deciding the fate of the nation*, New York: Public Affairs, 2008.