

# THE 2019 INDIAN GENERAL ELECTION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

DIEGO MAIORANO  
RONOJOY SEN

# South Asia Scan



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## The 2019 Indian General Election and its Implications

Diego Maiorano  
Ronojoy Sen

Issue No. 6  
February 2020



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May be cited as:

Diego Maiorano and Ronojoy Sen

*The 2019 Indian General Election and its Implications*

South Asia Scan, Issue No. 6

(Singapore: Institute of South Asian Studies, February 2020).

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### **Institute of South Asian Studies**

National University of Singapore

29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace

#08-06 (Block B)

Singapore 119620

Tel (65) 6516 4239

Fax (65) 6776 7505

URL [www.isas.nus.edu.sg](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg)

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## Executive Summary

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) won a landslide victory in the 2019 Indian general election. Though the margin of the BJP's victory in 2019, where it won 37.4 per cent of the vote share, was nearly six per cent higher than in 2014, the fundamentals of the victory were similar to that in 2014.

The BJP's success in 2019 was built on several factors. Some of these mirrored what happened in 2014: the nationwide appeal of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP's presidential-style campaign; the organisational skills of the BJP and its president Amit Shah as well as the foot soldiers of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and other Hindu nationalist organisations; the ability to stitch together winning caste coalitions; a sweep of the Hindi heartland and western India; and a media campaign, particularly on social media, that could not be matched by the opposition. There were other factors that were specific to the 2019 campaign: targeted welfare schemes, cash handouts to farmers and quotas in jobs and education for the poor; a nationalist narrative following the Pulwama attack and the Balakot airstrike in February 2019; and inroads into eastern India and the Northeast.

In this publication, we look at six factors that were crucial to the BJP's victory in 2019 and assess some of the implications for future policy and governance. These factors are Modi's popularity and vote catching abilities; the BJP's geographical expansion; the caste composition of the BJP's support base and marginalisation of minorities; the emergence of nationalism and national security as electoral campaign issues; the ruralisation of the BJP; and the importance of welfare schemes.

## Introduction

The scale of the BJP's victory in the 2019 Indian general election – where it won 303 out of 543 seats in the Lok Sabha (the Lower House of Parliament) – took most analysts by surprise. Though the margin of the BJP's victory in 2019, where it won 37.4 per cent of the vote share, was nearly six per cent higher than in 2014, the fundamentals of the victory were similar to that in 2014 (Figure 1).

The BJP's success in 2019 was built on several factors. Some of these mirrored what happened in 2014. These included Modi's popularity, the reach of the BJP and its allied Hindu nationalist organisations, electoral success in northern and western India and a well-oiled media campaign. There were other factors that were specific to 2019. These were the provision of a host of welfare schemes, sops for farmers and the poor, nationalist fervour in the wake of the Pulwama attack and the Balakot airstrike and electoral gains in eastern India and the Northeast.

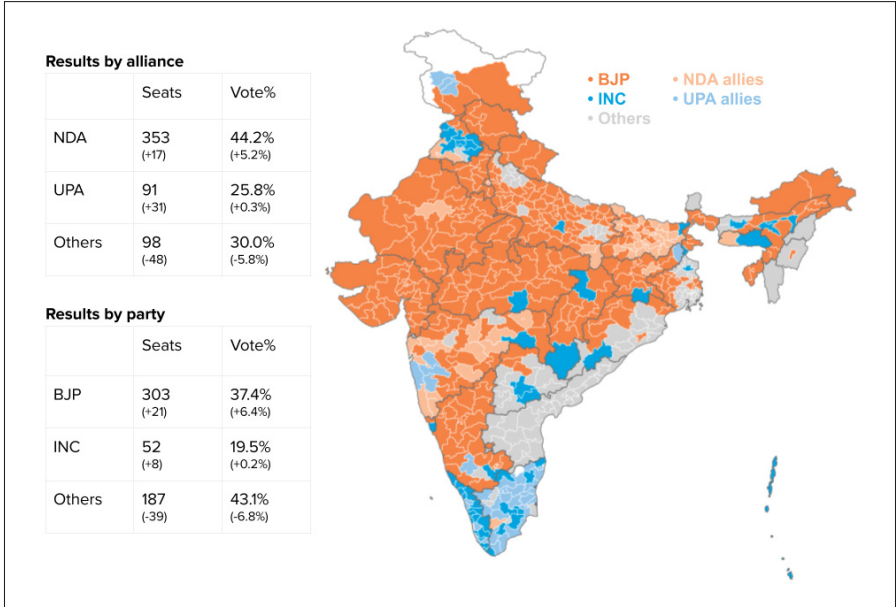
In contrast, the Congress could only marginally increase its seat share to 52 seats while its vote share remained stagnant at 19.5 per cent. The woes of the Congress were underlined by the party drawing a blank in 19 states and union territories and winning more than half its seats from only two states: Kerala and Punjab. The regional parties too saw a significant decrease in their vote share from around 50 per cent in 2014 to 43 per cent in 2019 (Figure 2).

We look at six factors that were crucial to the BJP's victory in 2019 and assess some of the implications for future policy and governance. These factors are:

1. The Modi factor, namely, his popularity and his ability to garner votes;
2. Geographical consolidation and expansion by the BJP;
3. Relevance of caste and religion, and minority marginalisation;
4. Importance of national security and the rise of nationalism;
5. Ruralisation of the BJP; and
6. Significance of welfare schemes.

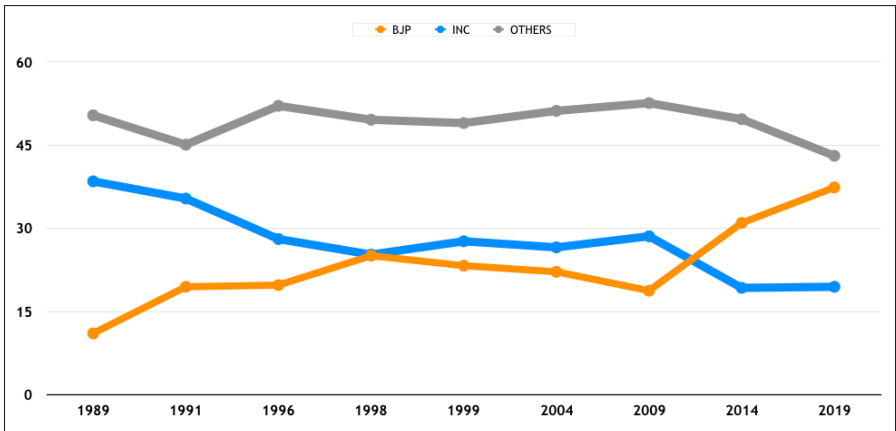


**Figure 1: Results of the 2019 Indian General Elections**



Source: Loki.ai analysis of Election Commission of India data

**Figure 2: Vote Share of the Parties in Indian General Elections since 1989**



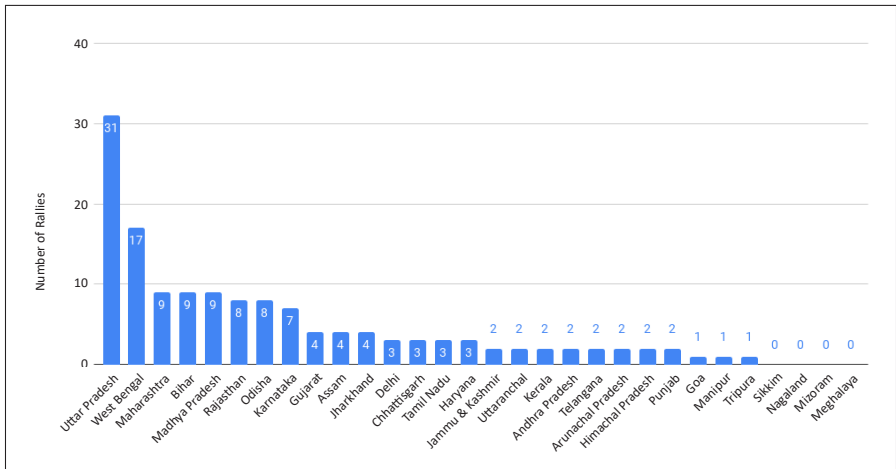
Source: Loki.ai analysis of Election Commission of India data

# The Modi Factor

Without Modi and his carefully crafted brand, the BJP would not have won as many votes as it did. It also would not have attracted such a huge influx of volunteers, which ensured that the party maintained its core support in North India and expansion into other areas. Furthermore, Modi branded himself as a strong leader who would adopt a tough stance towards India’s enemies, particularly Pakistan. When terrorists attacked India’s paramilitary forces in Pulwama in February 2019, Modi could credibly claim that his government’s strong response was the best possible reaction. Another component of the Modi brand – which was crucial for the BJP’s victory in 2014 as well – was the idea that Modi could bring ‘development for all’. This also gave credibility to the numerous welfare schemes that the party launched or re-branded. In short, all the factors analysed in this publication are constituent parts of a carefully crafted ‘Modi brand’. Each part reinforced the other and sustained the prime minister’s popularity and ensured the BJP’s unprecedented victory.

The prime minister spared no effort in making the electoral campaign about himself. Modi crisscrossed the country and addressed 142 public meetings during the election campaign, emphasising that a vote for the BJP was a vote for him (Figure 3). More importantly, many who voted for the BJP did so only because of Modi and not the candidate in their constituency. According to the Lokniti-Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) post-poll survey, a third of those who voted for the BJP said that they would have voted differently if Modi had not been the prime ministerial candidate. Such sentiments have been backed up by field reports.

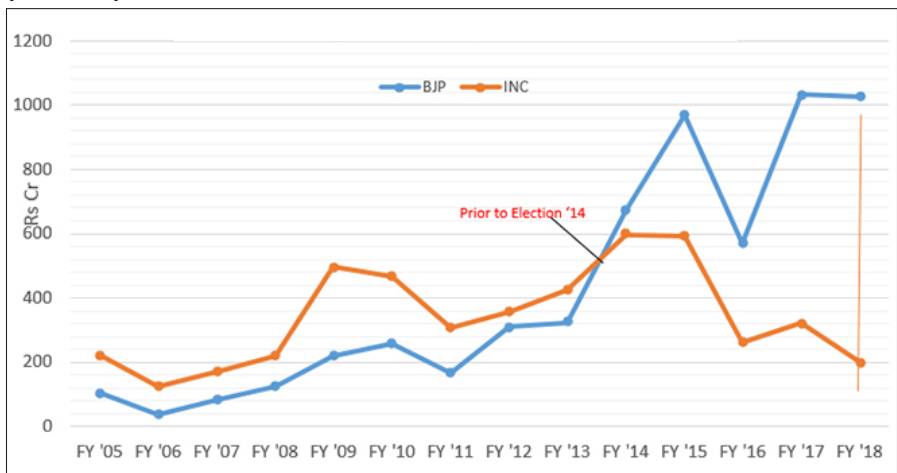
**Figure 3: Number of Election Rallies by Modi**



Source: Times of India Election Campaign Tracker

Modi’s personal appeal to the voter was combined with the exceptional organisational skills of his right-hand man, Shah. The current home minister’s organisational skills had been on display in several Assembly elections since 2014. With a huge amount of funds in the BJP’s war chest, not only was the party able to micro-manage the general election right down to the booth level, but it was also able to mount a concerted campaign, both on traditional and digital media. To give an idea of the imbalance in terms of party finances, the BJP obtained 95 per cent of the funds generated by the newly introduced electoral bonds. Even considering only the self-declared earnings of the Congress and the BJP – by all accounts, a gross underestimation of the parties’ actual earnings – the BJP could count on a disproportionate amount of resources. In 2017-18, the BJP garnered more than 80 per cent of the total donations and a staggering 92 per cent of the total corporate donations. While the BJP received ₹400 crore (about S\$76 million) from corporate donations, the Congress received a paltry ₹19 crore (about S\$3.5 million) of the same in 2017-18 (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Comparison of Funds Raised by the BJP and the Congress (2015-18)**



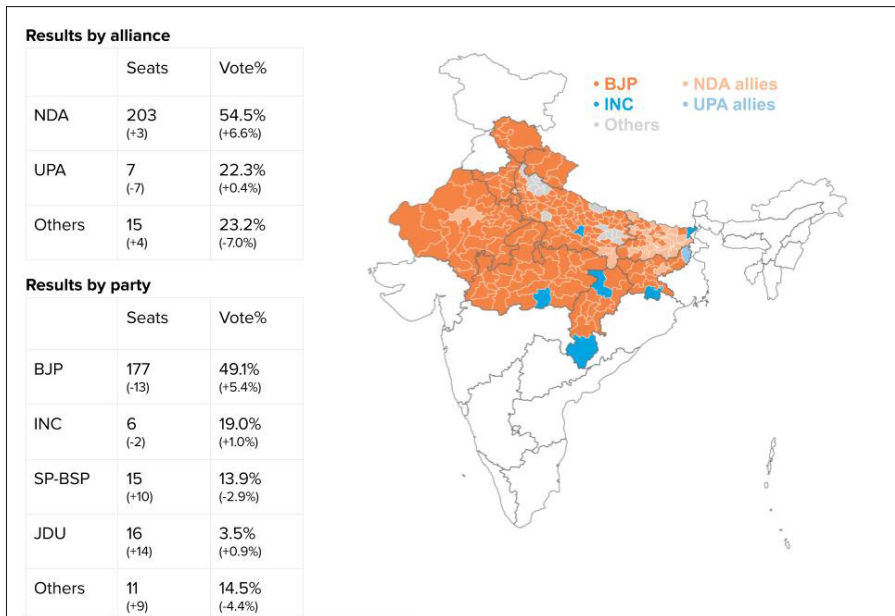
Source: Compiled from ADR data<sup>1</sup>

1. Niranjan Sahoo and Niraj Tiwari, “Political funding: How BJP and Congress compete for every piece of the pie”, *Observer Research Foundation*, 25 April 2019. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/political-funding-how-bjp-and-congress-compete-for-every-piece-of-the-pie-50287/>.

## The BJP's Geographical Consolidation and Expansion

Many had expected that the BJP would not be able to repeat its 2014 sweep of the Hindi heartland, namely, the 10 Hindi-speaking states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Haryana and Delhi (Figure 5). The BJP won 190 of the 225 seats in these states in 2014, which accounted for two-thirds of the BJP's final tally of 282. In light of the Congress forming the government in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh in end-2018 and the *Mahagathbandhan*, a 'Grand Alliance' comprising all major anti-BJP parties in Uttar Pradesh, the expectation was that the BJP would suffer a significant decrease in seats. While the BJP's seats did decline in Uttar Pradesh, the decrease was far less than expected. In fact, in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, where the Congress was expected to do well, the BJP swept the polls, virtually winning all the seats (62 out of 65).

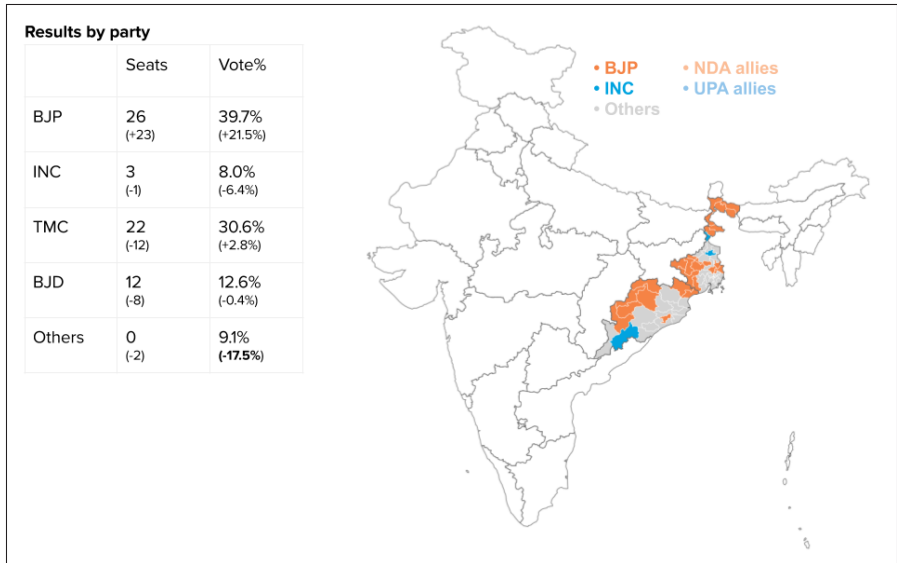
**Figure 5: Results in the Hindi Heartland**



Source: Loki.ai analysis of Election Commission of India data

Finally, the BJP was able to compensate for its losses in the Hindi heartland by achieving major gains in the eastern states of West Bengal and Odisha (Figure 6). The BJP's inroads into Bengal were remarkable since its seat share jumped from two to 18 and its vote share from 17 to 40 per cent. In Odisha, the BJP did not perform as spectacularly, but still increased its seat share from one to eight seats. Only south India, except for Karnataka, largely remained immune to the Modi wave.

**Figure 6: Results in West Bengal and Odisha**



Source: Loki.ai analysis of Election Commission of India data

## Caste and Religion

The BJP replicated and expanded its ability to stitch together a winning caste alliance, particularly in the Hindi heartland states. In 2014, the BJP had successfully crafted a winning social coalition of upper castes (its traditional supporters), Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Dalits. In 2019, the coalition remained intact. In Uttar Pradesh, which sends 80 members of parliament to the Lok Sabha, a large chunk of the upper castes, non-Yadav OBCs and non-Jatav Dalits voted for the BJP. This, along with Modi's popularity, was enough to negate the alliance or *Mahagathbandhan* of the Samajwadi Party, the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Rashtriya Lok Dal in Uttar Pradesh. The Yadavs (who constitute the core support base of the Samajwadi Party), the Jatavs (who traditionally back the BSP) and Muslims voted in greater numbers for the *Mahagathbandhan* (Table 1).

**Table 1: Vote Share of Parties among Caste and Religion in Uttar Pradesh in 2019**

Party voted for Lok Sabha 2019 (Uttar Pradesh)				
	Congress (%)	BJP+ (%)	MGB (%)	Others (%)
Brahmin	6	82	6	6
Rajput	5	89	7	-
Vaishya	13	70	4	13
Jat	2	91	7	0
Other Upper Caste	5	84	10	1
Yadav	5	23	60	12
Kurmi+Koeri	5	80	14	1
Other OBC	5	72	18	5
Jatav	1	17	75	7
Other SC	7	48	42	3
Muslims	14	8	73	5
Others	1	50	35	14

Source: National Election Studies, Lokniti-CSDS

The broad caste coalition that backed the BJP was in evidence across India. There was a significant increase in support for the BJP across all categories in 2019, particularly in the OBCs, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes categories. In contrast, the Congress had been losing support across all categories since 1996. However, in the 2014 and 2019 elections, the Congress' support across caste categories remained stagnant (Table 2).

**Table 2: Vote Share of the BJP (National Democratic Alliance) [NDA] and the Indian National Congress [INC] (United Progressive Alliance) [UPA] among Hindu Castes and Communities, 1996-2019 Lok Sabha Elections**

	1996 (%)	1998 (%)	1999 (%)	2004 (%)	2009 (%)	2014 (%)	2019 (%)
<b>SUPPORT FOR BJP (NDA)</b>							
Upper Caste	35 (38)	47 (56)	40 (61)	35 (51)	28 (35)	47 (56)	52 (59)
Upper OBC	22 (26)	28 (39)	23 (44)	22 (40)	22 (26)	30 (39)	41 (52)
Lower OBC	15 (19)	27 (43)	22 (44)	24 (40)	22 (29)	42 (50)	48 (58)
SC	14 (15)	14 (18)	14 (25)	13 (23)	12 (15)	24 (30)	34 (41)
ST	21 (21)	21 (31)	22 (35)	28 (34)	24 (26)	37 (40)	44 (46)
<b>SUPPORT FOR INC (UPA)</b>							
Upper Caste	25 (25)	22 (24)	21 (21)	23 (30)	26 (35)	13 (16)	12 (18)
Upper OBC	24 (25)	25 (29)	25 (33)	24 (36)	23 (31)	15 (20)	15 (25)
Lower OBC	25 (27)	20 (24)	24 (33)	24 (36)	27 (31)	16 (17)	15 (19)
SC	34 (34)	28 (29)	30 (35)	26 (35)	27 (34)	18 (20)	20 (25)
ST	42 (42)	32 (44)	46 (46)	37 (44)	38 (46)	28 (31)	31 (37)

Source: National Election Studies conducted by Lokniti-CSDS

While the multi-caste support base of the BJP shows a consolidation of the Hindu vote behind the party, the BJP's win has also been achieved largely without the support of the minorities, particularly the nearly 200 million-strong Muslim population in India. According to the CSDS, only eight per cent of the Muslims voted for the BJP nationwide (Table 3). Another credible survey pegged the Muslim vote at 10 per cent.<sup>2</sup> The figures for India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh, show low levels of Muslim support for the BJP. According to Lokniti-CSDS, in Uttar Pradesh, where a fifth of the population is Muslim, eight per cent of the Muslims voted for them.

Muslim representation in Parliament is also at an all-time low. The newly elected Lok Sabha has 26 Muslim members of parliament, a slight increase of three from the last house. At just under five per cent, this is the second lowest proportion of Muslim members of parliament to the population, the lowest having been in 2014. The proportion of Muslims in Parliament is way lower than their share of India's population, which stood at 14 per cent in 2011.

The picture is even starker when one looks at the BJP's numbers. Of the BJP's 303 Lok Sabha members of parliament in 2019, only one is a Muslim. This is an improvement from the last Parliament where the BJP did not have a single Muslim among its 282 members of parliament. The Union council of ministers too has just one Muslim.

The numbers in the state assemblies are no better. For instance, in the 2017 Uttar Pradesh assembly elections, where the BJP won 325 seats, the party did not field a single Muslim candidate. The numbers suggest that the BJP

2. Mohit Kumar and Ashish Kumar, "Axis My India Exit Poll 2019", *India Today*, 22 May 2019. <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/lok-sabha-2019/story/axis-my-india-exit-poll-2019-frequently-asked-questions-answers-1531367-2019-05-21#muslimsvotebank>.

has worked out a strategy where it consolidates the majority Hindu vote, irrespective of caste, while, at the same time, making the minority vote irrelevant.

**Table 3: Vote Share of the BJP (NDA) and the INC (UPA) by Religious Identity, 1996-2019 Lok Sabha Elections**

	1996 (%)	1998 (%)	1999 (%)	2004 (%)	2009 (%)	2014 (%)	2019 (%)
<b>VOTE FOR BJP (NDA)</b>							
Overall	20 (23)	26 (38)	24 (40)	21 (36)	19 (24)	31 (38)	37 (45)
Hindu	23 (26)	28 (41)	27 (45)	25 (40)	22 (27)	36 (43)	44 (52)
Muslim	2 (3)	6 (11)	7 (14)	7 (11)	4 (6)	8 (9)	8 (9)
Christian	2 (2)	7 (10)	11 (20)	6 (20)	6 (10)	7 (17)	11 (16)
Sikh	8 (10)	22 (34)	10 (44)	18 (47)	11 (46)	16 (49)	11 (31)
<b>VOTE FOR INC (UPA)</b>							
Overall	29 (29)	26 (30)	28 (34)	27 (37)	29 (36)	19 (23)	19 (27)
Hindu	28 (29)	24 (28)	26 (31)	25 (34)	27 (34)	16 (19)	17 (23)
Muslim	36 (37)	32 (38)	40 (54)	36 (51)	38 (47)	38 (45)	33 (45)
Christian	33 (34)	57 (78)	48 (53)	40 (54)	37 (48)	29 (31)	39 (45)
Sikh	8 (8)	32 (36)	23 (23)	25 (27)	43 (45)	21 (22)	38 (39)

Source: National Election Studies conducted by Lokniti-CSDS<sup>3</sup>

3. Figures in parentheses are vote shares of the NDA and the UPA; voting preferences of voters belonging to other religions are not given due to an inadequate sample.

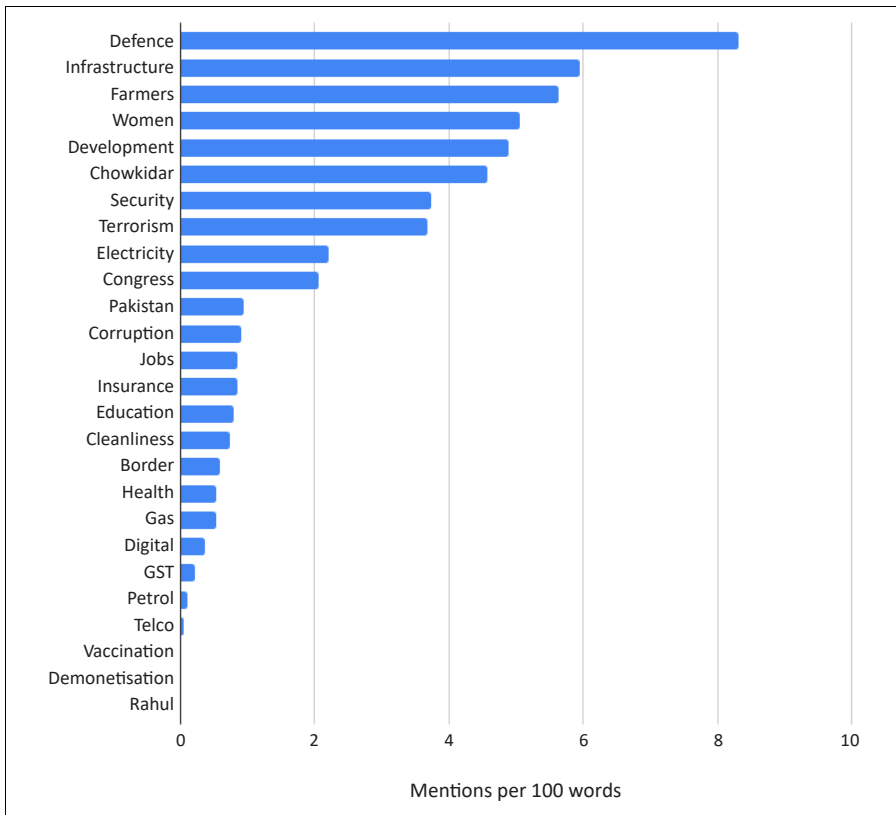


# National Security

There is little doubt that the Pulwama terror attack in February 2019 and India’s subsequent air strike in Pakistan changed the election campaign narrative quite dramatically. While opinion polls conducted immediately after the air strike found a perceptible bump for Modi, subsequent surveys have found that it was not an issue at the top of the voters’ minds. However, Modi and the BJP made national security a central plank of their electoral campaign and the party’s election manifesto.

In contrast to the 2014 election campaign, when, as prime ministerial candidate, Modi talked about *vikas*, or development, this time around, he focused heavily on defence and national security. An analysis of Modi’s speeches in March 2019 shows that ‘defence’ found the most mention, significantly more than infrastructure or development. Security and terrorism also figured prominently in his campaign speeches (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Most and Least Mentioned Topics in Modi’s Speeches in March 2019**



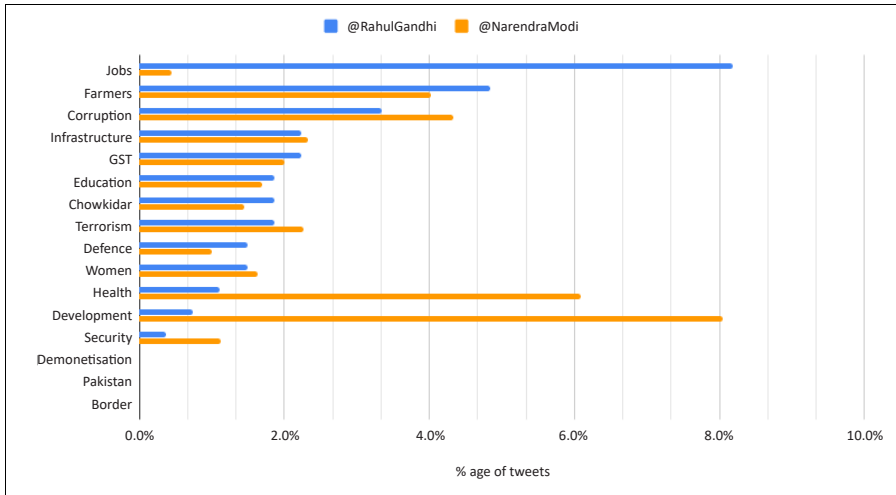
Source: Loki.ai analysis of transcripts of Narendra Modi’s speeches

The BJP's election manifesto also made the emphasis on national security and terror clear. The preamble to the 2019 manifesto titled 'Towards a New India' states: "In order to achieve our goals, we must first secure our country against internal and external aggression." The very first item of the manifesto is titled 'Nation First'. Among the topics prominently listed in this section are a 'Zero-Tolerance Approach to Terrorism' and 'National Security'. The former highlights the 2016 surgical strikes and the Balakot air strike: "Our security doctrine will be guided by our national security interest only. This is exemplified by the Surgical Strikes and the Air Strikes carried out recently. We will firmly continue our policy of 'Zero Tolerance' against terrorism and extremism and will continue to give a free hand to our security forces in combating terrorism."

The BJP's campaign and Modi's speeches, in particular, reflected this change in emphasis. If one goes through the prime minister's speeches in April 2019, the issue of Pakistan and terror came up repeatedly. If the BJP, both in its campaign and manifesto, kept the focus firmly on security, the opposition, by and large, tried to steer the focus, if not always successfully, away to economic issues. The Congress' manifesto, which had a strong welfare element, highlighted 'bread and butter' problems like job scarcity and rural distress. The very first section of the Congress' manifesto was on jobs and identified unemployment as the "gravest challenge" before the country and job creation as the "highest priority". The manifesto also showcased the Minimum Income Support programme which promises a cash transfer of ₹72,000 (\$\$1,370) a year to the poorest 20 per cent of all families.

The Congress' focus on the economy was reflected on social media too. A comparison of the tweets by Congress president Rahul Gandhi and Modi between January and March 2019 shows that jobs and farmers dominated the former's tweets (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Percentage of Topics Mentioned by Rahul Gandhi and Narendra Modi in their Tweets from January to March 2019**

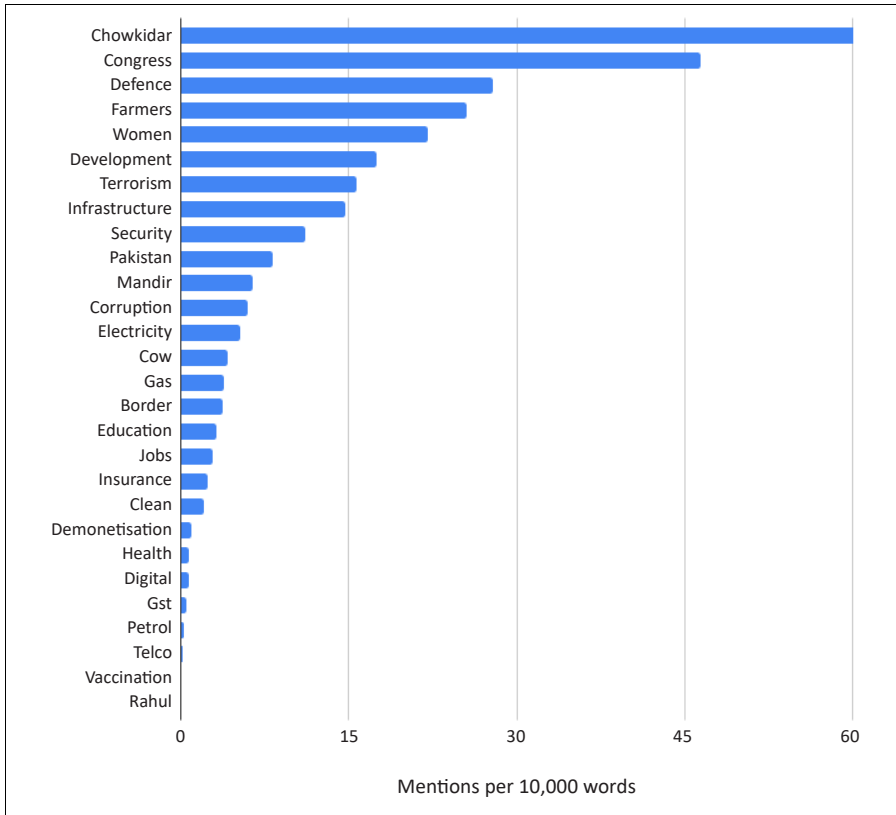


Source: Loki.ai analysis of tweets from official Twitter accounts of Rahul Gandhi and Narendra Modi

With the election stretching for over six weeks, the BJP did manage to change the narrative. This was reflected in Modi’s speeches too, where the focus on defence and terrorism shifted somewhat towards the latter half of the campaign but still remained important (Figure 9).

While national security issues were brought to centre stage by external actors – the terrorists who attacked India’s security forces in Pulwama – Modi was quick to capitalise on the attack and use it as a major electoral plank. He could do this because he had established himself as a tough leader who would not succumb to international pressure or provocation from Pakistan. In fact, one of the most important reasons behind Modi’s popularity was his combination of two ideologies: development and nationalism. In 2014, the former dominated; in 2019, nationalism prevailed.

**Figure 9: Most and Least Mentioned Topics in Narendra Modi’s Speeches from 1 March 2019 to 18 April 2019**



Source: Loki.ai analysis of transcripts of Narendra Modi’s speeches from his official site

## The Ruralisation of the BJP

The 2019 election saw two important trends which, given the BJP's dominance of India's party system, are likely to have medium term consequences. The first one is the broadening of the support base of the BJP to rural areas. The second trend (analysed in the next section), partly overlapping with the first, is the widespread support the party received among the weakest sections of society.<sup>4</sup>

The 2019 election took place amid unfavourable conditions in India's rural areas. The agricultural crisis was not of the 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.<sup>5</sup> However, especially when compared with the terms of the UPA (2004-14), agrarian distress certainly deepened.

Perhaps the most significant macroeconomic indicator of the difficult situation rural areas found themselves in on the eve of the election was the collapse of food prices. The Wholesale Price Index (WPI) for primary food items turned negative for several months before the election. Over the five years of the Modi government, food inflation was 15.2 per cent as compared with a whopping 120 per cent between 2004 and 2012.<sup>6</sup> Low food prices hurt farmers – especially those with larger landholdings that can sell their surplus on the market – but benefit a large section of the population both in urban and rural areas. This is true especially for the poorest section of society which tends to spend a high proportion of its income on food. However, low food inflation also compresses the wages of agricultural labourers. In fact, real wages for this sector of the workforce increased by less than two per cent per year between November 2014 and October 2018, more than five percentage points less than the growth witnessed between 2007 and 2013.<sup>7</sup>

Additional factors that negatively affected rural areas included the decision taken in November 2016 to 'demonetise' 86 per cent of the circulating cash,

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4. Diego Maiorano, "The 2019 Indian Elections and the Ruralisation of the BJP", *Studies in Indian Politics*, 12 November 2019.
  5. Himanshu, "India's farm crisis: Decades old and with deep roots", *The India Forum*, 29 April 2019. <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/farm-crisis-runs-deep-higher-msps-and-cash-handouts-are-not-enough/>.
  6. Authors' 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.
  7. Sujata Kundu, "Rural wage dynamics in India: What role does inflation play?", (Mumbai, Reserve Bank of India, 2018), No. 3.

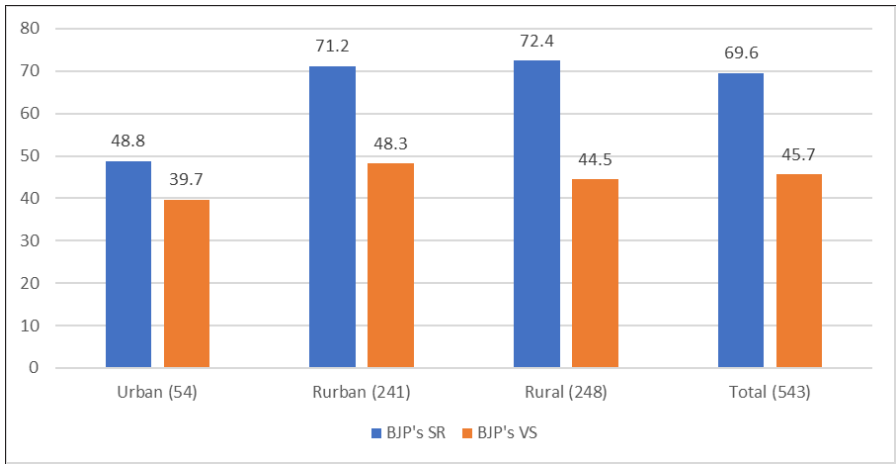
which contributed to further compressing the price of food items, and brought to a halt economic activity in rural areas which largely depend on cash; and two successive droughts in 2014 and 2015.<sup>8</sup> Overall, the terms-of-trade for agriculture – the ratio of prices that farmers receive to the prices they pay for non-agricultural products – worsened sharply during Modi’s first term in office.<sup>9</sup> It is thus not surprising that farmers across the country organised several large-scale protests during Modi’s first term in office, including in the national capital.

Under these conditions, most analysts expected the BJP to perform poorly in rural areas, especially after the party lost three important state elections (in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh) in December 2018, just six months before the general election. In fact, an analysis of the state election data revealed that the losses of the BJP had been particularly severe in rural areas.<sup>10</sup>

However, counter to expectations, the BJP performed extremely well in rural areas. Figure 10 is constructed using a dataset compiled by Mohit Kumar from the Trivedi Centre for Political Data at Ashoka University. It maps the 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 figure shows the BJP’s strike rate (SR), that is, the 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 per cent), ‘Rurban’ (where the proportion is between 10 and 30 per cent) and Rural (above 30 per cent).

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8. Ajit Karnik, “What is agitating the farmers?” (23 June 2017) <http://ajitkarnik.blogspot.com/2017/06/what-is-agitating-farmers.html>; Also see Robert, Beyer, Esha, Chhabra, Virgilio, Galdo & Martin, Rama, “Measuring districts’ monthly economic activity from outer space”, (Washington, DC, The World Bank, 2018), No. 8523.
  9. Neelanjana Sircar and Roshan Kishore, “Winning back the rural heartland”, *Seminar*, August 2019, No 720. [https://www.india-seminar.com/2019/720/720\\_neelanjana\\_and\\_roshan.htm](https://www.india-seminar.com/2019/720/720_neelanjana_and_roshan.htm)
  10. Neelanjana Sircar, “BJP strike rate drops in both rural, urban areas”, *Hindustan Times*, 12 December 2018. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/chattisgarh-elections/bjp-strike-rate-drops-in-both-rural-urban-areas/story4nxy13Y22knj4b8Z0HzEbK.html>.

**Figure 10: The BJP's Performance in Urban, Rurban and Rural Constituencies**

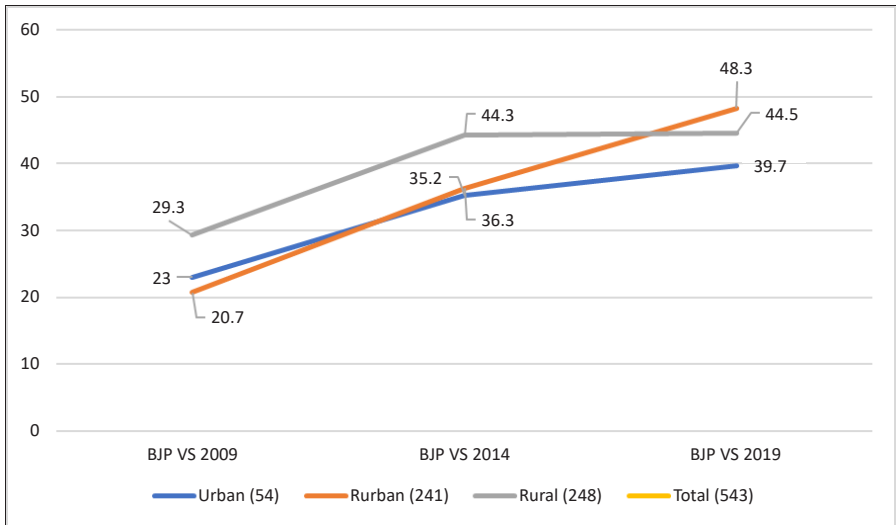


Source: Mohit Kumar, Trivedi Centre for Political Data, Ashoka University

As the chart shows, the BJP's performance in rural areas was considerably better than in urban areas, both in terms of SR and VS. This contrasts with the traditional image of the BJP as a party mostly rooted in urban areas. The figure also suggests that, despite the difficult economic conditions prevailing in rural areas, the BJP was able to retain (and increase, as we shall see below) its support in the countryside. In fact, a comparison of electoral data over the last three elections shows that the 2019 results are a continuation of previous trends.

Figure 11 shows the VS of the BJP between 2009 and 2019 in the three types of constituencies.

**Figure 11: BJP’s Performance in Urban, Rurban, and Rural Constituencies, 2009-19**



Source: Mohit Kumar, Trivedi Centre for Political Data, Ashoka University

The figure clearly shows that the increased support for the BJP in rural areas (as well as other areas) is a medium-term trend. In fact, analysts first noted an expansion of the party in rural areas in the late 1990s.<sup>11</sup> Overall, it is significant that the BJP, long considered a party of the upper caste/class urban dwellers, now draws significantly more support from rural and semi-rural areas of the country. This is also reflected in the corresponding decline of the BJP’s main national rival, the Congress, in rural constituencies. Sircar and Kishore (2019) used satellite data to assess the proportion of agricultural land in any given constituency. They found that the more agriculture a constituency has, the higher would be the winning margin of the BJP vis-à-vis the Congress.

This is also confirmed by survey data collected by CSDS in Delhi for the National Election Studies (NES). Table 4 shows how the ‘farmers’ (a category that includes both landowners and agricultural labourers) are more likely to support the BJP than other voters. Additionally, the BJP’s support among ‘farmers’ increased dramatically between 2014 and 2019. This seems to be driven by the sharp decline of support by the ‘other’ parties, which, in many cases, are regional parties that built their support base among the farming community, especially in North India. This might suggest that the farming communities might have lost faith in parties that they had traditionally

11. Yogendra Yadav, Sanjay Kumar and Oliver Heath, “The BJP’s new social bloc”, *Frontline*, 6 November 1999. <https://frontline.thehindu.com/static/html/fl1623/16230310.htm>; K.C., Suri & Rahul, Verma, “Democratising the BJP” (Seminar, 2017) No. 699.



supported and that did little to ease a long-standing agricultural crisis, which, as mentioned, is certainly not of the BJP's making. An alternative explanation is that economic considerations did not shape the farmers' electoral behaviour – as seems to be the case among other sections of the electorate, who voted for the BJP despite the far-from-spectacular performance of the economy over Modi's first term.

**Table 4: Support for Main Parties among 'Farmers' and 'Other' Voters**

	Occupation	Congress	Congress Allies	BJP	BJP Allies	Others
2019	Farmers	20	6	39	8	27
	Others	19	7	37	7	30
2014	Farmers	19	5	29	10	37
	Others	20	3	32	6	39

Source: National Election Studies 2014 and 2019

These trends have repercussions for future policymaking. As the BJP has gradually transformed itself from a party of the urban world – the party of 'Shining India' – to a party whose support predominantly comes from rural and semi-rural areas, it is reasonable to expect that a greater emphasis will be put into policies that benefit these sections of society.

Indeed, in the last part of Modi's first term – as well as in the first 100 days of the second term – a great deal of attention has been paid to counter the narrative that the government was unresponsive to the grievances coming from the rural world. In fact, between 2014/15 and 2019/20, the budgetary allocation for the Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers' Welfare (MAFW) increased by a whopping 443 per cent, or, in absolute terms, from ₹256 billion (\$\$5 billion) to ₹1,407 billion (\$\$27 billion).<sup>12</sup> Considering the low rate of inflation during the entire term of the Modi government, this is also a very substantial increase in real terms.

The largest contributor to the increased expenditure – as well as being the most politically consequential policy – was the PM-Kisan scheme, introduced shortly before the election. This is a cash transfer programme that provides ₹6,000 per year (\$\$116) to all small and marginal farmers in three quarterly instalments. While the sum might appear small, it is not insignificant. According to the latest Agricultural Census, the average operational landholding is just 1.08 hectares, while as many as 86.21 per cent of the farmers own less than two hectares. For the great majority of these small and

12. A small but not insignificant part of this increase occurred in 2016/17, when the heading for the interest on subsidies for short term credit to farmers – amounting to ₹150 billion (\$\$2.9 billion) – was moved from the Finance Ministry to the MAFW. Source: Government of India, Budget Documents, various years. The figure for 2019/20 is based on the Budget Estimates.

marginal farmers, an annual subsidy of ₹6,000 (\$113) can, for instance, cover the price of subsidised fertilisers or seeds.

The government also increased substantially the Minimum Support Price (MSP) for agricultural products purchased by the state-owned Food Corporation of India, particularly in the months before the election, when the average percentage increase of the MSP for the Kharif (autumn) and Rabi (spring) crops were increased by 24.7 per cent and 7.3 per cent respectively.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, another measure taken by the government that could be seen as ‘pro-farmer’ was the decision in January 2019 to introduce a 10 per cent quota in government jobs and educational institutions for economically weaker sections of castes not covered by existing reservations. This, in many ways, meets one of the key demands raised during numerous protests in several states (like Haryana, Maharashtra and Gujarat) by dominant agricultural castes such as the Patel, the Maratha and the Jats. If the decision is upheld by the Supreme Court, this could also have broad repercussions and open the gates for additional quotas (both at the national and state levels) in the years to come.

Overall, as many as 68 per cent of the farmer respondents to the NES 2019 were satisfied with the government’s performance. Considering that a great proportion of the votes for the party came from rural areas and from people whose livelihoods directly depend on agriculture, as the analysis shows, it is reasonable to expect that the trends seen during Modi’s first term – particularly in terms of substantial expenditure for agriculture – will continue over the next five years.

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13. Ministry of Agriculture and Farmers Welfare.

## Reaching the Poor

Despite the remarkable economic success of India over the last few decades – and its equally remarkable record in terms of reducing extreme poverty – a very large section of the population still lives under or just above the poverty line.<sup>14</sup> According to the latest available World Bank data (2011), 21.2, 60.4 and 86.8 per cent of the population lives below the US\$1.90 (S\$2.10), US\$3.20 (S\$4.50) and US\$5.50 (S\$7.70) purchasing power parity United States dollar/day poverty lines respectively. It is reasonable to assume that poverty declined significantly over the last eight years. However, it is clear that a very sizeable part of the population (and of the electorate) still lives in poverty or just above it. Therefore, welfare schemes are not only a crucial part of any developmental project, but also a useful political tool to win support. This is also confirmed by survey evidence that shows how most people in India see the provision of welfare as an integral part of democracy.<sup>15</sup>

The BJP government was also in a particularly favourable situation to increase welfare support, particularly because of low crude prices during its term, which significantly increased fiscal space. Additionally, government revenues increased by over 80 per cent over the five years of Modi's first term, freeing further resources for welfare provision.<sup>16</sup>

There was also a political incentive for Modi's BJP not to neglect the poorest sections of the electorate. The party had suffered a crushing defeat at the 2004 election, when it had based its campaign on the slogan 'Shining India' – a reference to the very high economic growth that the BJP-led government had ensured between 1999 and 2004. However, voters did not reward this good economic performance and chose instead the Congress-led UPA, which had campaigned on a very progressive (and welfare-oriented) agenda. In fact, recent data show that Indian voters – in particular, poorer ones – based their vote on very sound economic reasons. The 2019 Global Multidimensional Poverty Index, published by the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, shows that between 1998 and 2005, poverty levels among the poorest increased, despite very solid gross domestic product (GDP) growth over the same period, signalling that the BJP-led government had forgotten the weakest sections. It is clear that Modi did learn the lesson and put welfare schemes at the centre of his agenda.

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14. James Chiriyankandath, Diego Maiorano, James Manor and Louise Tillin, *The Politics of Poverty Reduction in India: The UPA Government 2004 to 2014*, New Delhi, Orient Blackswan, 2019.

15. Sandeep Shastri, Sanjay Kumar and Suhas Palshikar, "State of Democracy in South Asia. Report II", Bengaluru, Lokniti-CSDS, Delhi and Jain University Press, 2017.

16. IMF, "World Economic Outlook", Washington D.C., 2019.

On the one hand, the BJP-led government tried to distance itself from the rights-based approach<sup>17</sup> to development that had characterised the UPA 1 and 2 governments. For instance, the government attempted to downscale the UPA's flagship programme, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), although it then later backtracked on this effort. Budgetary allocations almost doubled in nominal terms – from ₹330 billion (S\$6.4 billion) in 2014/15 to ₹610 billion (S\$11.8 billion) in 2018/19, although in real terms, the increase is not that dramatic and, by most evidence, is still insufficient to meet the demand for employment under the scheme.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the government proposed dismantling the Public Distribution System (PDS), through which food is procured and distributed to beneficiaries under the National Food Security Act (NFSA), and called for the introduction of a cash transfer programme instead, but eventually dropped the proposal. Many states were also rather slow in implementing the NFSA, but today, according to government data, 99 per cent of the beneficiaries are currently covered under the Act. A similar trend can be seen for the Integrated Child Development Services, whose budgetary allocations were at first halved, but then largely restored. In short, the BJP-led government clearly tried to dismantle the welfare regime inherited by the previous government, but then, under the pressure of its own members of parliament and broader political compulsions, somewhat reluctantly continued to implement policies introduced by the previous governments.

More significant from a political point of view was the introduction of several schemes that provided private or public goods to the rural poor. In some cases, these schemes were a re-designed (or, sometimes, merely re-branded) version of existing policies. The provision of private goods regarded four main areas: housing, sanitation, household goods and financial inclusion. The government launched the Pradhan Mantri Awaas Yojana – Gramin (PMAY-G), a reformed and expanded version of the Indira Awas Yojana, which aimed at building a 'pucca' (bricks and cement) house for 10 million rural residents. Between 2014/15 and 2017/18, 5.2 million houses were completed and 3.7 million are currently under construction.

Similarly, the government expanded existing sanitation programmes with the introduction of the Swachh Bharat mission on 2 October 2014. One of its key objectives was to make India open-defecation free within five years, chiefly

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17. This refers to a number of rights-based welfare programmes launched by the UPA government, like the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act or the Right to Food Act. See Chiriyankandath et al. 2019.
  18. Avani Kapur and Meghna Paul, "Mahatma Gandhi national rural employment guarantee scheme budget brief", New Delhi, Accountability Initiative, CPR, 2019.

through the construction of household latrines. Official data shows that the government made a significant effort to increase toilet construction; to date, 96 million household toilets have been built under the mission, something that might be life-changing, especially for women.

Quite important for the women also was the launch of the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY), which provides a free liquified petroleum gas (LPG) connection to all poor rural households. This is an important safety issue for women – a great majority use harmful fuel to cook. The government claims that more than 72 million LPG connections have been released, although research shows that many families struggle to afford LPG cylinders, thus limiting the impact of the scheme.<sup>19</sup> However, the scale of the programme and the potential benefits are not to be underestimated in their political impact.

The government also made financial inclusion a key priority and, according to official data, opened more than 330 million bank accounts through the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY), a reformed version of the UPA's financial inclusion programme. While the scheme has not been free from problems and created new hurdles for welfare programme beneficiaries – especially as a result of its integration with Aadhar – it also streamlined the implementation of some schemes and provided a bank account to virtually every household that did not have one.

Among the private goods provided to the poor, the Ayushman Bharat should also be mentioned – or 'Modicare', as it was branded. While it is doubtful that the health insurance scheme could have had any real impact, given the extremely limited financial resources allocated to it, the scheme received immense publicity in the media and through the BJP party organisation.<sup>20</sup>

Public goods provision mainly covered two areas: roads and electrification. In both cases, the government continued (and partially reformed) existing programmes to provide all-weather roads and electricity connections. While the government's claims that 91 per cent of the country's habitations are now connected to roads and that all the villages in the country are electrified is seriously questionable, it remains that there has been an effort to streamline their implementation with some tangible results.<sup>21</sup> And, again, the results

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19. Ashwini Dabadge, Ashok Sreenivas and Ann Josey, "What has the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana achieved so far?" (Economic and Political Weekly, 2015) 53(20), pp. 7-8.

20. Jean Dreze, "Ayushman Bharat trivialises India's quest for universal healthcare", *The Wire*, 24 September 2018. <https://thewire.in/health/ayushman-bharat-trivialises-indias-quest-for-universal-health-care>.

21. Sneha Alexander and Vishnu Padmanabhan, "Rural road building picked up speed under NDA", *Livemint*, 14 April 2019. <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/rural-road-building-picked-up-speed-under-nda-1555258597435.html>.

– real or inflated as they might be – were repeated incessantly by the BJP’s propaganda apparatus.

Overall, the BJP-led government was able to reach a very large number of people with its welfare schemes – including those inherited by the UPA government. According to some estimates, the UPA 1 and 2 covered about 200 million people over its two terms. The NDA, on the other hand, reached about 260 million people in half the time.<sup>22</sup>

Two important areas where the government chose not to invest are public health and education. This is a long-term trend in India and the country spends very little resources in these two key developmental areas.<sup>23</sup> Rather, the focus of the BJP-led government has been – and is likely to remain over Modi’s second term – on providing tangible goods to a broad section of the population. This is not only easier than reforming the public health and education systems, but it is also likely to offer more visible outcomes and, therefore, more significant political dividends.

As this very analysis shows, Indian elections are not decided on single issues, however important. Welfare schemes cannot be expected to shift voting intentions on their own, but they do contribute to build an image of the governance capabilities of the incumbent government as well as its focus (or lack thereof) on the welfare of specific sections of the society. Yadav and Palshikar (2009) made a similar argument with reference to the 2009 election, when the introduction of several welfare schemes by the UPA 1 government over the previous five years contributed to construct an image of the government in largely positive terms. Something similar is likely to have happened during the 2014 election.

There is some evidence that welfare schemes helped the BJP to win support, particularly in rural areas. Table 5 shows the voting preference of programmes’ beneficiaries as compared to non-beneficiaries.

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22. Jyoti Mishra and Vibha Attri, “Did welfare win votes?”, *Seminar*, 2019. [http://www.india-seminar.com/2019/720/720\\_jyoti\\_and\\_vibha.htm](http://www.india-seminar.com/2019/720/720_jyoti_and_vibha.htm).

23. Diego Maiorano and James Manor, “Poverty reduction, inequalities and human development in the BRICS: Policies and outcomes”, (*Commonwealth and Comparative Politics*, 2017), 55(3) pp. 278-302.

**Table 5: Voting Preference of Programmes’ Beneficiaries versus Non-beneficiaries**

	Proportion of beneficiaries who voted for the BJP	Proportion of non-beneficiaries who voted for the BJP
PMAY-G	38	37
MGNREGA	32	39
Ayushman Bharat	40	37
Pensions	34	38
PDS	36	39
PM-Kisan	41	37
PMUY	43	35
PMJDY	44	35

Source: Diego, Maiorano, “The 2019 Indian Elections and the Ruralisation of the BJP”, (*Studies in Indian Politics*, 12 November 2019)

The table shows that the policies most strongly associated with the BJP and the prime minister – Ayushman Bharat, PM-Kisan, PMUY and PMJDY – and that were a key element of the BJP’s electoral campaign, do seem to have had some impact, particularly among women voters.<sup>24</sup> It should be noted that the figure for the PM-Kisan scheme underestimates the effect that it might have had on the support for the BJP. When only farmer respondents are considered, as many as 56 per cent of those who gave credit to the central government for the scheme voted for the BJP.

In fact, the BJP-led government seems to have been able to claim credit for welfare schemes much more efficiently than its predecessor, including schemes like the MGNREGA, the UPA 1’s flagship scheme.<sup>25</sup> Table 6 shows the marked difference in attribution of credit between the UPA 1 and 2 and the NDA.

**Table 6: Attribution of Credit for Social Policies**

NDA Policies	Central Govt.	State Govt.	UPA 1-2 Policies	Central Govt.	State Govt.
Ujjwala Yojana	71	14	Indira/Rajiv Awas Yojana	22	50
Jan Dhan Yojana	71	13	MGNREGA**	27	41
PM Awas Yojana	51	32	NRHM**	20	53
Ayushman Bharat	53	30	Pension Scheme	19	54
PM Kisan Yojana*	44	38	...	...	...

\* Only farmers

\*\* Only rural sample

Source: 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*, OnlineFirst, 2019)

24. Vibha Attri and Anurag Jain, “Post-poll survey: When schemes translate into votes”, *The Hindu*, 27 May 2019. <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha-2019/when-schemes-translate-into-votes/article27256139.ece>.
25. Rajeshwari Deshpande, Louise Tillin and K K Kailash, “The BJP’s Welfare Schemes: Did They Make a Difference in the 2019 Elections?”, *Studies in Indian Politics*, OnlineFirst, 2019.

While this trend might reveal a growing awareness by voters about governance mechanisms, the BJP put considerable effort into associating these new social policies with the government in general and the prime minister in particular. In fact, as many as 18 government schemes were named (or re-named), adding the prefix 'Pradhan Mantri' (Prime Minister) to the official name. This was part of a well-thought out and designed political communication strategy that complemented the party's main electoral slogan 'Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas' (Togetherness of All, Development for All).



## Implications

What are the implications of the 2019 election? We should expect a continuation of the process of centralisation that has characterised Modi's first term in office. Newspaper reports and academic research concur that policymaking has seldom been so centralised in the hands of the Prime Minister Office (PMO), at least since Indira Gandhi's time.

This has several important consequences. First, as the PMO exercises greater scrutiny over important files, especially those with large financial allocations, and since the battle against corruption is an integral part of the 'Modi brand', we have not witnessed any major corruption scandal, at least at the central level. While this might partly be due to the erosion of the independence of institutions that has occurred during the course of Modi's first term, which makes it less likely that a scam could emerge, many accounts of the functioning of the central bureaucracy are consistent with the view that state officials are extra-cautious when it comes to taking sensitive and possibly discretionary decisions.

Second, and closely related, we can expect a slow pace of policy design and implementation, as we saw during Modi's first term. As files need to be cleared by an overburdened PMO – and often by the prime minister himself – decisions on key policy issues have been delayed and are likely to be delayed in the years to come. Furthermore, as many officials are wary of taking decisions that could be interpreted as discretionary, even files that would not require the PMO's clearance are routed through the PMO for approval, further increasing the logjam.

Third, we can expect unconventional and unexpected decisions, such as the sudden 'demonetisation' of 86 per cent of the country's circulating currency in November 2016. As policymaking and decision-making are increasingly concentrated in the PMO, alternative ideas or pressures from other actors in the policy community are likely to remain ineffective.

The geographical expansion of the BJP has important consequences. Since the 2019 election, however, the party's expansion has been halted. It remains to be seen whether the BJP's setback in Maharashtra – where its long-time ally, the Shiv Sena, deserted it and formed the government with the Congress and the Nationalist Congress Party – is temporary. Since then, the BJP has been voted out in Jharkhand and suffered a heavy defeat to the Aam Aadmi Party in Delhi. Given the degree of centralisation practised by the BJP within the party – mirroring the centralisation of power by the central government – BJP-ruled states find little space to influence national policy. Non-BJP states, on the other

hand, are increasingly marginalised and struggle to reach the ‘critical mass’ that is necessary to concretely shape policy. This might result in severe stress on federal institutions in the years to come.

Several studies have shown how federalism is an important reason why India remained a stable democracy over the decades. In the past, federalism ensured stability through two channels: the first instance was when, shortly after independence, most state governments were ruled by the Congress party, and the states’ needs and inputs found expression in internal party fora, which would then be translated into policy. This was possible because of the highly decentralised nature of the Congress party at the time, which allowed for inputs (and leaders) from below to reach the top of the system. Second, with the growing fragmentation of the party system over the decades, federalism – and its institutional mechanisms – became a way through which regional parties expressing local grievances could have their voice heard at the national level. The current configuration of the party system – similar to what happened during Indira Gandhi’s tenure as prime minister in the 1970s and 1980s – does not allow for either of these mechanisms to work and ensure stability: neither is the BJP receptive to inputs from below, nor is the party system fragmented enough for the non-BJP states to have a critical mass against a BJP-dominated central government. This could create tensions around issues that will impact on states’ interests in the next few years, like the distribution of government revenues to the states, on which the Fifteenth Financial Commission submitted its interim report in December 2019. While there is no reason to foresee political instability in the short term, these tensions could add up and create problems from a medium-term perspective.

During Modi’s second term in office, we can also expect that the marginalisation of minorities, particularly the Muslims, will continue. In fact, there are several indications that this is the road by which the government has chosen to consolidate its support base. In August 2019, for instance, the government amended Article 370 of the Constitution, which gave special autonomy to India’s only Muslim-majority state, Jammu and Kashmir. The government also revoked its statehood and made it a union territory, governed directly by the central government. Jammu and Kashmir were put on a lockdown for several months: curfew was imposed, additional troops were sent in, journalists’ movement was restricted, opposition politicians were arrested and detained without charges and all forms of communication were blocked. The move was extremely popular in large parts of the country, but further marginalised the Muslim community.

Two other recent examples of Muslim marginalisation included the passage in Parliament of the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill 2019, which grants citizenship rights to non-Muslim refugees from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan; and the construction of a temple in Ayodhya, following the Supreme Court ruling in November 2019 to grant to the Hindu litigants the site of the Babri Masjid, which was destroyed by a mob of Hindu nationalists in December 1992.

Modi's first few months of his second term confirm that welfare policies designed to provide tangible benefits to the largest possible number of households will remain a cornerstone of the BJP's policy agenda. Several policy initiatives seem to confirm this. For instance, the government launched the Jal Shakti project, which aims at providing piped water to all households before 2024. During the very first Cabinet meeting after the election, the new government extended the PM-Kisan scheme to all farmers of the country, which works out to about 145 million.<sup>26</sup> A few weeks later, it also revised the wages that workers will receive under the MGNREGA and linked them to an inflation index.

Given the continuation and in many ways the deepening of the economic crisis – GDP growth and job creation are at a decades-low – we can expect nationalism to play a growing role in the government's narrative.

This will also have spill-over effects into foreign policy: we have some indications that, under Modi, domestic considerations will matter more in determining foreign policy than they did in the past. This was the case with the government's decision to withdraw from the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership in November 2019. More generally, we can expect nationalism to trump development, as the economy falters and Modi's image as the 'developmental man' loses sheen.

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26. Barring those who meet some exclusion criteria, like being a government official or paying income tax.

## Conclusion

The factors behind the BJP's spectacular performance analysed in this paper – the 'Modi factor'; the BJP's geographical expansion; the consolidation of the Hindu vote and marginalisation of minorities; the emergence of nationalism and national security as an electoral campaign issue; the ruralisation of the BJP; and the importance of welfare schemes – are crucial elements that explain the BJP's victory in the 2019 general election.

Given the importance of Modi's persona for the party's victory, we can expect the prime minister and Shah to play an even bigger role in determining policy outcomes than in Modi's first term in office. This will result in the continuation of the process of centralisation of decision-making in the PMO, which in turn might be characterised by sudden and unexpected major policy decisions like the one to scrap Article 370. While these 'surprise moves' have important political advantages for Modi – they reinforce his image as a leader who 'gets things done' – they are also prone to suffer from unintended consequences, as they are the result of a policymaking process that is hardly consultative.

On the other hand, given the bad shape of the economy, we can expect that Modi will put a growing emphasis on nationalism, rather than development, which are the two pillars on which his brand has been built. Nationalism will continue to be understood both as national pride and toughness against India's enemies and as a long-term project to build a majoritarian democracy, where the Hindu community is given prominence. Minorities, especially the Muslim community, are likely to be further marginalised.

Finally, it seems clear that while the BJP dominates India's political party system – partly because of the state of the opposition parties, particularly the Congress – it is also clear that overreliance on the Modi brand makes this dominance somewhat fragile.



## About the Authors

Dr Diego Maiorano's research focuses on India's politics and political economy and on political and economic change in developing countries, with special reference to the themes of poverty and inequality. He is currently leading a research project funded by the Swedish Research Council titled 'The Paradoxes of Empowerment – Women, Dalits and Employment Guarantee in India'.

Prior to joining ISAS, Dr Maiorano was Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellow at the School of Politics and International Relations, University of Nottingham, United Kingdom. He has a PhD in Political Studies from the University of Torino, Italy.

Dr Maiorano is the author of *Autumn of the Matriarch – Indira Gandhi's Final Term in Office* (Hurst & Co./Oxford University Press/Harper Collins, 2015) and *The Politics of Poverty Reduction in India* (Orient Blackswan, 2019). He has published several research articles in leading academic journals.

Dr Ronojoy Sen is a Senior Research Fellow and Research Lead (Politics, Society and Governance) at the Institute of South Asian Studies and the South Asian Studies Programme, National University of Singapore. He has worked for over a decade with leading Indian newspapers, most recently as an editor for *The Times of India*.

His latest book is *Nation at Play: A History of Sport in India* (Columbia University Press/Penguin, 2015). He is also the author of *Articles of Faith, Religion, Secularism, and the Indian Supreme Court* (Oxford University Press, 2010) and has edited several books, the latest being *Media at Work in China and India* (Sage, 2015). He has contributed to edited volumes and has published in several leading journals. He also writes regularly for newspapers.

Dr Sen has a PhD in political science from the University of Chicago and read history at Presidency College, Calcutta. He has held visiting fellowships at the National Endowment for Democracy, Washington, DC, the East-West Center Washington and the International Olympic Museum, Lausanne, Switzerland.

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## **Institute of South Asian Studies**

National University of Singapore

29 Heng Mui Keng Terrace

#08-06 (Block B)

Singapore 119620

Tel (65) 6516 4239

Fax (65) 6776 7505

URL [www.isas.nus.edu.sg](http://www.isas.nus.edu.sg)