Caste, Social Justice, and the Politics of Inclusion in the 2024 Indian General Election

Gilles Verniers

Karl Loewenstein Fellow and Visiting Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Amherst College, Massachusetts, and Senior Visiting Fellow, Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi

gverniers@amherst.edu

Abstract

This paper delves into caste as one of the defining issues of the 2024 Indian General Elections, as the two contending alliances—the Indian National Congress (INC)-led Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) and the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA)—made competing claims about their inclusive character. While INDIA foregrounded caste as a central factor in the pursuit of social justice, the NDA's idea of inclusivity focused on political inclusion through the representation and integration of Hindu castes under a common religious and ethnic umbrella. INDIA emulated NDA's strategy of courting non-dominant segments of voters by including a larger number of lower caste candidates on their list while keeping some space for representation of religious minorities. The author argues that if INDIA ended up beating the NDA in the game of inclusion, both alliances' efforts remained limited by longstanding features of Indian electoral politics that go against more substantive forms of political inclusion. The representation of minorities and women within non-NDA parties keeps decreasing, and the data on assets reveals that competitive pressure still pushes political parties to favor independently wealthy candidates.

Keywords: Indian parliamentary elections 2024, political representation, caste, minorities, gender, political parties, inclusion, elitism

doi: 10.18278/inpp.5.1.5

Casta, justicia social y políticas de inclusión en las elecciones generales de la India de 2024

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la cuestión de las castas como uno de los temas definitorios de las elecciones generales de la India de 2024, ya que las dos alianzas contendientes —la Alianza Nacional Inclusiva para el Desarrollo de la India (INDIA), liderada por el Congreso Nacional Indio (INC), y la Alianza Democrática Nacional (NDA), liderada por el BJP— presentaron argumentos contrapuestos sobre su carácter inclusivo. Mientras que INDIA priorizó la cuestión de las castas como un factor central en la búsqueda de la justicia social, la idea de inclusividad de la NDA se centró en la inclusión política mediante la representación e integración de las castas hindúes bajo un paraguas religioso y étnico común. INDIA emuló la estrategia de la NDA de cortejar a segmentos no dominantes de votantes al incluir un mayor número de candidatos de castas inferiores en sus listas, manteniendo al mismo tiempo cierto espacio para la representación de las minorías religiosas. El autor argumenta que, si INDIA terminó venciendo a la NDA en el juego de la inclusión, los esfuerzos de ambas alianzas se vieron limitados por características arraigadas de la política electoral india que se oponen a formas más sustanciales de inclusión política. La representación de minorías y mujeres dentro de partidos no pertenecientes a la NDA sigue disminuyendo, y los datos sobre activos revelan que la presión competitiva aún empuja a los partidos políticos a favorecer a candidatos ricos e independientes.

Palabras clave: Elecciones parlamentarias indias de 2024, representación política, castas, minorías, género, partidos políticos, inclusión, elitismo

2024年印度大选的种姓、社会正义与包容性政治

摘要

本文研究了种姓制度这一2024年印度大选的决定性问题之一，因为两个相互竞争的联盟——印度国民大会党(INC)领导的印度全国发展包容性联盟(INDIA)与人民党领导的全国民主联盟(NDA)——对各自的包容性特征提出了竞争性的主张。尽管INDIA将种姓制度作为追求社会正义的核心因素，但NDA的包容性理念却侧重于通过在一个共同的宗教和族裔保护伞下，以代表和融合印度种姓来实现政治包容。INDIA

效仿了NDA的策略，即通过在其名单中纳入更多低种姓候选人来争取非主流选民群体，同时为宗教少数派的代表保留一些空间。作者论证，如果INDIA最终在包容性博弈中击败NDA，那么两个联盟的努力仍然受到印度选举政治长期特征的限制，这些特征不利于更实质性的政治包容形式。非NDA政党内部少数族裔和妇女的代表性持续下降，并且资产数据显示，竞争压力仍然迫使政党青睐财富独立的候选人。

关键词：2024年印度议会选举，政治代表，种姓，少数群体，性别，政党，包容性，精英主义

Introduction

Caste was one of the defining issues of the 2024 Indian General Election campaign and election. The two contending alliances, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) offered voters two contrasting visions of social justice, inclusion, and the role of caste in fostering them.

The BJP-led NDA campaign, on the one hand, focused on political inclusion through the representation and integration of Hindu castes under a common religious and ethnic umbrella while favoring a welfare regime that targets individuals rather than specific groups. The INDIA alliance, on the other hand, promised similar welfare policies but defined caste as a key instrument of social justice, promising representation and a welfare regime that recognizes the role caste plays in the perpetuation of inequalities.

Since 2014, the BJP has promoted the transformation of India's welfare regime towards a system that targets individuals rather than groups (Aiyar, 2019; Anand, Dimble, & Subramaniam, 2020). At the same time, it sought to shift the focus of welfare policies away from caste, diluting reservation benefits meant for lower castes and backward classes, notably by introducing economic-based quotas that benefit individuals from the general category (Singh, 2023; Verma, 2023). The BJP government also staunchly opposes the conduction of a caste census, a key demand, and component of the opposition's social justice project.

Protecting caste-based reservations and conducting a caste census were two of the main promises made by the opposition. Congress's leading figure, Rahul Gandhi, has been vocal throughout the campaign about the necessity to properly enumerate castes, highlighting the under-representation of lower castes across institutions and various professional domains (*The Hindu*, 2024). During the campaign, the opposition conflated these questions into a matter of protecting the Constitution after a few BJP officials declared that they would use their future two-

thirds majority to amend it (PTI, 2024).

The question of social justice in India is central in regional and national electoral campaigns. Parties make competing claims and promises about welfare and redistribution policies that have become increasingly undifferentiated across parties and states. Welfarism, both as policy and as electoral language, is used as a response to the effects of tepid economic growth, joblessness, and rising inequalities and as compensation for the shortcomings of the state's handling of these challenges (Roy, 2019). Yamini Aiyar has argued that the shift towards this new welfare regime was also used to help political leaders build a personal, direct connection with voters, substituting their own generosity for the state's duty to protect citizens (Aiyar, 2023). Welfarism, she argues, played an important role in cementing the BJP's victory in the 2019 election (Aiyar, 2019).

Since then, other parties have sought to emulate the BJP's brand of welfarism and personalized politics by implementing similarly designed policies in states where they are in power. This competitive welfarism has provided some electoral advantage to the BJP, which disposes of greater resources to pursue this form of politics and can claim intellectual ownership over these kinds of policies. In a one-party dominant system, the party in power often gets to define the grounds on which elections are fought. In such cases, the opposition suffers not only from its fragmentation but also from its inability to differentiate itself from the incumbent. Campaigning on caste enabled the opposition to distinguish itself by producing an alternative welfare and social justice narrative to mobilize voters. While all parties competed on similar ground, they differed in their articulation of caste and welfare.

Beyond its relevance for welfare, caste also serves as a signal of political inclusion. Both alliances claim to represent India's most marginalized communities by displaying the diversity of their candidates' recruitment. Since its rise a decade ago, the BJP has made efforts to shed its image of a party of and for the upper castes by opening its ranks to lower caste representation, to the point that some have claimed—somewhat hastily—that the BJP in Northern India has effectively become an OBC party (Mehta, 2022). This claim has a strong element of exaggeration, as the rise of the BJP in Northern India since 2014 has also meant an overall rise in upper caste representation. Still, the number of BJP representatives coming from non-dominant groups has indeed increased in recent years, if anything, because the BJP has become a bigger party (Verniers & Jaffrelot, 2020).

The focus on inclusion by political parties also stems from political parties' awareness that caste-based electoral behavior in India is generally quite fluid. If the BJP has succeeded in building a strong following among upper caste voters in recent years,[1] the electoral behavior of other groups of castes, notably Dalits and Other Backward Classes, has been more fluctuating,[2] particularly so in 2024.

In 2024, opposition parties have sought to emulate the BJP's electoral strategy by targeting the same historically under-represented groups among Scheduled Castes and Other Backward Classes. Particularly in Northern India, they have sought to shed the reputation of dominant caste preferentialism that the BJP tagged on them ten years ago by distributing tickets to groups that have recently been leaning towards the BJP.

In this article, I focus on this second aspect of caste politics, assessing both alliances' claims of inclusion by examining caste data collected during the campaign and after the election. I first compare alliances and major parties' nomination strategies. I then focus on the role caste played in the Uttar Pradesh results, which was arguably the biggest upset the BJP faced in this election. I then use this data and case to argue that while the opposition alliance did play the caste card somewhat to its advantage, both alliances' claims of inclusion suffer from a series of essential limitations that correspond to enduring features of politics in India.

Alliances' Caste-based Strategy: The NDA Beat at its Own Game

Regarding representational outcome, the 2024 election has thrown some interesting results. For the first time since Independence, the share of OBC MPs in the Lok Sabha matches the number of upper caste MPs, at roughly 26 percent of the seats each. The share of Intermediary Caste MPs remains stable, and the representation of groups benefiting from mandated representation (SCs and STs).[3] The share of upper-caste MPs has decreased from 28.5 to 25.8 percent.

Table 1. Caste Group and Community Representation in the Lok Sabha (2009–2024)[4]

	2009 (%)	**2014 (%)**	**2019 (%)**	**2024 (%)**
Upper Castes	29.70	28.70	28.50	25.80
Intermediary Castes	13.60	14.70	14.40	14.20
OBCs	21.90	23.20	23.00	25.40
SC	16.40	16.60	15.80	16.20
ST	9.60	8.80	9.00	9.40
Sikhs	1.30	1.30	1.70	1.70
Muslims	5.30	4.20	5.00	4.40
Non-ST Christians	2.20	2.20	2.00	2.20
Other Religious Minorities	0.00	0.20	0.60	0.60
Unidentified	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.20

Source: The Social Profile of the Indian National and Provincial Elected Representatives (SPINPER) project. https://www.sciencespo.fr/ceri/en/content/sociologie-des-elus-nationaux-et-regionaux-du-raj-l-union-indienne-contemporaine-lia-spinper

Compared to 2019, the variations are modest. There are 15 fewer upper castes MPs in an assembly of 543 members (from 155 MPs to 140 MPs) and only 14 additional OBC members (from 124 MPs to 138 MPs). Most of these shifts occurred in the Hindi Belt and, for the most part, in Uttar Pradesh (See Table 2 and Section 2). There are fewer Muslim MPs (from 27 to 24) and two more Sikh MPs (from 11 to 13). The representation of Christian communities remains stable, accounting for the fact that this category overlaps with several Scheduled Tribes MPs coded as Christians in the data.[5]

However modest, these variations are symbolically significant. While a rise of OBCs has marked national politics since the late 1980s (Jaffrelot, 2003), the upper castes have always remained ahead and represented well above their demographic share (Verniers & Jaffrelot, 2020). The rise of OBCs occurred during a short period, from 1989 to a peak in 2004. After 2004, OBC representation plateaued and only marginally increased in 2014 (see Table 1). The rise of representation of OBCs in 2024 is sharp, even sharper, when one isolates the Hindi Belt, which has been the main battleground for late 20th-century plebeian politics (Jaffrelot & Kumar, 2009).

Table 2. Caste Group and Community Representation in the Hindi Belt (2009–2024)

	2009 (%)	**2014** (%)	**2019** (%)	**2024** (%)
Upper Castes	41.6	42.0	38.9	32.7
Other Backward Classes	20.4	23.5	25.7	31.0
Intermediary Castes	6.2	6.6	6.2	6.6
SC	17.3	17.7	17.3	17.7
ST	9.3	8.0	8.0	8.4
Muslims	4.4	1.8	3.5	3.1
Sikhs	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0
Non-ST Christians	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.0
Unidentified	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4

Source: SPINPER project

In 2024, upper caste representation is down to where it was 20 years ago when the BJP lost a national election. However, the gap between upper castes and OBCs was as wide as six points, as Muslims' representation was then on the rise. In 2024, both groups are nearly equivalent in terms of share of representation.

Comparing the Alliances' Nomination Strategies

Variations become more pronounced when we compare alliances' nomination strategies and their outcomes (see Table 3).[6] The NDA nominated more upper-caste candidates than INDIA (31.3 percent against 19.2 percent), slightly fewer OBC candidates (25.3 percent against 26.4 percent), a similar share of intermediary castes' candidates, and non-minority SC and ST candidates. The main difference between the two alliances is the nomination of candidates belonging to religious minorities.

While the NDA continued with its policy and practice of excluding minorities, INDIA distributed 14 percent of its tickets to members of various religious minority groups. NDA parties distributed only four tickets to Muslim candidates (all lost), seven tickets to Sikh candidates, seven to Christian candidates, and three to Buddhist candidates. In contrast, INDIA gave 80 tickets to minority candidates and half to Muslim candidates.

Looking at *jati*-level ticket distribution, one finds other variations and similarities. Within the OBCs, both alliances privileged non-dominant OBC representation over the representation of dominant OBC groups such as Yadavs or Kurmis.[7] Among the upper caste, INDIA nominated much fewer Rajput candidates than the BJP.

From here, three observations can be made. First, Table 3 shows that the BJP repeated the strategy of preferential representation of upper caste and non-dominant backward groups it had adopted in the previous two general elections. One in three NDA candidates belonged to the upper castes, while only one in five INDIA candidates belonged to that category.

Second, INDIA sought to emulate the BJP's strategy of diversifying representation among non-dominant OBCs. These are the groups among whom support for the BJP increased significantly in 2014 and 2019 (Jaffrelot, 2019). These are also the groups that have been historically the most under-represented among Hindus. Even Congress, which in the past has never offered much representation to non-dominant OBCs, opened its ranks to OBC representation in 2024 (see Table 4).

Third, the differences between the two alliances are starker when considering representational outcomes. Upper caste MPs comprise a third of all NDA MPs (33.2 percent), against 13 percent for INDIA. There are no religious minority MPs in the NDA, except the MP from Arunachal West, Mr. Kiren Rijiju. INDIA has a higher share of representation of non-dominant Yadavs OBCs than the BJP (keeping in mind that the BJP has more MPs). These differences hold when we isolate the BJP and Congress within their respective alliances (See Table 4). Upper castes comprise 36.4 percent of all BJP candidates (compared to 34.6 percent in 2019), against 21.2 percent for Congress (which contested fewer seats than in 2019).

Table 3: Caste and Religious Minorities' Representation in the 2024 General Elections (percentage)

	NDA Candidates (%)	**INDIA Candidates (%)**	**NDA MPs (%)**	**INDIA MPs (%)**
Upper Castes	31.1	19.3	33.2	12.9
Brahmins	14.7	9.7	14.7	5.9
Rajputs	6.9	3.0	8.7	1.5
Other UCs	9.7	6.5	9.8	5.4
Intermediary Castes	14.7	13.8	16.1	13.4
Marathas	4.7	4.8	3.5	5.9
Jats	2.6	2.1	2.4	3.5
Lingayats	1.5	1.1	1.0	1.5
Patidars	1.5	1.4	2.4	0.0
Reddys	1.7	2.3	2.1	1.5
Vokkaligas	1.1	1.1	1.7	0.5
Other ICs	1.7	0.7	2.8	0.5
Other Backward Classes	25.3	26.4	26.2	29.7
Yadavs	2.4	4.2	3.1	3.5
Kurmis	2.4	2.7	3.5	3.0
Other OBCs	20.5	19.8	19.6	23.3
Non-minority SC	15.8	17.5	13.3	18.8
Non-minority ST	9.1	8.7	10.5	8.4
Muslims	0.7	7.1	0.0	7.9
Sikhs	1.3	2.8	0.0	3.0
Christians	1.3	3.7	0.0	5.0
Buddhists	0.6	0.5	0.7	0.5
Unidentified	0.0	0.2	0.0	0.5
Grand Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	N= 537	N= 565	N= 286	N= 202

Source: SPINPER project

Table 4: Caste and Religious Minorities Representation by Parties and their partners' candidates

	BJP (%)	**NDA Partners** (%)	**INC** (%)	**INDIA Partners** (%)
Upper Castes	36.4	7.2	21.2	16.7
Other Backward Classes	21.8	41.2	20.6	34.2
Intermediary Castes	11.8	27.8	16.9	9.6
Non-minority SC	16.4	13.4	15.7	20.0
Non-minority ST	10.7	2.1	11.7	4.6
Muslims	0.2	3.1	5.8	8.8
Sikhs	1.6	0.0	2.5	3.3
Christians	0.5	5.2	4.6	2.5
Buddhists	0.7	0.0	0.9	0.0
Unidentified	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	N= 440	N= 97	N= 325	N= 240

Source: SPINPER project

Table 5: Caste and Religious Minorities Representation by Parties and their partners' MPs

	BJP (%)	**NDA Partners** (%)	**INC** (%)	**INDIA Partners** (%)
Upper Castes	37.9	8.7	15.2	10.7
Other Backward Classes	23.3	41.3	14.1	44.7
Intermediary Castes	12.1	37.0	16.2	10.7
Non-minority SC	13.8	10.9	20.2	17.5
Non-minority ST	12.1	2.2	13.1	3.9
Muslims	0.0	0.0	7.1	8.7
Sikhs	0.0	0.0	4.0	1.9
Christians	0.0	0.0	9.1	1.0
Buddhists	0.8	0.0	1.0	0.0
Unidentified	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
	N= 240	N= 103	N= 99	N= 46

Source: SPINPER project

Again, these differences are slightly more pronounced among MPs (see Table 5). Upper castes comprise 38 percent of all BJP MPs (compared to 35.9 percent in 2019) and 21.2 percent of all Congress MPs. The OBC representation is equivalent between the two parties. Congress has a higher share of intermediary caste MPs than BJP.

Regarding alliance partners, most of BJP's partners' candidates belong to the OBC and intermediary caste (78.3 percent). Congress' partners also distributed their tickets preferentially to these two groups, which is not surprising given that INDIA is in good part made up of Southern state-based parties that have a history of providing representation to backward groups. The key distinctions between the two are upper caste preferentialism and minority exclusion of the NDA.

As far as political representation is concerned, the BJP has been trying since 2014 to achieve two seemingly contradictory goals: to provide preferential representation to traditional elites while increasing the representation to backward classes. Particularly in Northern India, the BJP seeks to improve the backward classes' representation without diluting the representation of upper castes. Winning large numbers of seats, as it has done in the Hindi belt since 2014, helps the pursuit of these two objectives. So does the exclusion of religious minorities.

On the other side, INDIA chose to increase OBC representation in 2024 by reducing the representation of upper castes, thus maintaining some space for religious minorities. As a result, even though the NDA won far more seats than INDIA, the social composition of the opposition ended up being more diverse and inclusive than the BJP's version of politics of inclusion.

There are, however, important caveats to this assertion. To begin with, the variations observed are primarily limited to one state, Uttar Pradesh, where the BJP faced its most significant upset in 2024. The unexpected performance of the Samajwadi Party, which won 37 seats (Congress won six seats), largely contributed to the variation in OBC representation nationally.

Turn of the Tide in Uttar Pradesh

National elections in India are often won or lost in Uttar Pradesh, a state that sends 80 legislators to the Lok Sabha. In 2014, the BJP won 71 of those 80 seats (73 with its partner, the Apna Dal) and 62 in 2019 (64 with Apna Dal). The BJP has also been in power with a single majority in the state assembly since 2017. In 2024, the BJP and its partners lost thirty of the sixty-four seats they had won five years earlier. They could only win two new seats, in Bijnor and Amroha. The Samajwadi Party—Congress alliance prevailed in that state, winning forty-three seats, including thirty previously held by the BJP and the Apna Dal.

Against the BJP's strategy of nominating non-dominant OBCs and upper caste candidates, the opposition alliance designed a campaign target-

ing all non-upper caste segments of the population, concentrating ticket distribution among those groups. Thus, half of the Samajwadi Party's tickets went to OBC (29) and Jat candidates (2). Sixteen tickets were given to Scheduled Caste candidates, and four were given to Muslim candidates, leaving only 11 seats for upper caste candidates. On the other hand, Congress passed half of its tickets to caste candidates and distributed the remaining eight tickets to a handful of candidates across different groups. This distribution of nominations helped the Samajwadi Party to center its campaign around three broad backward groups—*Picchda*, *Dalit,* and *Alpsankhyak* (lower castes, Dalits, and minorities) —while its partner continued to cater to upper castes representation.

Table 6: Caste and Religious Communities' Representation Among Major Parties' Candidates in Uttar Pradesh, General Elections, 2024

	BJP	**BJP Partners***	**SP**	**INC**
Upper Castes	37		11	9
Brahmins	15		5	4
Rajputs	17		2	2
Other UCs	5		4	3
Intermediary Castes	2	1	2	1
Jats	2	1	2	1
Other Backward Classes	20	4	29	2
Yadavs	1	1	5	
Kurmis	6	1	8	1
Gujjars	2	1	1	
Non-Dominant. OBCs	11	1	15	1
Scheduled Castes	16	1	16	3
Jatav	2		5	1
Pasis	5		7	
Other SCs	9	1	4	2
Muslims			4	2
Total	75	6	62	17

*Note:**BJP partners in Uttar Pradesh include the Apna Dal (Kamerawadi), the Rashtriya Lok Dal and the SBSP.

Source: SPINPER project

Within the backward categories, the Samajwadi Party distributed only five tickets to its core support base: the Yadavs (all of them belonging to the same family), eight tickets to Kurmi candidates, and 16 other tickets to candidates belonging to 11 different backward groups. The SP diversified its candidate recruitment compared to previous years, emulating the BJP's outreach to non-dominant backward groups. It did not, however, replicate the BJP's preference for upper castes representation.

Given the differences in performance between the two alliances, the caste profiles of MPs from Uttar Pradesh are therefore contrasted. A total of 17 of BJP's 33 MPs belong to the upper caste, against only five out of 37 MPs of the Samajwadi Party. Nineteen of the 29 Samajwadi Party OBC candidates won. On the other hand, the nine upper-caste Congress members performed poorly. Only two were elected.

Table 7: Caste and Religious Communities' Representation among Major Parties' MPs in Uttar Pradesh, General Elections, 2024

	BJP	**BJP Partners***	**SP**	**INC**
Upper Castes	17		5	2
Brahmins	7		1	2
Rajputs	9		2	
Other UCs	1		2	1
Intermediary Castes	1	1	1	
Jats	1	1	1	
Other backward Classes	7	2	19	1
Yadavs			5	
Kurmis	3	1	6	
Gujjars	1	1		
Non-Dominant OBCs	3	0	8	1
Scheduled Castes	8		8	2
Jatav	1			1
Pasis	3		5	
Other SCs	4		3	1
Muslims			4	1
Total	33	3	37	6

Note: * BJP partners in Uttar Pradesh include the Apna Dal (Kamerawadi), the Rashtriya Lok Dal and the SBSP.

Source: SPINPER project

Among Scheduled Caste candidates, both alliances privileged the representation of non-Jatav Dalits. Overall, upper caste representation in Uttar Pradesh significantly decreased (see Table 8), while OBC representation surpassed it for the first time.

Table 8: Caste and Communities Representation in Uttar Pradesh – Lok Sabha (2009–2024)

	2009 (%)	**2014** (%)	**2019** (%)	**2024** (%)
UC	43.8	43.8	38.8	31.3
OBC	21.3	27.5	27.5	36.3
IC	2.5	5.0	3.8	3.8
SC	22.5	22.5	21.3	22.5
Muslims	8.8	0.0	7.5	6.3
Christians	1.3	1.3	1.3	0.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: SPINPER project

This head-counting exercise does not suggest nor demonstrate that the ascriptive identity of candidates necessarily drove party performance or influenced electoral behavior. There is no evidence, for example, that upper caste candidates individually performed any worse than candidates from other groups, both in terms of victory margins and strike rates.[8] There were also 54 seats where alliance candidates from different caste group backgrounds competed against each other to no specific group's advantage. Electoral dynamics in India are more nuanced and complex than parties' recruitment strategies, often based on simplistic notions about caste-based voting. Expectations were defeated in Nagina, for example, where Dalit leader Chandrashekhar Azad won with a large margin against major parties' candidates, banking on the collapse of the BSP and on the inability of both SP and BJP to establish themselves as alternatives to many Dalit voters.

Candidates' Experience

Within the Uttar Pradesh battleground, much has been written about the Faizabad contest, where the Samajwadi Party candidate, Awadhesh Prasad, a Dalit, defeated BJP's incumbent candidate, two-time MP Lallu Singh. Beyond the symbolism of a Dalit challenger defeating an upper caste incumbent in a non-reserved seat, the contest bore added significance as the seat includes the town of Ayodhya, the site of a disputed land where a temple dedicated to Ram was inaugurated five months

earlier (Mashal, Kumar, & Loke, 2024).[9] Even though the outcome of this contest is the product of a complex interlocking of personal, partisan, local, and regional factors, it came to symbolize the confrontation of approaches between the two parties, with the Samajwadi Party reclaiming a plebeian role that the BJP had assumed in that state in recent years.[10] It also helped the Samajwadi Party to display its candidates' political experience.

However, an examination of other candidates suggests that Awadhesh Prasad, a nine-time MLA, six-time minister in four cabinets, founding party member, and a leading figure among the Pasi community, might have been an exception. For instance, 41 out of the Samajwadi Party's 66 candidates contested for the first time in a general election. Only 14 had been elected MLAs before, and only five of them contested as incumbent MLAs. Among the 25 candidates who had contested in a Lok Sabha election before, only six have been elected more than twice. In other words, beyond a nomination strategy skewed toward non-dominant groups, the Samajwadi Party candidates did not have remarkable features, such as extensive political experience, that might account for the party's success.

The turning of the tide in Uttar Pradesh contributed to the overall variation in group representations in the Lok Sabha. In 2024, the share of upper-caste MPs in the Hindi Belt has decreased from 38.9 to 32.7 percent, while the share of OBC MPs has increased from 25.7 to 31 percent. Intermediary Castes and Muslims' representation remains at 6 and 8.4 precent respectively. Within the Hindi belt, the changes come, for the most part, from Uttar Pradesh. Six additional OBC MPs were elected across other Hindi belt states, where the BJP also lost some ground.[11] Across these 10 states, upper-caste representation declined by 15 seats (from 82 to 67).

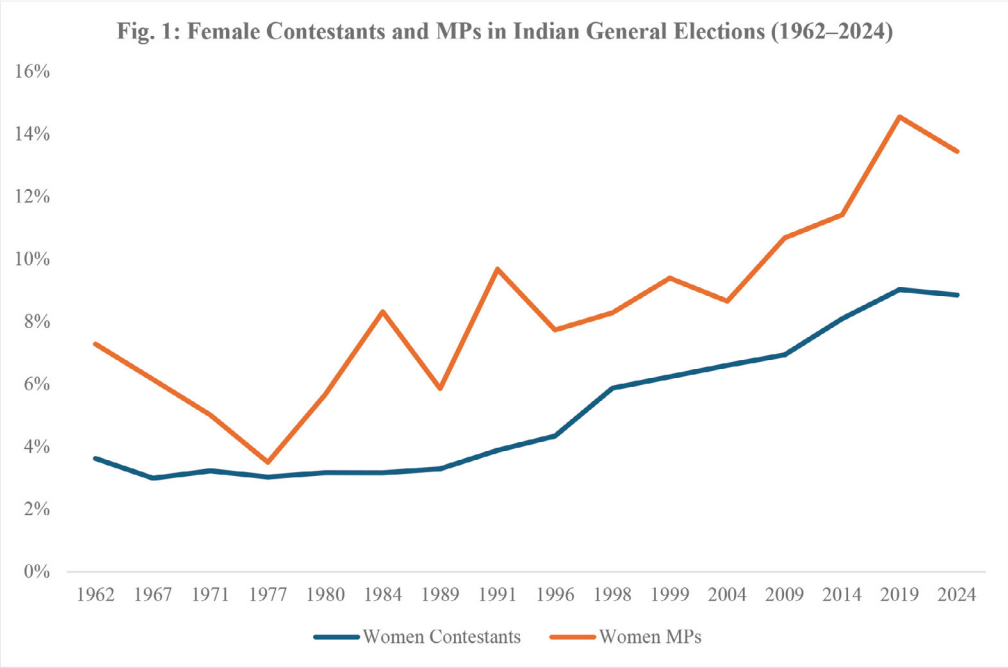
The Limits of Inclusion

The geographical limitation is not the only reason why the claims of inclusion of both alliances ought to be nuanced. There are at least four other significant caveats, including the continuing marginalization of women and Muslims by major parties, the ever-increasing cost of entry to politics—measured by the evolution of candidates' assets—and the fact that in many states, NDA and INDIA candidates' profiles remained undifferentiated.

A Declining Presence of Women in the Lok Sabha

Seventy-three women were elected in the 2024 election, six fewer than in 2019. For the first time since 1996, the share of women candidates and MPs has not increased. More women contested than in 2019 (740 against 727), but so did men.

Women comprised 16 percent of NDA candidates, against 13 percent of INDIA candidates. The ratio of women elected MPs from both alliances is identical. In 2019, women's representation increased due to the decision of two parties — the Trinamool and the



Source: SPINPER project

Table 9: Party-wise Women Nomination and Representation in the 2024 General Election

	Women Candidates	**Percentage of Women Candidates**	**Women MPs**	**Percentage Women MPs**
BJP	69	15.6	30	12.5
BJP Partners	16	15.8	4	8.7
NDA total	85	15.7	34	11.9
INC	41	12.5	13	13.1
INC Partners	35	14.1	11	10.7
INDIA Total	76	13.2	24	11.9
AITC	12	28.6	11	37.9
BJD	7	33.3	0	--
Other Major Non-Aligned Parties	58	8.4	4	33.3

Source: SPINPER project

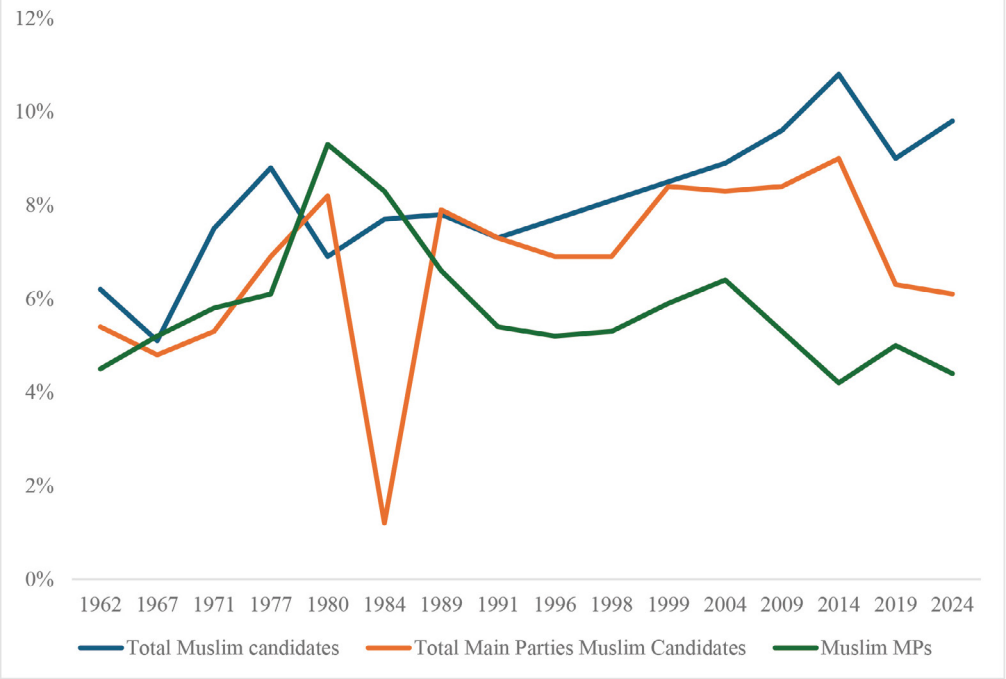
Biju Janata Dal — to allocate 40 percent and 33 percent of their tickets to women candidates (Verniers, Saran, & Sunaad, 2022). While the BJD maintained its commitment in 2024, the Trinamool reduced its number of women candidates. However, 11 women candidates from the Trinamool got elected against none for the BJD, who lost in every seat they contested to the BJP in Odisha.

Nominations are not the only way women find themselves politically marginalized. A majority of the 79 women elected in 2019 either lost or did not contest. There are only 17 women MPs who have been elected more than twice. A total of 44 of the 73 women elected in 2024 have been elected for the first time, indicating that it is tough for women to get nominated and to stay in politics.

Weak Muslims' Representation among Significant Opposition Parties

A similar observation can be made about Muslim representation and minority representation more broadly. While the opposition got a few Muslim candidates elected (21), their nomination rate decreased across parties compared to previous years (see Fig. 2). There are three fewer Muslim MPs in the 2024 Lok Sabha compared' to the previous election.

Fig. 2: Muslims' Nomination and Representation in the Lok Sabha



Source: SPINPER project

Congress and state-based parties drive the decrease in nominations, as the BJP has been consistently excluding Muslims. In 2019, the Congress and other state-based parties distributed respectively 8.3 and 10.3 percent of their tickets to Muslim candidates. In 2024, these numbers decrease to 5.7 and 8.8 percent respectively. Overall, the representation of religious minorities among state-based parties has reduced over the last three elections (see Table 10). More Muslim candidates contested than in 2019, but fewer on major party tickets.

Table 10: Muslims and other religious minorities' representation among major parties

	Religious Groups	**2009**	**2014**	**2019**	**2024**
INC	Muslims	32	33	35	19
	Other Religious Minorities	20	18	22	26
	Total candidates	438	464	421	328
	Percentage Minorities	12	11	14	14
BJP	Muslims	5	7	6	1
	Other Religious Minorities	3	6	8	11
	Total candidates	426	428	436	441
	Percentage Minorities	1.9	3.0	3.2	2.7
State-based Parties	Muslims	207	286	128	113
	Other Religious Minorities	22	47	34	34
	Total candidates	1476	2167	1234	1279
	Percentage Minorities	15.5	15.4	13.1	11.5

Source: SPINPER project

Within alliances, Congress distributed half of all tickets allocated to Muslims by INDIA (19). Only five of Congress' 21 partners included Muslims among their candidates. BJP, as we saw earlier, excluded Muslims from its list and barely offered representation to other religious minority groups. Its partners, too, exclude religious minorities.

State vs. National Trends

So far, I have focused on aggregate representation outcomes and the case of Uttar Pradesh. Comparing INDIA and NDA nomination patterns across states gives us a more precise idea of the differences between the two alliances. Considering 16 significant states, one sees that the skewed representation of the upper castes within the NDA holds

across most states. Barring Haryana, Jharkhand, and West Bengal, upper caste representation is significantly higher within the NDA. In West Bengal, they make 65 percent of their candidates, against 32 percent for INDIA.

Table 11: Caste Groups and Religious Minorities Representation among INDIA and NDA Candidates

	Alliance	**UC**	**OBC**	**IC**	**Religious Minorities**
Andhra Pradesh	INDIA		28.0	32.0	16.0
	NDA	4.0	28.0	48.0	
Assam	INDIA	14.3	21.4		28.6
	NDA	30.8	23.1		7.7
Bihar	INDIA	15.4	53.8		10.3
	NDA	35.3	55.9		2.9
Chhattisgarh	INDIA	8.3	41.7		
	NDA	45.5	9.1		
Delhi	INDIA	57.1	14.3		
	NDA	57.1	14.3	14.3	
Gujarat	INDIA	4.3	39.1	26.1	
	NDA	11.5	34.6	26.9	
Haryana	INDIA	40.0	20.0	20.0	
	NDA	30.0	20.0	30.0	
Jharkhand	INDIA	33.3	25.0		
	NDA	21.4	35.7		
Karnataka	INDIA		20.0	43.3	3.3
	NDA	10.7	17.9	46.4	
Kerala	INDIA	27.5	20.0		42.5
	NDA	40.0	40.0		10.0
Madhya Pradesh	INDIA	33.3	22.2	7.4	
	NDA	34.5	27.6	3.4	
Maharashtra	INDIA	4.2	22.9	50.0	2.1
	NDA	13.5	15.4	46.2	
Rajasthan	INDIA	20.0	16.0	28.0	
	NDA	36.0	8.0	28.0	
Tamil Nadu	INDIA	16.2	56.8	2.7	5.4
	NDA	15.4	61.5		2.6
Uttar Pradesh	INDIA	25.3	39.2	3.8	7.6
	NDA	45.1	29.3	3.7	
West Bengal	INDIA	31.8	4.5		27.3
	NDA	64.3	2.4		2.4

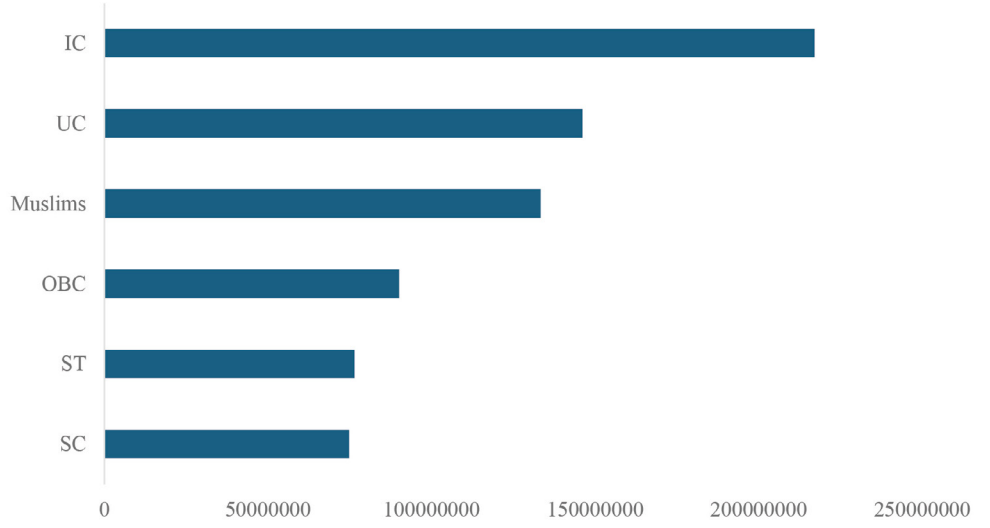
Source: SPINPER project

In states where intermediary castes dominate—Maharashtra, Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh—there is much less differentiation between the two alliances. Minority representation in those states tends to be low, even within the opposition alliance. Regarding OBC nominations, the differences between the two alliances are less marked. INDIA nominated more OBC candidates in seven states and a similar share of OBCs in seven other states. In other words, upper caste preference is a national trend for the NDA. Regarding other groups, the differences between the two alliances are less marked, other than for religious minority representation. The two alliances have much less differentiation in states where intermediary castes dominate.

Assets

Finally, the inclusiveness of the new Parliament is mitigated by the enduring elitist character of political recruitment, measured in personal wealth. Assets data provided by the Association for Democratic Reforms reveal that candidates in 2024 were, on average, wealthier than in 2019 (ADR, 2024); 504 of 543 MPs are self-declared crorepatis. Controlling for outliers, MPs declare, on average, 11.7 crore of net assets. There are important variations between caste groups. Intermediary caste MPs are significantly wealthier than all others, followed by Upper Castes and Muslim MPs. OBC, ST, and SC MPs trail behind.

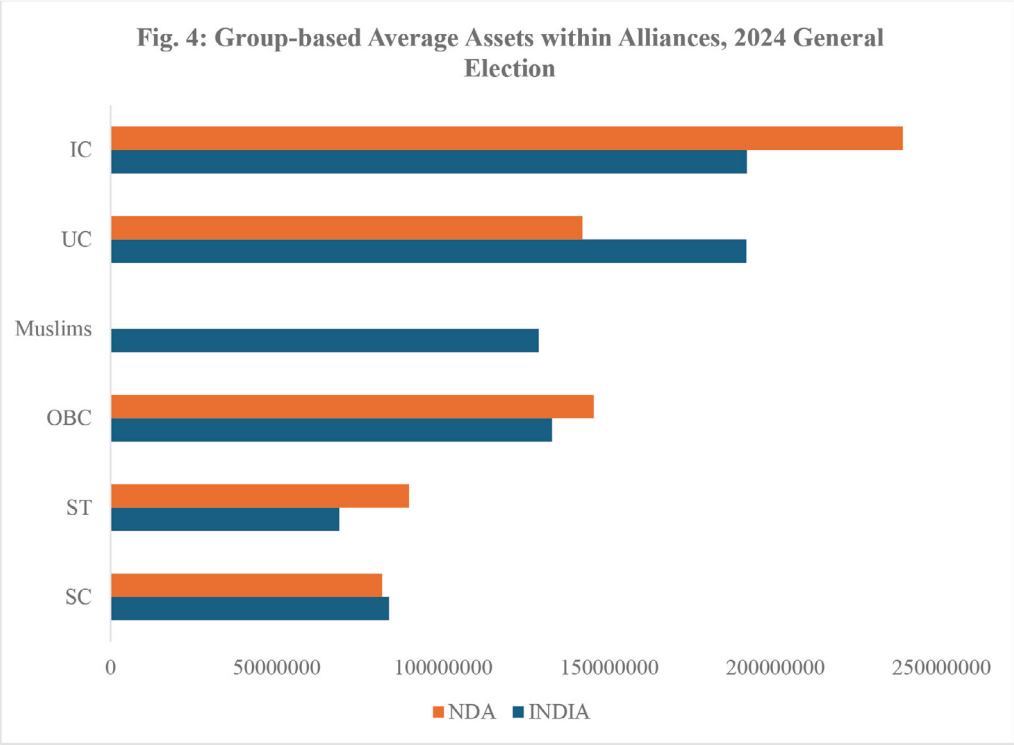
Fig. 3: Group-based MPs' Average of Net Assets, 2024 Lok Sabha



Source: Association for Democratic Reforms (*https://adrindia.org/*)

A simple cross-alliance and cross-parties analysis reveals that these variations hold within the two alliances, which do not differ much from one another. The NDA fielded wealthier intermediary caste candidates than INDIA.

The opposition alliance fielded fewer but richer upper-caste candidates than the NDA. These variations hold when one isolates Congress and BJP within their respective alliances.[12]



Source: Association for Democratic Reforms

Observations

This glance at the caste and community profile of the new Lok Sabha reveals a certain convergence in nomination practices between major parties. BJP, Congress, and their respective allies adopted a similar strategy of courting the more disadvantaged groups within the lower castes.

The two alliances, however, differ in two crucial aspects: upper caste preferentialism and inclusion of religious minorities. The diversification of backward class representation continues and is now embraced by more major parties. The two alliances differ regarding attitudes toward upper caste and religious minorities representation. While they lost the election, the INDIA alliance offered voters a more diverse and inclusive figure than its adversary. The nomination strategy adopted by Congress reveals a desire for transformation within a party that was historically skewed towards traditional elites and dominant groups. The nomination of a Dalit president in 2022, a campaign led by Rahul Gandhi on themes that used to belong to the socialist opposi-

tion to Congress, marks a desire to reinvent the party. These developments mark a significant transformation of India's representational politics, indicating that India is progressing towards a more representative polity.

That said, even the opposition alliance efforts remain limited by longstanding features of electoral politics that go against more meaningful forms and substance of political inclusion. Minority representation within non-NDA parties keeps decreasing, and so does the representation of women. Assets data reveals that competitive pressure still pushes parties to favor independently wealthy candidates. The changes are meaningful but limited to a few North Indian states. Political recruitment patterns in South, East, and Western India remain, by and large, unchanged and skewed towards locally dominant groups. Once again, the story of Uttar Pradesh has been unduly conflated into a national story.

The 2024 Indian general election reminds us that representational outcomes in Indian elections are a function of political parties' recruitment strategies and practices, which may or may not be aligned with the transformations of electoral behavior. Aggregate support numbers obfuscate the depth of variation that exists between and within states. Despite efforts to become more inclusive, elite bias in political recruitment persists.

Ultimately, caste was only one aspect of the 2024 campaign. While elections are fought on many other issues, caste remains central for candidate nomination strategies and as a differentiation tool between parties. The opposition insisted on caste, as the BJP maintains an ambiguous stance towards it. It opposes the use of caste as a policy variable—the caste census is a hot-button issue for its upper caste base—but cannot afford to discard it as a political tool since it also courts the votes of groups that are deeply attached to affirmative action and caste-based forms of social justice. Besides, the BJP now governs in a coalition with partners who do not share its uneasy relationship with caste.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Sharik Laliwala, Kiran Goud, Vignesh Karthik, and Nishant Ranjan for their contributions to caste data collection and verification, Vaidyanathan Ramany and his team at the Indian Institute of Management (Bangalore) for ECI candidate data collection, and Abhishek Jha, from *Hindustan Times*, for sharing ECI results for the 2024 general election. The author also thanks the organizers and participants of the Procida Conference on the 2024 Indian General elections, the 2024 election panel hosted by the Saxena Centre for Contemporary South Asia at Brown University, and the participants of the round table on the 2024 Indian General election held at the South Asia Conference, Madison, for

their comments and suggestions. This paper was funded through a grant from the Saxena Centre for Contemporary South Asia at Brown University. The Author declares no competing interest in the paper. Identifying election candidates' caste is a qualitative exercise. All efforts have been made to avoid misidentification through layers of verification, but errors remain possible.

Notes

1 According to the Lokniti 2024 post-poll survey, the all-India vote share of the BJP among Hindu upper caste voters has been 53 percent in 2024 and 2019, and 47 percent in 2014.

2 According to various Lokniti electoral surveys, OBC and Dalit support for the BJP has been increasing from 2014 onwards, with however strong regional variations and strong *jati*-level variations.

3 Intermediary Caste group mostly historically landowning agrarian castes such as Lingayats and Vokkaligas in Karnataka, Reddys, Kammas, and Kapus in Andhra Pradesh, Marathas in Maharashtra, and Jats across North India. Some of these castes are divided into various sub-groups that are at times officially classified in different caste categories, such as Lingayats, Marathas, and Patels. Jats are formally classified as OBCs in some states, like Uttar Pradesh and not in others. They have been classified as Intermediary Castes in the data, given their socio-economic profile.

4 Variations in the data for 2009–2019 come from updating and reducing the number of undefined entries in the data.

5 To address the issue of overlap of categories, MPs have been first sorted by religion and then by caste. Thus, Jat Sikhs have been classified as religious minorities rather than Intermediary Castes. Similarly, ST Christians and ST or SC Buddhist have been classified as religious minorities rather than as SCs or STs. As a result, the SC, ST and IC figures might be slightly under-estimated. This, however, concerns a handful of cases, unlikely to affect the overall interpretation of the data.

6 Alliances here comprise parties that allied either with BJP or Congress and had seat sharing agreements. These include 542 candidates who contested on an NDA ticket and excludes 29 RPI (A) candidates who contested outside seat sharing agreement in states other than Maharashtra. As far as INDIA is concerned, I have included 576 candidates contesting in three sets of seat-sharing agreements: INDIA, INDIA-Left Democratic Front and INDIA-United Democratic from in Kerala. This explains why the total of INDIA candidates (576) exceeds the total number of seats. This list excludes 207 candidates of INDIA-affiliated parties that contested outside seat-sharing agreements in states other than their state of origin. This includes for the most part various left or communist parties, and a few state-based and local parties.

7 Non-dominant OBC is a category more relevant to Northern India, where OBCs have been sorted according to differences in demography, status, and political representa-

tion. Thus, in northern India, dominant OBCs include Yadavs, Kurmis, and Gujjars. This does not preclude the fact that some non-dominant OBC groups may be dominant locally. The category used here is meant to have some transversal validity. Absence of sufficient jati-level data among SC candidates does not allow me to proceed to the same analysis among SC candidates, outside Uttar Pradesh.

8 In fact, BJP's upper caste candidates still had a better strike rate (45 percent) than its OBC and intermediary caste candidates (36 percent).

9 The Faizabad seat has also been a BJP stronghold since the early 1990s. Vinay Katiyar served three times as its MP, in 1991, 1996 and 1998. Lallu Singh was elected twice in 2014 and 2019.

10 For an excellent, detailed account of the Faizabad election, read Ghazala Jamil (2024).

11 The BJP lost 51 seats in the Hindi belt. Twenty-two of these seats were held by upper-caste MPs, against only seven by OBC MPs. Six IC MPs (Jats) also lost their seats. The influx of new non-dominant OBC MPs came mostly from the Samajwadi Party, which barely nominated any Yadav. In total, 29 OBC candidates were elected in Uttar Pradesh, against 22 in 2019.

12 This is not to suggest that there was no financial advantage for NDA candidates, who benefitted from the BJP's stark political funding's advantage. See Association for Democratic Reforms' reports on party funding declarations.

References

ADR (Association of Democratic Reforms). 2024. *Analysis of Criminal Background, Financial, Education, Gender and Other Details of Winning Candidates*.

Aiyar, Yamini. 2019. "Modi Consolidates Power: Leveraging Welfare Politics." *Journal of Democracy* 30 (4): 78–88. https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2019.0070.

Aiyar, Yamini. 2023. "Citizen vs Labharthi?" *The India Forum*. https://www.theindiaforum.in/public-policy/citizen-vs-labharthi.

Anand, Anuradha, Aashish Dimble, and Ankur Subramaniam. 2020. "New Welfarism of Modi Govt Represents Distinctive Approach to Redistribution and Inclusion." *The Indian Express*, December 22. https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/national-family-health-survey-new-welfarism-of-indias-right-7114104/.

The Hindu. 2024. "Caste Census Will Be the Foundation for Policy-Making: Rahul Gandhi." *The Hindu*, August 4. https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/caste-census-needed-for-90-people-sitting-out-of-system-rahul-gandhi/article68562543.ece.

Jaffrelot, Christophe. 2003. *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in*

North India. New York: Columbia University Press. http://www.loc.gov/catdir/toc/fy037/2002073707.html.

Jaffrelot, Christophe. 2019. "Class and Caste in the 2019 Indian Election—Why Do So Many Poor Have Started to Vote for Modi?" *Studies in Indian Politics* 7 (2): 149–60. https://doi.org/10.1177/2321023019874890.

Jaffrelot, Christophe, and Sanjay Kumar, eds. 2009. *Rise of the Plebeians? The Changing Face of Indian Legislative Assemblies*. London: Routledge.

Jamil, Ghazala. 2024. "The BJP's Paradoxical Defeat in Faizabad." *Scroll.in*. https://scroll.in/article/1068876/the-bjps-paradoxical-defeat-in-faizabad.

Mashal, Mujib, Hari Kumar, and Atul Loke. 2024. "In Ayodhya, Modi Opens Ram Temple in Triumph for Hindu Nationalists." *The New York Times*, January 22. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/22/world/asia/modi-india-ram-temple.html.

Mehta, Nalin. 2022. *The New BJP: Modi and the Making of the World's Largest Political Party*. Chennai: Westland Non-Fiction.

PTI. 2024. "Ensure Two-Thirds Majority for BJP in LS Polls to Get Constitution Amended, BJP MP Tells Public." *The Times of India*, March 10. https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/ensure-two-thirds-majority-for-bjp-in-ls-polls-to-get-constitution-amended-bjp-mp-tells-public/articleshow/108368669.cms.

Roy, Rathin. 2019. "A Tale of Two Disenchantments." *Business Standard*, March 5. https://www.nipfp.org.in/media/medialibrary/2019/03/BSTD_050319_jpZZrUT.pdf.

Singh, M. P. 2023. "Reservation for Economically Weaker Sections: The EWS Quota." *Social Change* 53 (1): 94–97. https://doi.org/10.1177/00490857221150969.

Verma, Vidya. 2023. "Taking the EWS Quota Seriously: Is It Fair and Just?" *Social Change* 53 (1): 98–107. https://doi.org/10.1177/00490857221151086.

Verniers, Gilles, and Christophe Jaffrelot. 2020. "The Reconfiguration of India's Political Elite: Profiling the 17th Lok Sabha." *Contemporary South Asia* 28 (2): 242–54. https://doi.org/10.1080/09584935.2020.1765984.

Verniers, Gilles, Ishika Saran, and Aishwarya Sunaad. 2022. "Women's Participation in Indian National Elections." *Seminar* 752. https://www.india-seminar.com/2022/752/752-GILLES_ISHIKA_AISHWARYA.htm.