

# The Backwards Turn Right in the Hindi Belt: Trajectories and Implications<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

In India, various social groups have long been seen as constituting and behaving as voting blocs. The social group officially known as Other Backward Classes (OBCs), has also been marked by preferential political choice in many parts of India for decades, leading to considerable restructuring and reconfiguration of party politics both at the national and state levels. One important aspect of this phenomenon has been the rise of state level parties, representing the “third space” in India’s democratic polity. Although political mobilization of OBCs around the issue of social justice fizzled out too early, a few state-level parties arising out of the social justice movement continued to receive support from sections of OBCs and did well electorally. But, of late, a new trend seems to have set in. This paper, based on empirical evidence culled from National Election Studies (NES)<sup>2</sup> (post-poll surveys) conducted by Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, demonstrates that at least in the Hindi belt, OBCs have shifted toward the BJP in a big way, making it the largest recipient of their votes. The paper argues that the drift of sections of OBCs away from social justice parties and toward the BJP has been multi-layered and incremental rather than accidental in nature and that the 2014 Lok Sabha (LS) election was the tipping point. Not only has the new trajectory of political behavior of OBCs introduced a new phase of political competition and reconfiguration, it appears to have created deep existential crisis for social justice parties.

**Keywords:** backwards, constituency, Hindi belt, mobilization, OBCs, political choice, political restructuring, social group, social justice, state-level parties, support base, voting behavior

# **El giro hacia atrás a la derecha en el cinturón hindú: trayectorias e implicaciones**

## **RESUMEN**

En India, varios grupos sociales han sido vistos desde hace mucho tiempo como constituyentes y se comportan como bloques de votación. El grupo social, oficialmente conocido como Otras clases atrasadas (OBC), también ha estado marcado por la elección política preferencial en muchas partes de la India durante décadas, lo que lleva a una considerable reestructuración y reconfiguración de la política de los partidos, tanto a nivel nacional como estatal. Un aspecto importante de este fenómeno ha sido el surgimiento de partidos a nivel estatal, que representan el “tercer espacio” en la política democrática de la India. Aunque la movilización política de los OBC en torno al tema de la justicia social fracasó demasiado pronto, algunos partidos a nivel estatal que surgieron del movimiento de justicia social continuaron recibiendo el apoyo de secciones de los OBC y obtuvieron buenos resultados electorales. Pero, últimamente, parece haberse establecido una nueva tendencia. Este documento, basado en evidencia empírica obtenida de los Estudios Nacionales de Elección (encuestas posteriores a la encuesta) realizados por el Centro para el Estudio de las Sociedades en Desarrollo, demuestra que al menos en el cinturón hindú Los OBC se han desplazado hacia el BJP a lo grande, convirtiéndolo en el mayor receptor de sus votos. El documento argumenta que la deriva de secciones de OBC fuera de los partidos de justicia social y hacia el BJP ha sido de varias capas y de naturaleza incremental en lugar de accidental, y que la elección Lok Sabha 2014 fue el punto de inflexión. La nueva trayectoria de comportamiento político de los OBC no solo ha introducido una nueva fase de competencia política y reconfiguración, sino que parece haber creado una profunda crisis existencial para los partidos de justicia social.

**Palabras clave:** hacia atrás, circunscripción, cinturón hindú, movilización, OBC, elección política, reestructuración política, grupo social, justicia social, partidos a nivel estatal, base de apoyo, comportamiento electoral

# 印度教环带的落后群体转向右翼：轨迹与意义

## 摘要

在印度，不同社会群体长期以来被视为组成和表现为投票联盟。官方名称为“其他落后阶层”（OBCs）的社会团体几十年来在印度诸多地区以偏好性党派选择为特征，导致国家和各邦层面的党派政治发生大量重组。该现象的一个重要方面是邦级党派的崛起，代表印度民主政体中的“第三空间”。尽管OBCs在社会正义议题上的政治动员过早失败，一些邦级党派却从社会正义运动中崛起，继续获得OBCs各阶层的支持，并在选举中表现不错。然而，近期一个新趋势似乎来临。本文基于由发展中社会研究中心进行的国家选举研究（选举后调查）所收集的实证证据，证明了至少在印度教环带的OBCs已经大幅转向印度人民党（BJP），后者是其投票的最大受益者。本文论证认为，OBCs不同阶层从倾向社会正义党派转向BJP的趋势是具备多个层次的，渐进式的，而不是偶然发生，并且2014年人民院选举是转折点。OBCs政治行为的新轨迹不仅引入了一个关于政治竞争与政治重组的新阶段，还似乎已为社会正义党派制造了深度生存危机。

**关键词：**落后群体，选民，印度教环带，动员，其他落后阶层（OBCs），政治选择，政治重组，社会群体，社会正义，邦级党派，支持基地，投票行为

## Introduction

In India, various social groups have long been seen as constituting and behaving as electoral blocs. For decades, the social group labeled as Other Backward Classes (OBCs) also appeared to behave as vote bank<sup>3</sup> in many parts of India. The emergence of this phenomenon in the early 1990s, especially in India's two most populous states—Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (UP)—led to a considerable restructuring of

party politics and the reconfiguration of political class and ruling elites.<sup>4</sup> At one level, it helped dismantle dominance of the Indian National Congress (Congress) in the electoral arena. At other level, it obstructed the rise of the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) as the alternative to Congress. Yet at another level, it gave rise to new political formations that represented the “third space” in India's democratic polity. Powered by the support of a wide section, if not the majority, of OBCs, parties such as

Rashtriya Janta Dal (RJD) in Bihar and the Samajwadi Party (SP) in UP ruled in their respective states for years.

Of late, these parties, often referred to as social justice parties, appear to have lost their hold on one of their core constituencies of support, that is, the OBCs. As a result, the parties have suffered so much so in successive elections in recent years that they appear to be facing a deep existential crisis. The decline of social justice parties such as RJD and the SP coincided with the phenomenal rise of the BJP. Given the relative size of OBCs in the Hindi belt, much of the BJP's recent outstanding electoral performance is attributed, and rightly so, to huge support coming from OBCs. But given the BJP's primary base of support (the forward castes) and its ideological unease with caste-based affirmative action, its ability to cut into a huge chunk of OBC votes raises many important questions. Did OBCs ever constitute a politically cohesive group, at least in the Hindi belt, if not nationally? If they did, even to some extent, why could they not hold together? Conversely, how has the BJP been able to garner so much support from the OBCs? What does the shift in political preference of OBCs imply for so-called social justice parties?

This paper aims to address these questions. To this end, India's Hindi belt is chosen as the site of the study. For a nuanced understanding, the focus is further narrowed down to two states—Bihar and UP—mainly for five reasons. First and foremost, the relative share of OBCs in the overall population of the

two states is far greater than the national average. According to latest estimates, OBCs account for about 62.6 percent and 54.5 percent of the total population of Bihar and UP, respectively, in comparison to 44 percent in the country as a whole (NSSO 2011–2012). Second, the two states were the epicenter of intense political mobilization of OBCs in the late 1980s and early 1990s under the banner of social justice. Third, the two states also saw the rise of parties whose political agenda, policies, and programs gave clear preference to the promotion and protection of this group's interests, which consists of a broad range of castes. Fourth, in spite of the deeply entrenched politics of social justice in the two states, the BJP has, in recent years, made both wide and deep cuts into OBC votes. Fifth, about a quarter of parliamentary constituencies are located here. Given this, the party that performs well in these two states also controls power at the Centre. Put another way, the outcomes of parliamentary elections in these two states tend to play an important role in shaping the national political discourse and exert substantial influence on party politics at the national level.

The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The following section takes a quick look at how the notion of OBCs has been shaped historically. It is followed by a discussion on the political mobilization of OBCs in the Hindi belt. The paper then proceeds to analyze changing political preferences among OBCs and the underlying factors and political meanings. The final section concludes the discussion.

## I. Other Backward Classes: Multiple and Shifting Meanings

O riginating in the late nineteenth century, the term “Backward Classes” (BCs) has been marked by multiple and shifting meanings.<sup>5</sup> By Independence, it had a variety of referents across politico-spatial contexts, and therefore had come to mean different things in different places. For instance, Galanter traces at least ten usages of BCs: (i) as a synonym for Depressed Classes, Untouchables, and Scheduled Castes (SCs); (ii) as comprising the untouchables, aboriginal and hill tribes, criminal tribes, etc.; (iii) as comprising all communities deserving special treatment; (iv) as comprising all non-tribal (Hindu) communities deserving special treatment; (v) as comprising all communities deserving special treatment except the untouchables; (vi) as comprising the lower strata of non-untouchable communities; (vii) as comprising all communities above the untouchables but below the most “advanced” communities; (viii) as comprising the non-untouchable communities who were “backward” in comparison to the highest castes; (ix) as comprising all communities other than the highest or most advanced; and (x) as comprising all persons who meet given non-communal tests of backwardness (e.g., low income).<sup>6</sup>

The Constituent Assembly (CA) debated the questions of what constituted backwardness and who the Backward Classes were but failed to settle the term “BCs” unlike those of “SCs” and “Scheduled Tribes” (STs). Eventually, the Con-

stitution left the matter with the executive at the state level, with an option for the Centre to unify it.<sup>7</sup> Following this, several states, using varying methods, mechanisms, and criteria, created such a category for the first time and conferred benefits to those who belonged to it.<sup>8</sup> With the listing of SCs/STs being already done, the category of OBCs had now widely come to mean (a) those who needed special treatment and (b) a social stratum higher than untouchables but nevertheless depressed. In brief, the term lacked a definite meaning at the national level. Neither was there any exclusive method nor any particular agency for their determination.

As early as 1951, judicial interventions brought the issue to the center stage.<sup>9</sup> In response, the central government appointed the first Backward Class Commission in 1953. It was directed to “determine the criteria to be adopted in considering whether any section of the people ... (in addition to the Scheduled Castes and Tribes ...) should be treated as *socially and educationally* backward classes; and, in accordance with such criteria to prepare a list of such classes.”<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, the Commission came up with a list of 2399 groups and sub-groups as socially and educationally backward classes (SEBCs). In determining SEBCs, the Commission took into account secular criteria, comprising a variety of social and economic indicators, in order to measure backwardness, which were used to rank groups/sub-groups, not individuals. The Commission’s report generated controversies and sparked debates. Kaka Kalelkar, the Chairman

of the Commission, himself was doubtful of the whole exercise. Nor were its recommendations accepted by the central government. In effect, the question of who constituted OBCs again reverted to the states.<sup>11</sup>

In the following years, as we shall see in the following section, political pressure continued to build up, particularly in Bihar and UP, for preparing central master list of OBCs. But the issue made a comeback to the national political agenda only when the Janta Party-led government was formed at the Centre in 1977. A new Backward Classes Commission with B.P. Mandal as its Chairman (henceforward, the Mandal Commission) was appointed in 1978. For determining backwardness among Hindus, the Commission considered caste-based social backwardness as the crucial element, educational backwardness as the linked element, and economic backwardness as the derived element.<sup>12</sup> For identifying OBCs among non-Hindus, it evolved rough and ready criteria: (a) all untouchables converted to any non-Hindu religion and (b) such occupational communities that are known by the name of the name of their traditional hereditary occupation and where Hindu counterparts have been included in the list of other backward classes.<sup>13</sup> The Commission in its report, submitted in 1980, listed 3743 groups/sub-groups all over India as OBCs and recommended central action for them with regard to reservation. As the Janta Party-led government collapsed too early and the new government formed by Congress was barely interested in

this project,<sup>14</sup> the Commission's report gathered dust until 1992, when the National Front (NF) government at the center announced that it would implement some of the report's recommendations.

While this particular decision was enmeshed in the political dynamics internal to the NF government,<sup>15</sup> a few points regarding who made up the list of OBCs are worth noting. First, the category of OBCs consisted of a wide array of caste groups/sub-groups for preferential treatment, but it lacked centrally identifiable systemic characteristics, such as social segregation and spatial isolation, as found in the case of SCs and STs, respectively. Second, while most of these groups (listed as OBCs) comprised those having been at the lower rungs of the traditional Hindu social order situated just above the ex-untouchables—in short, non-twice-born castes<sup>16</sup>—many (mostly landowning middle peasantry) had actually risen economically and educationally and also enjoyed high status in the local social space. And yet, many non-twice-born (peasantry) castes, such as Jats, Patidars, and Marathas, to mention only a few, were excluded.

In sum, the social category of what is now known as OBCs is nothing but a constellation of castes/communities marked by a lack of universally identifiable systemic characteristics and characterized by vast inter- and intra-caste disparities along multiple axes—social, educational, and economic.

## II. Political Mobilization

Political mobilization of the OBCs has taken place differentially across time and space, and through different routes. In the southern part of India, it took a definite shape much earlier than in the rest of India.<sup>17</sup> Even within the Hindi belt (Bihar, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh [MP], Rajasthan, and UP) it took place to varying degrees. For instance, states like MP and Rajasthan had been marked by the absence of backward castes movements worth the name in spite of their substantial presence.<sup>18</sup> Instead, Bihar and UP became the epicenter of political mobilization of the backward castes. Even so, mobilization of the backward castes in these two states took place in phases and through different routes.

In UP, leaders like Ram Manohar Lohia, Chaudhury Charan Singh, and Kanshi Ram made efforts to mobilize the backwards castes/communities in the 1960s. The mobilization of these castes/communities took place through two routes—social justice and peasant movements. Lohia, for instance, advocated 60 percent reservation in public employment for BCs, religious minorities, and SCs/STs. In the 1970s, Kanshi Ram carried the social justice movement forward and made strenuous efforts to unite the entire spectrum of the subaltern castes (*Bahujan Samaj*). Charan Singh, on the other hand, mobilized non-upper caste peasant communities such as Jats and Yadavs. Even when he was Revenue Minister in charge of land reforms in the Congress government in UP, Charan Singh claimed to have

promoted the interests of the middle peasantry by abolishing the zamindari system.<sup>19</sup>

In Bihar too, the fusion of quota and peasant politics undergirded the political mobilization of the backward castes. There were deep-rooted movements against the iniquitous distribution of land and the exploitative agrarian system.<sup>20</sup> While the Congress regime seemingly quelled the demands of the backward castes by abolishing the zamindari system early on (in 1949) and subsequently undertaking a number of legislative measures aimed at land reforms between the 1950s and 1960s, the former Zamindars found a number of ways to retain large proportions of their land that were to be acquired as surplus land. Withholding all limitations, the Land Reform Laws since 1948 had, nevertheless, transferred ownership rights in vast areas of land to the upper stratum of the backward castes, mainly Yadavs, Koeris, and Kurmis. This gave them the strength to ask for a larger share in political, economic, and educational opportunities.<sup>21</sup> By the late 1960s, they began to assert themselves politically and pushed for reservation in public employment. It gave further impetus to their mobilization under the umbrella of “backwards.” Intense political mobilization of these vastly heterogeneous caste/communities and their shift, especially after the end of the Emergency in 1977, toward non-Congress parties, the Janta Party in particular, not only effectively challenged the hegemony of the Congress Party, but also brought about changes in the social profile of political elites in the state. For instance,

the proportion of forward caste MLAs to MLAs elected from general seats came down from 59.0 percent in 1962 to 48.6 percent in 1977. Further, the proportion of backward castes ramped up from 30.5 percent to 38.5 percent.<sup>22</sup>

Political mobilization of backward castes/classes in the Hindi belt, more so in Bihar and UP, entered a new phase in the 1980s. Now the mobilization centered on the demand to implement Mandal Commission's recommendations that included, among other things, 27 percent reservation for OBCs in public employments. Violent protests and agitations by the supporters and opponents of the new reservation regime were unleashed in many parts of the Hindi belt. The agitators again occupied the streets when the Janata Dal (JD) led government at the Centre announced implementation of some of the Mandal Commission's recommendations. The emerging situation placed political parties, namely Congress and the BJP, in a real quandary. For the BJP, it seemed to shatter its attempts at Hindu unity. But given its core base of support, the forward castes, the party found it extremely difficult to openly support the new reservation regime. Congress's approach was also marked by ambiguities and somersaults, as in the past.<sup>23</sup>

To sum up, the Mandalization of politics, especially since the late 1980s, created a definite socio-political cleavage between the backward and forward castes in greater part of the Hindi belt. In Bihar and UP, such a cleavage got deeply entrenched, leading to the rise of a new set of ruling elites, consisting of and dominated by the backward castes.

### **III. Changing Political Preference**

**W**hile the political mobilization of the backward castes around the issue of social justice dominated the national political discourse in the 1990s, an all India "OBC Vote" with marked proclivity toward one particular party did not emerge. In many studies, it has been shown that OBCs tended to vote differently in different spatio-political contexts,<sup>24</sup> implying that the notion of OBCs as a politically cohesive group is a myth. Given the uneven and differential political mobilization of the backward castes across time and space, as noted in the preceding section, this line of argument holds some substance. But the fact remains that a large subset, if not a majority, of OBCs—at least in the Hindi belt—threw weight behind those parties arising out of the social justice movement and thereby put national-level parties, such as Congress and the BJP, in their place.

Let us, therefore, look at the trajectories of voting behavior of OBCs in the Hindi belt. The discussion presented in this section is based on rich datasets generated by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies under the National Election Studies (NES) Series (post-poll surveys).<sup>25</sup> Table 1 presents the trends and patterns of political preference among OBCs in the Lok Sabha (LS) elections. Four points emerge quite clearly. First, the national parties—Congress and the BJP—received significant chunk of votes from the late 1990s through 2009. During this period, the

vote share of Congress among OBCs was fairly stabilized within the range of 22–25 percent. As for the BJP, its vote share among OBCs was slightly higher than Congress's, oscillating between 23 percent and 31 percent. In brief, the BJP's vote share among OBCs was more in flux than Congress's was. Second, except for a slight dip in 1999, state-level parties received votes of a large subset, if not majority, of OBC votes (40–43 percent) until 2009. Third, the 2014 LS elec-

tion appeared to be a watershed moment as the BJP left all other parties behind in terms of vote share among OBCs and continued to maintain its lead over the other parties in 2019. Fourth, the BJP is now the single largest recipient of OBC votes, not only by taking away votes from state-level parties, but also from Congress. In other words, the shift in political preferences among OBCs since 2014 has been unidirectional.

Table 1: Political Preference among OBCs: Hindi Belt

LS Election	OBCs voted for				N
	Congress	BJP	State-Level Parties	Others	
1996	22	31	40	7	1022
1999	25	27	35	13	3476
2004	22	29	40	9	3870
2009	22	23	43	12	5202
2014	17	42	36	5	3713
2019	15	45	27	13	4533

Notes:

1. Hindi Belt consists of the following states: Bihar, Jharkhand, Haryana, Delhi, UP, Uttrakhand, Chhattisgarh, MP, and Rajasthan.
2. OBCs include those groups among Hindus who are listed as such in the state list of OBCs.
3. Others are Independents.

Source: NES, respective years.

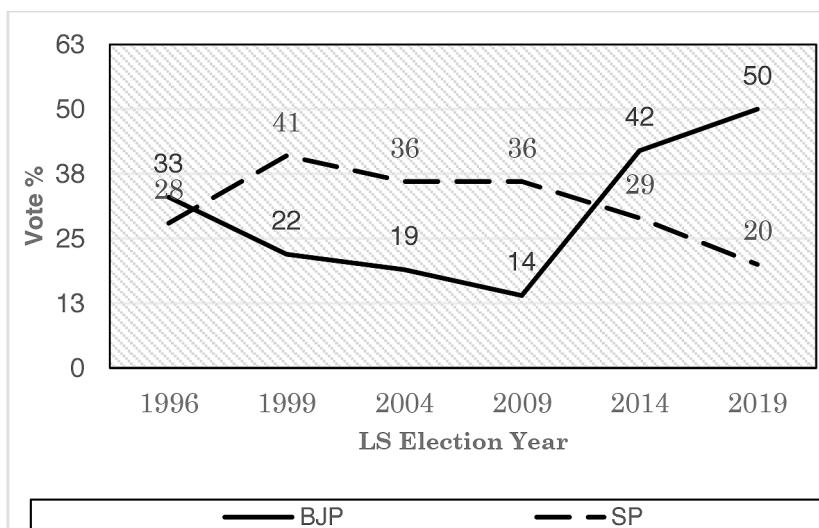
It thus appears that relatively a large section of OBCs preferred state-level parties and for quite some time in the Hindi belt, and that only recently, have they shifted toward the BJP in a big way. However, the story of the BJP's rising support and falling of state-level parties out of favor among OBCs in the Hindi Belt as a whole does

not reveal much. For one thing, many states in this region are characterized by bipolar elections, in which the BJP has long been one of the main contenders (e.g., MP, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Rajasthan). Viewed thus, it would be interesting to look at the observed shift in political preferences among OBCs in the states where there are state-leve-

el parties with a stronger base among OBCs. Bihar and UP present themselves as a fit case for this purpose.

As is evident in Figure 1, the BJP in UP had a considerable base of support among OBCs, with little edge over the SP in the early 1990s. Recall that the early 1990s were the period where the movement for Ram Mandir at Ayodhya (in UP) reached its peak and the BJP was at the forefront of it. Thereafter, the party's support base among OBCs began to decline and continued

till 2009, by which point its vote share among OBCs had plummeted to 14 percent. But in the 2014 LS election, the BJP's vote share shot up to 42 percent, far greater than what it used to be at the height of Ram Mandir movement. Its spectacular performance among OBCs was, however, not a one-off incident, as the party sustained the momentum in the 2019 LS election to corner about half the total OBC votes, a feat never achieved (at least in LS elections) even by the SP (Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Vote Share of BJP and SP among OBCs (UP)

Note: Figures are weighed by actual vote share of BJP in the respective state and rounded off at the cut-off point 0.5

Source: NES, respective years

The BJP's increasing gains have meant a substantial loss for SP as the latter, relative to other parties, enjoyed a large base of support among OBCs. Although the SP had begun to lose part of its OBC votes after 1999, it continued to receive more OBC votes than any other party until 2009. This helped the party

in large measure maintain its lead over other parties in terms of both overall vote and seat share in the state. But the LS election held in 2014 marked an end to SP's relative advantage among OBCs. In many ways, the 2014 LS election was a reversal of the 1999 LS election. In terms of vote share among OBCs, the

BJP in 2014 received almost the same proportion of OBC votes as the SP had done in 1999. In 1999, the SP pushed the BJP way behind and become the largest beneficiary of OBC votes. In 2014, the BJP turned the tables, and did even better in 2019 to lower the SP's vote share among OBCs to one-fifth, the lowest ever since 1999.

In Bihar, the story is slightly different and a bit more complicated. Here, RJD had a much stronger base of support among OBCs than the SP in UP, as evident in Figure 2. Unlike the SP in UP, RJD's vote share among OBCs (44 percent), as the post-poll survey data suggests, was double that of the BJP in the 1999 LS election. RJD suffered a jolt in 1999 as its vote share came down to 33 percent. One of the reasons for this was the division of votes between RJD and its parent party (JD) from which it had only recently broken away.<sup>26</sup> With this, the gap between RJD and the BJP was reduced considerably, although the latter's vote share among OBCs increased only marginally (from 20 percent to 22 percent). But RJD bounced back in the next LS election held in 2004 to prove its obituary writers wrong. By being able to cause a huge swing in its favor, the party attained almost the same level of support among OBCs as in 1996. In contrast, the BJP witnessed a steep fall in its vote share among OBCs.

The 2004 LS election can be regarded as an important reference point in the context of electoral politics in Bihar for two reasons. One, it turned out to be high watermark in terms of RJD's vote shares among OBCs in the post-1990s era. Despite being in alliance with

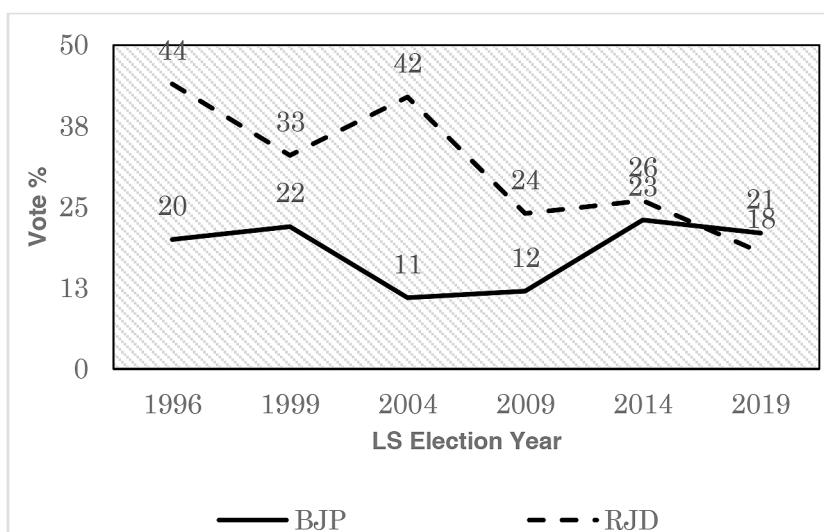
the JD (U), the BJP's vote share among OBCs touched the lowest ever mark. Two, for RJD, it also proved as the point of no return. In the subsequent 2009 LS election, as can be seen in Figure 2, RJD's support among OBCs appeared to fall off a cliff and continued to move downward. The BJP, on the other hand, gradually expanded its support base among OBCs to narrow down the gap between it and RJD. Eventually the time came in the 2019 LS election when the former nudged out the latter.

While the BJP has been able to make inroads into OBCs, it still appears to remain far from making an impact as wide and deep as it did in UP. A major, if not the sole reason, has been the presence of yet another popular backward caste leader (Nitish Kumar) heading yet another backward-based party – the Samata Party, later rechristened as JD (U). The BJP has been in alliance with the JD (U), except in the 2014 LS election, since the early years of the latter's formation. Over the years, Nitish Kumar has been successful in placing his party as an alternative choice for a large section of OBCs.<sup>27</sup> In short, the JD (U), being a critically important constituent of Bihar's political ecosystem, prevented the BJP from making as much of a dent among OBCs as it did in UP.

The BJP's success in Bihar in terms of cutting into the OBC bloc as a whole may not appear to be as huge as in the neighboring state of UP, but if we scratch the surface, the party seems to have gained astounding ground where it could and should have made it, that is, among the lower OBCs (an expression often used to refer to OBCs minus

Yadavs, Koeris, and Kurmis). The party received, as evidence indicates, a whopping 53 percent of votes of the lower OBCs in the 2014 LS election.<sup>28</sup> This is what makes BJP's position enviable and the politics around OBCs quite interesting in the state. There are at least three reasons for it: (a) the BJP received this much support even without allying with the JD (U); (b) the lower OBCs constitute a large socio-political constituency, accounting for nearly 30 percent of total population (based on survey

estimate); and (c) the lower OBCs, by virtue of demographic weight coupled with a tendency to vote for a particular party in a big way, exert tremendous influence on the poll outcomes. With the forward castes solidly behind, the BJP, by taking away the largest slice of lower OBC votes, was able to swing the poll outcomes in its favor in the 2014 LS election. It is therefore not surprising if the BJP has refused to play second fiddle in the NDA alliance.



**Figure 2:** Vote Share of the BJP and RJD among OBCs (Bihar)

Note: Figures are weighed by actual vote share of BJP and RJD in the state and rounded

Source: NES, respective years

#### IV. Explaining the Drift

What accounts for the drift of a wide section of OBCs away from the social justice parties and largely towards the BJP, at least in Bihar and UP? A host of factors seems to have been at work. The first set

of factors is largely internal to the group and the parties professedly representing it. First and foremost, as the parties championing the cause of the backward castes became rooted in power, they began to be afflicted with many ills. At one level, these parties began to be captured

by a few groups at the forefront of mobilization of the backward castes.<sup>29</sup> They appeared to use these parties for their own political ascendency. For instance, the share of Yadavs and Kurmis in the OBC Members of Parliament (MPs) by the end of the 1990s grew so much so that each of these castes happened to represent about one-third of the OBC MPs in North India.<sup>30</sup> As leaders like Mulayam Singh Yadav and Lalu Prasad Yadav became deeply entrenched in power their parties and governments, more and more looked to be identified with Yadavs. Not only did the Yadavs dominate positions at every level of the party structure, but they also began to do so in the state bureaucracy.<sup>31</sup> The growing phenomenon of yadavization in these two parties generated tension and irked the leaders of caste groups as dominant as the Yadavs.<sup>32</sup> They raised the banner of revolt. In Bihar, Nitish Kumar, an influential leader from the Kurmi caste (an upwardly mobile backward caste), broke away and founded his own party. Similar developments also took place in UP, as leaders like Sone Lal Patel and Veni Prasad Verma (both belonging to the Kurmi caste) left the SP. Thus, the tension within and between the upper crust of the backward castes marked the first wave of drift of OBCs away from RJD and the SP. Although Kurmis and Koeris broke away early, sections of the most backward castes, also referred to as lower OBCs, stayed with the social justice parties for some time. But for a variety of reasons, a few of which are pointed out below, they too began to desert these parties after 2004 (Table 2).

**Table 2: Declining Vote Share of RJD and the SP among Lower OBCs**

LS Elections	RJD*	SP**
1996	37	15
1999	30	26
2004	38	27
2009	12	25
2014	10	13
2019	11	18

Notes:

All figures are in percent (rounded) and weighted by actual vote share of the respective parties.

\* RJD's figures, including allies, are for Bihar only. The 1996 figure refers to JD, as RJD came into existence in 1998.

\*\* SP's figures, including allies, are for UP only.

Source: NES, respective years

At another level, these parties also appeared to behave as family enterprises, as top positions in the party were reserved for family members of the leaders who controlled the party.<sup>33</sup> This phenomenon affected these parties in ways more than one. At one level, blocking of mobility within the party structures did not go well, even with leaders of the same caste as that of the party patriarch, as many felt that they would not rise to the top no matter how hard they worked for the party. This led to exit of many leaders, including those belonging to the same caste that the party patriarchs hailed from. Most of these leaders joined the opposite camp. Worse still, the war of succession within the extended families of the party patriarchs struck the underbelly of these parties. The party patriarchs' blatant preference for their own sons alienated

other politically active and experienced members of the extended family. As a matter of fact, family feud over leadership transition came out in the open as news headlines. Yet at another level, it created leadership crisis as politically novice second-generation leadership (the dynasts) miserably failed to fill the void caused by the departure of party patriarchs and politically experienced members of the extended family from organizational control. All this created disenchantment and divisions even in the primary base of support, that is, fellow caste men and women. As a result, a section of fellow caste men and women also began to drift away.

**Table 3:** Declining Vote Share of RJD and the SP among Yadavs

LS Elections	RJD	SP
1996	81	53
1999	76	82
2004	68	72
2009	65	73
2014	64	53
2019	61	60

**Notes:**

All figures are in percent (rounded) and weighted by actual vote share of the respective parties.

\* RJD's figures, including allies, are for Bihar only. The 1996 figure refers to JD, as RJD came into existence in 1998.

\*\* SP's figures, including allies, are for UP only.

Source: NES, respective years

The analysis of evidence thus suggests that the drift of OBCs away from social justice parties has been

incremental rather than accidental in nature. It has come off bit-by-bit and layer-by-layer, rather than entire bloc drifting together.

The second set of internal factors relate to the dynamics of the social justice movement. After the goal of reservation was attained, the backward castes-led parties failed to reinvent or broaden the agenda of social justice—the idea of reservation in the private sector for instance. They were rather increasingly being seen as aligning with the capitalist class—the industrialists and big businesses.<sup>34</sup> In brief, once the long and hard struggle for reservation came to fruition and the forward castes reconciled with this, the glue of reservation disappeared.<sup>35</sup> Put another way, many backward castes/classes would not now feel the necessity of voting for a particular party.

There was yet another reason why the social justice movement and its product—the quota in public employment—would not work as durable glue to hold the group together. It is well known that by design, group-based reservation does not benefit all members or constituents of the beneficiary group equally. It is to largely benefit those relatively resourceful and educationally advanced within the beneficiary group. Hence, as the policy of reservation was implemented, its benefits reached different caste groups (within the OBCs) differentially, due to vast differences in their educational attainment and resource base. The rhetoric of reservation would, therefore, no longer appeal to those left out in the cold.

While the factors internal to the group played their part in diluting the politics of backward castes, the BJP's calibrated strategy to woo sections of OBCs augmented its decline. First and foremost, the BJP revived the rhetoric of Hindu unity by revising its stand on the issue of reservation. The party, through various platforms and channels, sent the message that it was not opposed to reservation for OBCs and that the verdict of the highest court on this issue was fully acceptable to it. To demonstrate this, the party supported the demand of Jats for OBC status in Rajasthan and Western UP. Second, the BJP made strenuous efforts to engineer a split among OBCs by working on the lower OBCs. It consistently brought to the fore the fact that parties that claimed to espouse their cause and promote their interests had actually betrayed them. To sharpen the rift, the party advocated for quota within quota for the lower OBCs. To this end, for example, the BJP government of UP headed by Rajnath Singh brought a law to fix a quota for the most backwards within the OBCs. The SP vehemently opposed this, as it saw in this move an attempt to divide the OBCs as a group.<sup>36</sup> In recent years, attempts have been made to sub-categorize OBCs at the national level.

Third, the BJP intensified its drive to use social engineering through two routes. First, it began giving greater representation to lower OBCs in party positions and in the distribution of tickets. In UP, for example, Kalyan Singh was first made the party president and later on the chief minister of state. He was regarded as the architect of the

BJP's strategy of relative Mandalization in the state.<sup>37</sup> To bring the Kurmis and Koeris into its fold, the BJP appointed Keshav Prasad Maurya, hailing from the Kushwaha community, as the state party president in 2016. After the BJP won the 2016 assembly election, he was made one of the deputy chief ministers. In 2019, another OBC leader, Swantana Dev Singh, was made the party chief.

In Bihar too, important party positions were given to backward caste leaders. For instance, Nand Kishore Yadav was appointed party president of the state unit in 1998. Prem Kumar, a Kurmi leader, was made the leader of opposition in the Bihar Legislative Assembly in 2015. In 2016, Nitaynand Rai was given the position of state party president in spite of resistance from a quarter of forward castes leaders within the party.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, the BJP's attempt to woo OBCs came into play when Narendra Modi was declared the party's prime ministerial candidate in the run-up to the 2014 general elections. He openly flaunted his OBC background in his many rallies and campaign meetings.

The second route of reaching out to OBCs has been creating alliances with smaller parties formed by leaders of one or another backward groups. For instance, in Bihar it has been in alliance with JD (U), led by Nitish Kumar. In 2014, when the BJP was not in alliance, it allied with the Rashtriya Lok Samta Party (RLSP), headed by Upendra Kushwaha (a Koeri leader), and thereby cut into Koeri and Kurmi votes. In UP, the party allied with Apna Dal and the Suheldev Bhartiya Samaj Party

(SBSP), formed by Sone Lal Patel and Om Prakash Rajbhar, respectively.

## V. Implications for Social Justice Parties

This new trajectory of OBCs political choice beginning in 2014 entails far-reaching political implications. At one level, it has caused phenomenal rise of the BJP. In the 2014 LS elections, the party swept the entire Hindi belt. Of the 221 LS constituencies that are allocated to this region, the BJP alone won 186. With this, about 66 percent of the 282 seats the BJP won in 2014 came from this region. The party maintained its dominance by repeating the same comprehensive victory in 2019. For many scholars of Indian politics, it marks the return of the era of one-party dominance, even poised towards hegemony. This phenomenon itself entails several consequences for democratic politics and governance.<sup>39</sup>

At another level, the remarkable change in the political preference of the backward castes has meant the decimation of dominant social justice parties in this part of country. For instance, RJD's overall vote share declined from 30.7 percent in 2004 to 20.1 percent in 2014 and then 15.4 percent in 2019. In terms of seats, the loss has been one of devastating, as its seat tally slid down from twenty-four in 2004 to four seats in 2014. Worse still, it drew a blank in 2019. For the first time in the history of RJD, the party went unrepresented in the LS.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, the SP's vote share and seat tally in LS elections have gone

down drastically. Its vote share plummeted from 26.7 percent in 2004 to 18.1 percent in 2019. Its seat tally came down from thirty-six in 2004 to five in 2014 and 2019. Simply put, the shift of OBCs toward the BJP seems to have broken the back of these parties.

Even so, it would be too early to write them off, given the complex caste dynamics that inform electoral politics in the two states. For this reason alone, doubt is cast if this is going to be a long-term trend. And yet, both parties (RJD and the SP) are faced with formidable challenges to bring one of their important social constituencies of support back to their fold. It remains to be seen how the two parties will frame issues, restructure their political agenda, and rejig party organizations so as to be able reclaim much of the lost ground.

## VI. The Upshot

The political mobilization the backward castes/classes in the early 1990s in the greater part India fundamentally altered the vector of democratic politics. Not only did it restructure the pattern of party competition, but it also reconfigured the ruling class. Although the social justice movement fizzled out too soon, a few state-level parties arising out of the movement continue to draw support from a large subset, if not the majority, of the backward castes and ruled for several years in not only India's two most populous states—Bihar and UP—but also in the heart of the Hindi belt. But, of late, they have electorally suffered so much so that they seem to be

facing a deep existential crisis. A major reason for this situation is the drift in their core base of support, that is, the OBCs. However, the drift of OBCs away from social justice parties is incremental rather than accidental as, for a variety of reasons, it came off layer by layer and in a gradual fashion. The 2014 LS election was just the tipping point.

Interestingly, the drift of OBCs appears unidirectional, as the BJP is the lone gainer. As the BJP has now emerged as the preferred political choice of the backward castes, at least in the Hindi belt despite being branded as the party of the upper castes and known for its ideological unease with caste-based affirmative action, it has, in a sense, heralded an era of post-

caste politics. But the BJP's gain is not by default. It is reaping the dividends of putting in place and a long pursuit of a well-crafted multipronged strategy.

The shift of a large chunk of OBCs towards the BJP has contributed to its phenomenal rise. It has come to acquire hegemonic status, implying several consequences for the nation's democratic politics and governance. Of many consequences, it spells doom for so-called social justice parties that fill in the "third space" in the nation's polity. While this is not to say that the arrival of the so-called post-caste politics has rendered these parties completely irrelevant, they are nevertheless faced with formidable challenges to stage a comeback.

## Notes

- 1 I am extremely thankful to the anonymous referees for their valuable comments and inputs that immensely helped improve the paper.
- 2 NES 1996, 1999, 2004, 2009, 2014, 2019. CSDS, Delhi.
- 3 A vote bank may be defined as a section of electorate that consistently votes for a particular political formation or a candidate.
- 4 Yogendra Yadav, "Reconfiguration in Indian Politics: State Assembly Elections, 1993–1995," *Economic and Political Weekly* 31 (1996): 95–104; Yogendra Yadav, "Electoral Politics in the Time of Change: India's Third Electoral System, 1989–99," *Economic and Political Weekly* 34 (1999): 2393–99.
- 5 Marc Galanter, "Who Are the Other Backward Classes? An Introduction to a Constitutional Puzzle," *Economic and Political Weekly* 13 (1978): 1812–28; P. Radhakrishnan, "Backward Classes in Tamil Nadu: 1872–1988," *Economic and Political Weekly* 25 (1990): 509–20.
- 6 Marc Galanter, *Competing Equalities: Law and the Backward Classes in India* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1984).
- 7 Also see Galanter, "Who Are the Other Backward Classes?" for the debates, as well as apparent confusion regarding this matter in the CA.
- 8 For instance, the state government of Bihar in 1947 made provisions for OBCs in post-matriculation studies. Similarly, in UP educational concessions for them began in 1948; Galanter, "Who Are the Other Backward Classes?" and Galanter, *Competing Equalities*.

- 9 For instance, in April 1951, the Supreme Court in *State of Madras vs. Champakam Dorairajan* struck down Madras's reservation in educational institutions. In another case, *State of Madras vs. Venkataramana*, it struck down Madras's quotas in government posts for all groups other than the SCs/STs and "Backward Hindus" (AIR 1951 SC 226).
- 10 Government of India, *Report of the Backward Classes Commission* (New Delhi: Government of India Press, 1956), 2 [emphasis added].
- 11 See Galanter, "Who Are the Other Backward Classes?"; Galanter, *Competing Equalities*.
- 12 Nomita Yadav, "Other Backward Classes: Then and Now," *Economic and Political Weekly* 37 (2002) 4495-4500
- 13 Government of India, *Report of the Backward Classes Commission* (New Delhi: Government of India Press, 1980).
- 14 P. Radhakrishnan, "In Defence of Mandal Commission," *Economic and Political Weekly* 17 (1982): 1094.
- 15 Seema Mustafa, *The Lonely Prophet-V.P. Singh: A Political Biography* (New Delhi: New Age International, 1995).
- 16 D. L Sheth, "Reservation Policy Revisited," *Economic and political Weekly* 22 (1987): 1957-62
- 17 Galanter, *Competing Equalities*; Hugo Gorringe, "Caste and Politics in Tamil Nadu," *Seminar* 633 (2012): 38-42.
- 18 The suggested reasons for the absence of a backward castes movement in MP and Rajasthan are as follows. First, backward castes have been less numerous in these two states as compared to Bihar and UP. Second, in these two states, the size of the dominant backward castes (like Yadavs and Kurmis) needed for spearheading a movement is too small. Third, the backward castes were so accommodated in the political structure by both the Congress and the BJP that they did not feel politically acutely neglected. As a matter of fact, their political representation had already begun to rise in the 1980s in MP, if not in Rajasthan, except for the Jats. For instance, the share of OBC MPs in MP almost doubled between 1984 and 1989 (from 7.5 percent to 25 percent). It further increased to 25 percent in 1996. Hence, these two parties have been the main recipients of their votes. Christophe Jaffrelot, "The Uneven Rise of Lower Castes in the Politics of Madhya Pradesh," in *Rise of the Plebians? The Changing Face of Legislative Assemblies*, ed. Christophe Jaffrelot and Sanjay Kumar (London: Routledge, 2009): 103-50.
- 19 This refers to a colonial system in which zamindars were both land owners and tax agents, as they collected land revenue. Christophe Jafferlot, "The Rise of the Other Backward Classes in the Hindi Belt," *The Journal of Asian Studies* 59 (2000): 86-108; Jaffrelot, "The Uneven Rise of Lower Castes."
- 20 In 1950s, as evidence shows, the top 10 percent of rural households owned 52.36 percent of the land and the bottom 40 percent households owned a mere 1.25 percent of the land. And most of the top 10 percent households that owned about half the land in the state belonged to the upper castes, except for some Muslims See, Pradhan H. Prasad, "Agrarian Violence in Bihar," *Economic and Political Weekly* 55 (1987): 487-852
- 21 Pradhan H. Prasad, "Caste and Class in Bihar," *Economic and Political Weekly* 14 (1979): 481-84.
- 22 Harry W. Blair, "Rising Kulaks and Backward Classes in Bihar," *Economic and Political Weekly* 15 (1980): 64-74.

- 23 Gail Omvedt, “‘Twice-Born’ Riots Against Democracy,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 25 (1990): 2195–2201
- 24 Sanjay Kumar, “A Shift towards Regionalization of Indian Politics,” in *Handbook of Politics in Indian States*, ed. Sudha Pai (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013), 147
- 25 On the coverage and sample size of NES series, please visit [www.lokniti.org](http://www.lokniti.org).
- 26 Lalu Prasad Yadav, who was the national president of the JD and also the chief minister of Bihar, broke away from the JD and founded his own party (RJD) in 1997.
- 27 Sanjay Kumar, Mohd. Sanjeer Alam and Dhananjay Joshi, “Caste Dynamics and Political Processes in Bihar,” *Journal of Indian School of Political Economy* 20 (2008). 1-32
- 28 Sanjay Kumar, “BJP Crafts a New Social Coalition in Bihar,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 49 (2014): 95–98.
- 29 Ghanshyam Shah. “Social Backwardness and Politics of Reservation,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 28 (1991): 601-10.
- 30 Christophe Jafferlot, *India’s Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003).
- 31 For instance, out of 900 teachers appointed by Mulayam Singh Yadav during his second term in power, 720 were Yadavs. Similarly, in the police forces, out of 3,151 newly selected candidates, 1,223 were Yadavs (*Indian Today*, October 15, 1999, 37). Such selective favouritism was also apparent in Bihar, where Yadavs were appointed in key positions. Most of government tenders/contracts also went to Yadavs. Walter Hauser, “General Elections 1996 in Bihar: Politics, Administrative Atrophy and Anarchy,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 32 (1997): 2599–607.
- 32 A.N. Das, “Still Paying Old Debts”, *The Telegraph*, June 6, 1997; Jafferlot, *India’s Silent Revolution*.
- 33 When Lalu Prasad demitted from the office of chief minister of Bihar due to a fodder scam, he chose his wife, who could barely speak in public, as his successor. In UP, members of the extended family of Mulayam Singh Yadav have been at the helm of party affairs.
- 34 A.K. Verma, “Backward Caste Politics in Uttar Pradesh,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 40 (2005): 3889–92.
- 35 Jafferlot, *India’s Silent Revolution*.
- 36 A.K. Verma, “UP: BJP’s Caste Card,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 36 (2001): 4452–55.
- 37 Jasmine Zerinini, “The Marginalization of Savarnas in Uttar Pradesh?” in *Rise of the Plebeians? The Changing Face of Legislative Assemblies*, ed. Christophe Jaffrelot and Sanjay Kumar (London: Routledge, 2009): 27–64.
- 38 “Nityanand Rai Appointed as New Bihar BJP Chief,” *The Pioneer*, December 1, 2016, <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2016/india/nityanand-rai-appointed-as-new-bihar-bjp-chief.html>.
- 39 Suhas Palshikar, “Towards Hegemony: BJP Beyond Electoral Dominance,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 53 (2018): 36–42.
- 40 Mohd. Sanjeer Alam and Rakesh Ranjan, “NDA’s Big Victory in Bihar,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 54 (2019): 18–21.