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## State Political Entrepreneurs in the Age of Modi: Opposition Politics in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal from 2019-2021

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State Political Entrepreneurs in the Age of Modi: Opposition Politics in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal from 2019-2021

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement  
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts / Science in Department from  
William & Mary

by

Maxwell David Markel

Accepted for Honors



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## Introduction

Contemporary Indian politics revolves around the unique, singular importance of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, who has been Prime Minister since his landslide elections in 2014 and 2019. Not since Indira Gandhi has a political figure so dominated the Indian political scene, and he has overseen deep changes to norms of Indian democracy. Compared to the previous era of Indian democracy that was more decentralized, coalition-based, and that had relatively weak Prime Ministers, India is now in an era of an increasingly centralized, single-party government with a strong Prime Minister. This transformation has caused deep changes to the nature of contemporary Indian democracy, and examining the nature of Modi's government and electoral success is a vital question any scholar of Indian studies has to deal with. This question is especially interesting in looking at contemporary limitations of Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party and how the rise of the BJP has been challenged in three key states from 2019-2021: Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal. The nature of this opposition, and whether the Indian National Congress or opposition state parties are more capable of successfully opposing the BJP, is an enduring contemporary question of Indian democracy.

The answer in many ways defines Indian democracy, as whether a national party, associated with New Delhi and the central government, and centripetal forces of Indian democracy can offer a challenge to the BJP, or if state parties, representing the decentralizing, centrifugal forces of Indian democracy, are better situated to successfully challenge the BJP. This paper hopes to examine this question, and look at elections since 2019 in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal in order to understand why the BJP has faced defeats in each state, and why state parties have been the primary vehicle for these defeats. What this means for the 2022 Uttar Pradesh election will also be examined, and whether the theories presented in this paper

explain the outcome in that state will be a test of the paper's limits or broader viability. The answers to these questions are essential to understanding the future of Indian democracy, and whether India is approaching another era of hegemonic party-rule a la India under the Indian National Congress from 1947-77, or if the contemporary dominance of Modi is more temporary. Additionally, the nature of the Indian National Congress and state parties discussed will be a key locus of analysis, as the recent crises affecting the INC leadership, combined with a sense that the party needs a renewal, compared to state parties that are more dynamic and focused, will be examined.

This paper attempts to explain the contemporary challenges of BJP failure in the cases selected by highlighting 3 points. First, that state parties in the cases are the best vector of resistance to the BJP due to their more dynamic and competent leadership compared to a moribund INC leadership. This dynamism comes from the fact many of these parties fit into two broad camps. One is those led by ex-INC figures, who were the most talented and charismatic members of the INC in their respective states, who then left the INC due to the crisis of leadership the INC is facing since the 1990s. The other are more purely regional political parties that began to compete in elections against the INC and so developed outside and in opposition to an originally hegemonic INC. The two models of state parties means that the parties, led by rational political entrepreneurs, need to find an electoral niche for themselves originally in opposition to a party that dominated the state. This meant the state political entrepreneurs in question early on needed to find a more focused social base and ideological formation for their parties in order to have continued relevance, and this greater coherence has made them more capable of opposing the BJP in their respective states. Secondly, strong regional identity in each

state creates an extra layer of resistance to Hindu Nationalism, with state parties linked to that regional identity able to be a much more effective vector of resistance than the INC, which lacks this localist identity. This link means the state parties are better able to form alliances with other political actors within their state and connect with voters, as it creates another level of identity that goes beyond simple Hindu-secular dichotomy that the BJP and INC mobilize off of. Thirdly, the ongoing agricultural crisis in India means that there is a large constituency of voters prone to blame incumbent governments for lack of support. The agrarian nature of India, with a huge rural constituency in almost every Indian state, means that rural concerns are hugely electorally significant. State parties, which depend on their state constituencies to remain relevant and thus are more capable of mobilizing this anger, are thus able to use farmer unrest to provide a viable electoral wedge against the BJP. These three forces, this paper argues, create systemic vulnerabilities for the BJP in each of the cases, and going forward will be a key limitation on continued BJP dominance across India. Within the traditional BJP base of the Hindi Belt, the recent state election in Uttar Pradesh in March 2022 will be examined in the conclusion to see how the state functions under this tripartite frame of reference.

Indian democracy is at an extremely critical and fascinating moment. The prospects of the 2024 general election are extremely far away, but the trends discussed in this paper will have clear impacts across Indian politics as the Indian opposition decides its electoral strategy leading to 2024. Regardless of the future outcomes, each case in this study is fascinating and deserving of research in its own right, and contemporary Indian electoral politics deserves further study. While not discussed in this paper, the nature of contemporary Dalit and Muslim politics will also be an important topic of future research as both are a key constituency that is traditionally hostile

to the BJP and thus a potential vector of resistance for the state parties discussed in this paper going forward. Additionally, the nature of youth and female voting patterns, two extremely key bases of BJP support, are not discussed in this paper and so are worthy of continued study in each case study. It is an extremely important moment to study Indian politics and South Asia's electoral politics more broadly, and this paper will be an important addition to the academic literature on this topic.

## Background

### *Era of INC Dominance 1947-1989*

This first period of Indian democracy lasted from Indian independence in 1947 until the defeat of the INC under Rajiv Gandhi in the 1989 election. During this period, the Indian National Congress ruled India almost uninterrupted, first under Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru (1947-1964), then Lal Bahadur Shastri (1964-66), then Nehru's daughter Indira Gandhi (1966-1977, 1980-1984) and then her son Rajiv Gandhi (1984-1989). Though the party never won a majority of the national vote, the party was the single-largest party in India and in the first-past-the-post, single member district electoral system utterly dominated the legislature. The leaders of the INC, especially under Nehru and Indira Gandhi, defined the country as a secular country accepting of religious and linguistic minorities. The party used the legitimacy and organization it had achieved in the struggle for Indian independence to dominate the country organizationally, creating a dominant party system where patronage and co-opting of social movements meant the INC remained the single most dominant party in the country.<sup>1</sup> This period saw the extreme marginalization of anti-INC or non-Congress political entrepreneurs from 1947-1957. However, as the 1960s wore on, the party began facing challenges to its dominance.

The INC did not lose this dominance for any one reason, but a variety of converging factors slowly eroded its dominance. The Gandhi dynasty was based in Uttar Pradesh and Southern India historically was hesitant at best, alienated at worst, at the linguistic policies of the INC state governments. Linguistic nationalism then developed as local peoples demanded

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<sup>1</sup>James Manor, "Parties and Politics." Essay. In *India's Democracy: An Analysis of Changing State-Society Relations*, 1st ed., 1:65–66. 1. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988.

representation for their linguistic population, with local political entrepreneurs mobilizing off an issue that had obvious salience. This was most defined in Tamil Nadu, which was at the center of at-times violent struggle for linguistic autonomy. This meant that as the 50s and 60s wore on, linguistic nationalism developed as a vector of localist resistance to the centralized INC rule across the entire country. On top of this, left-wing parties and political entrepreneurs, most notably the Communist Party of India but also Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu, mobilized against the INC with a message of social justice, caste abolition, and land reform, which cut into the cross-class and cross-caste INC coalition. Internal factionalism further upset INC hegemony as Indira Gandhi launched a campaign against party oligarchs, causing an open civil war which drove a rift in the party between long-time INC heads and loyalists to Indira.<sup>2</sup> This mobilization of a more non-programmatic populist party under Indira, though electorally successful in the short term, did deinstitutionalize the party, removed intra-party democracy, and made it more reliant on Indira and her family. This change, where the party was less able to integrate ambitious state political entrepreneurs, would further decentralize Indian politics away from INC hegemony.

The results of this would be a weakening of the INC, even as Indira issued a national Emergency and ruled as an effective dictator from 1975-1977. This move, which would be deeply unpopular and resented for upsetting Indian democratic norms, forced a coalition of opposition forces to form under the Janata Party, which combined ex-INC figures, state parties, socialists, and Hindu Nationalists, under the direction of Moraji Desai, a long-time INC figure turned anti-Indira figure. The landslide victory of the Janata Party in 1977 was mitigated as the

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<sup>2</sup>Manor, "Parties and Politics." In *India's Democracy*, Pages 66-70

contradictory coalition did not govern coherently, and soon lost power in 1980 to a resurgent INC under Indira. After the return of the INC in the landslide defeat of the Janata Party in 1980, Indira took power in a deeply changed country during her second term in office. The country had become a real multi-party democracy and deeply, confrontationally, democratic, which destabilized the fragile political equilibrium of social-forces and politics that the prior INC period represented. Anti-incumbency became a norm throughout the country, and the country became much more difficult to govern with the rise of multiple conflicting political movements.<sup>3</sup> This more diverse political era would be put off by her assassination in 1984, and her son Rajiv Gandhi riding a wave of sympathy for the 1984 election. He would also be unable to govern successfully due to his own political fumbling and a destabilizing corruption scandal contributed to a severe weakening of the INC in 1989,<sup>4</sup> which would create a new political era for India and the true awakening of state political entrepreneurs.

#### *Mandal Era 1989-2014*

This era of Indian democracy saw the fragmentation of Indian politics. The period from 1989-1991 saw three different governments and two elections, which was an unprecedented period of instability. VP Singh, formerly the Finance Minister under Rajiv Gandhi who defected to a reconstituted Janata Party, was able to form a government that was propped up by the BJP and Communists, and began implementing the Mandal Report. The Report was a 1979 commission study that supported affirmative action policies for “Other Backward Castes” which

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<sup>3</sup>Manor, “Parties and Politics.” In *India’s Democracy*, 71-77

<sup>4</sup>Sumit Ganguly and Mukherji Rahul. “Political Mobilization.” Essay. In *India since 1980*, 1st ed., 122–23. New York, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

reawakened caste conflicts in India by creating immense demand for entry into lucrative state jobs. This birthed a new era of political entrepreneurship through caste mobilization, with numerous OBC parties being birthed to represent this now mobilized constituency, notably the SP in Uttar Pradesh led by Mulayam Singh Yadav and the mobilization of Dalits under Kanshi Ram's BSP.<sup>5</sup> This further fragmentation was most obvious in Uttar Pradesh, which saw its elections fragment in this period between the Samajwadi Party supported by Yadavs and Muslims, the BSP supported by Dalits, the BJP supported by Brahmins and the urban middle class, and the rump of the once dominant INC coalition. As a result, Indian politics in this period was greatly fragmented, making electoral majorities extremely difficult to form and necessitating fragile minority governments between national parties and cynical state political entrepreneurs.

The 1991 Indian election saw these trends deepen. The INC recovered seats and formed a minority government under PV Narasimha Rao, who managed to push through an ambitious series of economic liberalization reforms in order to fix the country's economic crisis.<sup>6</sup> The Rao government saw the further fragmentation of power in India as Hindu nationalism accelerated as a political force with the demolition of the Babri Masjid Mosque and the erosion of the party in states across India. The mobilization of communal religious ties by the Sangh Parivar family, first by the RSS and then by its political wings that coalesced into the BJP, saw its full expression as the 80s and 90s developed. Both for ideological reasons of true-hearted Hindu nationalism, and also the realization that playing on communal ties could be a truly decisive vote-getter as Hindu nationalism accelerated in the 80s, meant the BJP rapidly grew. This culminated in the

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<sup>5</sup>Ganguly and Rahul, "Political Mobilization." In *India since 1980*, Pages 124-128

<sup>6</sup>Ganguly and Rahul, "Political Mobilization." In *India since 1980*, Pages 128-130

1996 Indian election, as the INC continued to splinter and face corruption scandals and faced a surging BJP under its long-time leader Atal Bihari Vajpayee. India would then have 3 Cabinets from 1996-1998, and two more elections, in 1998 and 1999, until Vajpayee was finally able to form a coalition government based on its National Democratic Alliance, an alliance between the BJP and state allies.<sup>7</sup> State parties had been dominant in this period of chaos, as the true volatility of the situation meant one party could decide the government, as the AIADMK did when it first supported, then deserted, the 1998 Vajpayee cabinet. The period of government instability ended, as Vajpayee was able to complete his legislative term, a first for any Federal non-INC government, creating a new, much more coalition-based, era in Indian politics.

Vajpayee lost re-election in 2004 to a resurgent INC under Sonia Gandhi with Manmohan Singh as PM, who would go onto win another term in 2009. He did not run for a third term as Prime Minister and the INC chose instead Sonia and Rajiv Gandhi's son, Rahul, who was not in cabinet under Singh and had no national or state experience beyond being in charge of the INC's youth and student wings. Though he was young and fresh-faced at 44, he was also the scion of a dynasty that had dominated India for almost 70 years and had no experience and seemingly little natural political ability.<sup>8</sup> This was compared to his BJP rival, a man who surprised many when he was chosen as the Prime Minister candidate as he was a long-time state leader of the BJP in Gujarat, Narendra Modi, who had fully lived through the BJP's ascent from a marginal extremist party to a fully legitimate national party.

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<sup>7</sup>Ganguly and Rahul, "Political Mobilization." In *India since 1980*, Pages 131

<sup>8</sup>Agence France-Presse. "Election Results 2014: Rahul Gandhi, 'India's Princeling', in Sharp Focus Today." NDTV.com. NDTV, First Published May 16, 2014. <https://www.ndtv.com/elections-news/election-results-2014-rahul-gandhi-indias-princeling-in-sharp-focus-today-562216>.

This era was unique and an innovation over the hegemonic INC era that preceded it because of the more decentralized nature of Indian politics. Instead of India having a uniquely centralized Federation, some of that central command was dissipated in return for more power to state organs. The further liberalization reforms of the 90s further decreased the amount of power of the central government, especially as state-parties could play against the now two-party system in India to gain material benefits for their state. National-state alliances were thus made vital for any government, as not one government from 1989-2014 had a single-party majority. This developed traditions and power of multi-party coalition building and decentralized democratic decision-making, which was healthy for the development of Indian democracy. Throughout this period, from 1947-2014, saw the sliding of the hegemonic INC and political entrepreneurs finding electoral niches for themselves, developing India into a highly fragmented, but two-coalition, system. The INC still had advantages over their rivals in the BJP from 1989-2014, however, as the party remained the one truly national Indian party and could still win power under the right national leadership. By 2014 however, the erosion of INC strength, and further dominance of the Gandhi dynasty, meant that the party had sapped itself of its strength and was vulnerable to a competent challenger. That competent challenger would usher in a new era in Indian politics, one that would severely disrupt the existing balance of power in India and upset existing state parties who were exploiting this decentralized era.

#### *The Modi Era 2014-Present*

The rise of Narendra Modi, the Gujarat BJP Chief Minister best known for presiding over some of the worst communal riots in Indian history, was long in the making but also unique to Modi's appeal as a politician. First, the institutional nature of the BJP allowed it to have a more

coherent electoral strategy across a wide swath of India, as its tight electoral focus on Hindu nationalism provided it an early electoral niche that political entrepreneurs could expand off of through the decades by finding the right caste combination of support, beyond their predominantly upper-caste, Brahmin original constituency. Outreach to OBC and young voters by Modi and the BJP into their existing coalition was years in the making and was part of a long-term outreach campaign among the poor. The use of the Sangh Parivar, the family of organizations broadly under the RSS and Hindu Nationalist umbrella, to provide social welfare benefits to poorer voters was done to build trust and support for the political branch of the Hindutva movement, the BJP.<sup>9</sup> This was especially clear in areas in North India where the BJP has had a long history of activism and mobilization, but the party has recently expanded this strategy across India. Further, the party used aggressive candidate selection to maximize vote shares in key districts, running Dalit or lower caste candidates as the situation demanded.<sup>10</sup> Thus, Hindu nationalism but also calculated caste and class coalitions has created an electoral combination that Modi has been uniquely talented at maintaining. This Hindu nationalist appeal was made even more electoral viable during the 2000s, spurred on by a spate of terrorist attacks, which helped drive home this rhetoric of Hindu victimization and the need for a aggressive, muscular Hindu nationalism.<sup>11</sup> The dominance of airwaves and media through intense

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<sup>9</sup>Tariq Thachil. "Why Rich and Poor Voters Support an Elite Party in India." Essay. In *Elite Parties, Poor Voters: How Social Services Win Votes in India*, 1st ed., Page 102. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

<sup>10</sup>Shanker Arnimesh. "BJP Rolls out Fleet of OBC, Dalit Leaders as Star Campaigners for 1st Phase of UP Polls." *ThePrint*, Last Modified January 20, 2022. <https://theprint.in/politics/bjp-rolls-out-fleet-of-obc-dalit-leaders-as-star-campaigners-for-1st-phase-of-up-polls/807781/>.

<sup>11</sup>Christophe Jaffrelot. "Modi's Rise to Power, or How to Exploit Hope, Fear, and Anger." Essay. In *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*, 1st ed., Pages 75–83. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, Published 2021.

campaigning and unified media programs allowed the BJP to blanket the opposition and further cement their hegemony over discourse.<sup>12</sup> The long-term creation of the Modi coalition was decades in the making, but saw its full flowering under Modi, a political entrepreneur who had the means and opportunity to fully express his brand of entrepreneurship that he had honed in his home-state of Gujarat..

On top of the more institutional reasons Modi won in 2014, he has proved himself to be the most dominant Indian leader since Indira Gandhi while in government. His exceptional mobilization of Hindu nationalist sentiment, on a global method of right-wing populist methods of demonizing his enemies as traitors to the nation, playing up fears of Muslims and Pakistan, and of attacking the liberal, secular nature of the Indian state. His public persona as a competent, austere politician striving to make India a great power based on Hindu identity proved extremely successful.<sup>13</sup> The result of all this is that the BJP began racking up a series of state victories in 2014, winning power in Maharashtra, Haryana, Jammu and Kashmir, and Jharkhand. By 2018 the party or its NDA allies had won power across almost all of North India, culminating in an explosion of vote share and winning a legislative supermajority in the electoral vital state of Uttar Pradesh in 2017. In the 2019 general election won an even greater share of the popular vote at over 37% and 21 more seats. The INC only managed to gain 8 seats overall, and Rahul Gandhi resigned,<sup>14</sup> and the party leadership went back to his mother, though the need for reforms within

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<sup>12</sup>Jaffrelot, “Modi’s Rise to Power” in Modi’s India, pages 95-101

<sup>13</sup>Jaffrelot, “Modi’s Rise to Power” in Modi’s India, pages 91-95

<sup>14</sup>Kai Schultz, and Kumar Hari. “Rahul Gandhi Resigns as Leader of India's Congress Party.” The New York Times, Last Modified July 3, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/03/world/asia/rahul-gandhi-resigns.html>.

the party has provoked huge internal anger, namely the G23 revolt by party grandees against the Gandhi dynasty.

What this means for this paper is that as the INC declined, political entrepreneurs were able to mobilize discordant forces and new political communities to oppose the INC. From within the party through defectors, and from without the party by outside parties, the INC has seen itself become a sidelined political force, with its energy and brainpower sapped by a dynasty that has proven deeply resistant to internal reforms. Compared to the BJP, which has historically been resistant, if not clean, from dynastic politics and with avenues for political advancement for regional elites, the INC has ossified and stagnated since the 1990s. Thus, the BJP's main opposition to its electoral fortunes is not the INC, but regional and state parties who lack this toxic internal structure.

## **Case Selection**

The reason for choosing the case selection in this study is due to several parameters that make them important to the study of modern Indian politics. The three cases chosen for study were Maharashtra, West Bengal, and Tamil Nadu, as each had several key parameters in question that made them indicative of Indian political trends. A fourth case, Uttar Pradesh, will be discussed in the conclusion to test the validity of the trends discussed. Each state has a highly distinct political history and identity, and each has different social, demographic makeups which makes them highly distinct from one another. This makes it a most-different case study in order to “nationalize” the trends discussed in order to understand larger Indian politics. Each state has common features that make them different, but worthy of discussion in one combined whole.

The states were selected for their large population, as each is in the top 10 most populous states in the country. Maharashtra is the second most populous state in India, fourth is West Bengal, and sixth is Tamil Nadu, per Indian census records. This means that the political impact of each state is extremely important, corresponding to 129 seats in the Lok Sabha.<sup>15</sup> This means that each state is a major electoral prize held by the BJP and thus is a key electoral focus for the party, which makes them highly worthy of study. Geographically, each state is in a distinct area of India, in that Tamil Nadu is located in southern India, Maharashtra in central India, and West Bengal in eastern India. This means that each state is situated in a unique political and cultural atmosphere than the rest of India, and not clustered in one location in India in order to ensure the results of this study are not limited by regional over-selection. Secondly, each state has innate

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<sup>15</sup>“States Census 2011.” List of states with Population, Sex Ratio and Literacy Census 2011. Accessed January 11, 2022. <https://www.census2011.co.in/states.php>.

characteristics and unique demographics not found in other states and from each other case, which highlights the overall trends and forces discussed in this paper. Maharashtra is dominated by the Maratha caste and speaks the Marathi language, which gives the state a dominant caste-linguistic group that is central to the politics of the state and different from Tamil Nadu and West Bengal.<sup>16</sup> Tamil Nadu has a deeply fragmented caste makeup, but a very strong linguistic and regional identity, on top of being the most urbanized state in India. It is also the most Hindu state of the three and also a state with the fourth largest number of Dalits in India.<sup>17</sup> West Bengal also has a fragmented caste makeup like Tamil Nadu, and is dominated by the Bangla language and a strong regional identity, but also has one of the largest Muslim populations in India and also with the second most Dalits, which combined making up over 45% of the population.<sup>18</sup> This highlights the diverse demography of each state, with each having distinct makeups that mean one demographic trend in one state would not necessarily play in another state.

For each case, there is little the states have in common beyond their huge political significance. The Chief Minister of each state automatically becomes one of the most prominent politicians in India, wielding huge resources and political influence. They have wildly different political traditions and political arrangements, and distinct social realities. The BJP thus has each state as a focus beyond its traditional Hindi belt, North India base, and thus makes the study of

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<sup>16</sup>Prachi Hajare, "Caste Wise Population of Maharashtra." PSCNOTES.IN, Last Modified July 15, 2021. <https://psnotes.in/caste-wise-population-of-maharashtra/>.

<sup>17</sup>Akila Muthukumar, "Casteism and the Making of Modern Tamil Nadu." Health Righters, Last Modified July 21, 2020. <https://healthrighters.com/2020/07/18/lives-lost-to-casteism-in-tamil-nadu/>.

<sup>18</sup>Outlook Web Desk, "'Bengal Hasn't Produced a Jagjivan Ram or Even a Mayawati'." Outlook India, Last Modified February 3, 2022. <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/bengal-hasnt-produced-a-jagjivan-ram-or-even-a-mayawati/281957>.

BJP expansion into each state hugely important to Indian politics. One of the one commonalities of each state is that each has seen a contemporary rise of the BJP. The BJP was much less powerful, or practically nonexistent, in each state before 2014, but after 2014 the BJP has shown a massive increase in political influence and support. This makes each state extremely clear in highlighting the changing social realities of the BJP coalition in each state and how that has impacted the politics of each state, which makes them worthy of being a case.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Thus, the cases selected are highly competitive and important to understand contemporary Indian politics, and are vital to understanding opposition politics in India.

The working thesis of this paper rests on several concurrent factors in each of the cases selected for this study. Before that is discussed, it is important to note the theoretical underpinning of this study.

This paper is based on an interpretation of political entrepreneurship. Theorists of entrepreneurship such as Schumpeter understand entrepreneurs as figures who create opportunities through innovations, and others such as Kirzner view entrepreneurs as discoverers, i.e. those who recognize and exploit opportunities within the market. Further, writers such as McCaffrey and Salerno use a Kirznerian framework that has political entrepreneurs being alert to “opportunities to profit from the political system”. Other writers on this topic such as Frohlich and Oppenheimer have viewed political entrepreneurs as, “an individual who invests his own time or other resources to coordinate and combine other factors of production to supply collective goods” while others such as Wagner have them as figures who “will seek out innovations in the political sphere which yield political profits”. Wagner himself conceives of political entrepreneurs as those who, “takes leadership of an issue in order to advance a personal agenda (of which finding a solution to the issue at hand may be part, but only part), possibly parlaying his public spirit into a political career, a network of contacts, future remuneration for

his legal practice, etc.”<sup>19</sup> This paper takes a different approach to political entrepreneurship than the existing literature in order to better understand the specifics of Indian politics.

This paper conceives of political entrepreneurship as those who hope to gain political power and influence by exploiting existing “holes” in the space left by other political actors. Political actors act to exploit those gaps to create their own political base of support and achieve long-term goals of patronage allocation, policy objectives, and political influence. The essential idea is that politicians are rational actors who exist to represent structural fissures within the societies they exist in. They do not invent identities, nor do they invent salient political issues, though they can reframe and articulate the specific way those issues and identities are expressed. They can express this relationship in either a cynical, transactional manner, merely trying to cut into the political system for patronage, or for greater ideological or political projects. Regardless of the reason behind exploiting these fissures, every political movement has to identify some social or ideological base in order to survive beyond the individual charisma of the leader of the political movement. Without some sort of ideological or identity core, no political entrepreneur can propel their movement forward long-term.

This relationship can best be seen in political systems with low cost for creating new political forces, i.e. where it is easy for political actors to set out on their own and create their own specific niche. For instance, in the American political context, where there are political high-costs for politicians leaving the two-party system, political actors are constrained in the coalition they can form and the constituency they can represent. Due to the existence of high

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<sup>19</sup>Snigdha Dewal. "Governance and Political Entrepreneurship in India: Case Studies of Gujarat and Bihar." George Mason University, 2016. <https://proxy.wm.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/governance-political-entrepreneurship-india-case/docview/1774429047/se-2?accountid=15053>.

incumbency rates for legislative seats, due to gerrymandering and uncompetitive primaries, it is extremely difficult to enter the American political system outside of the internal party primary.<sup>20</sup> The primary thus becomes the main vector of political alignment and for political actors to form novel coalitions even if that coalition represents a minority of the overall primary vote.<sup>21</sup> The Presidential System in America further exacerbates this tendency, as the logic of electoral consolidation into two broad parties to maximize chances of Presidential victory makes it difficult for smaller political movements to act as anything more than a spoiler. Comparatively, in India, and systems with low cost for leaving political parties like proportional representation systems, ample opportunities exist for political actors to create novel coalitions.

The system also creates highly competitive elections due to possibly rapid turnover in election results, making it thus much easier for political actors to rapidly reconfigure and represent existing, or new, tensions within society, but also more difficult for them to survive long-term without some stable electoral base. Further, in a stark reversal in American politics, anti-incumbency is a significant force in Indian politics, increasing the chances for entrance into the political system for political actors opposed to the current government.<sup>22</sup> This culminates especially in the context of Indian politics, where caste, class, regional, and linguistic identity all

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<sup>20</sup>John Friedman and Richard Holden. "The Rising Incumbent Reelection Rate: What's Gerrymandering Got to Do With It?" Research Gate, April 2009. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/231856436\\_The\\_Rising\\_Incumbent\\_Reelection\\_Rate\\_What's\\_Gerrymandering\\_Got\\_to\\_Do\\_With\\_It](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/231856436_The_Rising_Incumbent_Reelection_Rate_What's_Gerrymandering_Got_to_Do_With_It).

<sup>21</sup>Raymond J. La Raja and Jonathan Rauch. "Voters Need Help: How Party Insiders Can Make Presidential Primaries Safer, Fairer, and More Democratic." Brookings, Last Modified January 31, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/voters-need-help-how-party-insiders-can-make-presidential-primaries-safer-fairer-and-more-democratic/>.

<sup>22</sup>Milan Vaishnav and Matthew Lillehaugen, "Incumbency in India: More Curse than Blessing?" Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Last Modified August 13, 2018. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/08/13/incumbency-in-india-more-curse-than-blessing-pub-77010>.

create fissures within society which the plurality voting system prioritizes to win districts. Indian political entrepreneurs are thus incentivized to fixate on staking out unique political coalitions to mobilize political communities, lest another political actor do the same and steal their constituency from them. The presidentialization of the Modi administration, with his singular dominance ensuring a unique hegemony in discourse, has changed aspects of this theory however, with Modi seemingly preferring a more centralized electoral calendar that will more easily translate to down ballot success for the BJP compared to the more spread out calendar India has had since the 1970s.<sup>23</sup> Even with this recent limitation, the spread out electoral calendar and electoral system does ensure that local political entrepreneurs do have a shot at entering the political system in ways that are unique to India.

What this means for this study is a desire to explain the fragmentation created after the decline of the INC, and how that has been impacted by the consolidation seen with the rise of the BJP under Modi. The INC in its period of hegemony was unable to represent all the complicated social and policy forces in Indian society, and due to the parliamentary nature of India could win an electoral majority with vote shares only in the ~40% range. The constituencies and identities they did not represent were taken up by their opponents. As the INC declined from 1989-2014, this meant that local political actors, be they ex-INC defectors, regionalist politicians, local bigwigs, ideological innovators, or new populist political forces, could all go out and attempt to represent whatever constituency they could get their hands on. Patronage politics facilitated this, and the politics of identity as it related to caste helped ensure that if a political actor could find a

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<sup>23</sup>A Sreenivasa Reddy, "Does Modi Want a Presidential Form of Government?" Khaleej Times, Last Modified December 4, 2020. <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/opinion/is-modi-eyeing-a-shift-to-presidential-form-of-government>.

constituency that was underrepresented and numerous in key districts, they had a ticket to political power. There are limits to this, as deliverable goods must be given to ensure continued political success.

This political framework for political entrepreneurs fits in the unique Indian political context as well. Western political frameworks understand voters as individual actors who rationally choose political options based on a rational choice decision, namely which party will “selfishly” benefit themselves.<sup>24</sup> However, in the Indian social context caste and religious considerations matter most who voters choose to vote for,<sup>25</sup> beyond what a simple individual rational choice model would suggest. Caste politics frequently correlate with ideological groupings, with Muslims, scheduled tribes, and scheduled castes mostly voting for the INC and its centrist offshoots, and other left parties. Upper caste voters additionally have traditionally shown a preference for the BJP and other right-wing parties. The centrality of caste and religious voting concerns, even beyond economic class, age, gender, or educational status at the Federal level,<sup>26</sup> and also at the state level,<sup>27</sup> make the rational mobilization of caste identity hugely important.

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<sup>24</sup>Aaron Edlin, Andrew Gelman, and Noah Kaplan, “Voting as a Rational Choice: Why and How People Vote To Improve the Well-Being of Others.” *Rationality and Society* 19, no. 3 (August 2007): 293–314. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043463107077384>.

<sup>25</sup>“Growing Cleavages in India?: Evidence from the Changing Structure of Electorates, 1962-2014.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Mar 16, 2019, Pages 1-6 <https://proxy.wm.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/growing-cleavages-india-evidence-changing/docview/2202795693/se-2?accountid=15053>.

<sup>26</sup>“Growing Cleavages in India?” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Mar 16, 2019, Page 8

<sup>27</sup>“Growing Cleavages in India?” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Mar 16, 2019, Page 8-10

As the INC declined in the 1980s and 1990s, it was no longer able to successfully represent the demands of its broad electoral base, so political actors found an opening to stake their own electoral niches. This relationship is seen throughout the cases discussed in this study, as well as how the BJP rose to prominence in the first place. Originally, the BJP attempted to exploit the decline of the INC across India through their intense, programmatic advocacy of Hindu Nationalism in the 1980s, which greatly contributed to their meteoric rise through that decade. In West Bengal, the demand for land reform and agrarian justice against the incumbent INC government was taken up by the CPI(M) and allowed it to take power in 1977. In Tamil Nadu, it was Tamil linguistic nationalism and anti-Brahmin sentiment against an upper-caste INC government, which was taken up by the DMK, winning power in 1967. In Maharashtra, the fragmentation of the Marathi elite as the INC declined sprouted two unique political parties, the NCP and the SHS. All of this means that as Indian democracy became more established and institutionalized, the INC faced political actors mobilizing important identities and issues which threatened the INC's dominance of their state. The nature of the INC as well ensured it was especially vulnerable to this, as it has proven poor in integrating local, ambitious political entrepreneurs into its party structure.

Internal weakness within the INC structure comes from the dynastic nature of the party dominated by the Gandhis which limits the ambitions of ambitious leaders to have a viable path to party leadership and influence. This means that the most competent and charismatic figureheads of the party, those with real local power bases capable of assisting the party, have the

great incentives to split the party and form their own party.<sup>28</sup> This weakening of the INC at the local level is matched by a national INC leadership that is more focused on maintaining control of the party leadership than winning elections. Rahul Gandhi's tenure has brought these problems especially to roost, as his leadership has proven incapable of mobilizing on popular issues that matter to the state electorates and instead focuses on national issues and the person of Modi which has severely limited their mass appeal.<sup>29</sup> The INC is thus a fatally weakened institution even as it remains the second-largest political movement in India, and much of the responsibility for that failure rests with the inability of the Gandhi dynasty to manage local elites and create a viable merit-based political movement. The party now faces huge challenges to being a viable challenger to Modi as the 2024 parliamentary election looms on the horizon. Comparatively, the INC's rivals do not have this issue. As they lack the historically decentralized nature of the INC and history of splits, and were forced to stake out their own political constituency amid INC hegemony. The BJP fits into this framework perfectly.

Compared to the INC, the BJP under Modi is a vastly more centralized, competent, and viable electoral organ due to its elite party nature. As the party is predominated by high-caste interests, and a close relationship with the Hindu-nationalist family of parties, it allows it a degree of centralization and unity that put it apart from other Indian political parties.<sup>30</sup> The

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<sup>28</sup>Abhijit Majumder, "A Peep into Why Rahul Gandhi Chooses the Wrong Battles against Narendra Modi." Firstpost, Last Modified January 23, 2022. <https://www.firstpost.com/politics/a-peep-into-why-rahul-gandhi-chooses-the-wrong-battles-against-narendra-modi-10311901.html>.

<sup>29</sup>ibid

<sup>30</sup>Tariq Thachil. "Introduction" Essay. In *Elite Parties, Poor Voters: How Social Services Win Votes in India*, 1st ed., Pages 1-36. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

party's original base was high-caste voters<sup>31</sup> based on its exclusionary, elitist conception of Hindu nationalism, from figures such as Savarkar, seen as the founder and most important ideologue of modern Hindu Nationalism and K.B. Hedgewar, the founder of the RSS, both of whom supported the caste system and the Laws of Manu tract.<sup>32</sup> However, the party was able to mobilize outside of this narrow constituency, in spite of its elite base that precluded radical redistributive policies.

The party first expanded out of its narrow caste constituency in the 1980s. They first attempted this by promoting economic nationalism and domestic production, but then evolved after the 1990s liberalization reforms. The party still kept a form of nationalist Hindu anti-globalism, such as opposing beef exports and junk food imports, while also keeping its more elitist, pro-market tint by limiting budget spending on welfare for poorer Indians, which was seen in the party's record in performance in Gujarat and the 1999-2004 Vajpayee Government.<sup>33</sup> In spite of these innovations in the 1990s through 2000s, the party had difficulty expanding outside its North Indian, Hindi speaking base, even as its communalist agitation on Hindu supremacy allowed it a stunning electoral increase across the 1980s: from only 7.74% of the vote and 2 seats in 1984, to 20.08% of the vote and 120 seats in 1991. This explosion of support was in part facilitated by the Ram Temple dispute that ate up an immense amount of public attention and

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<sup>31</sup>Tariq Thachil. "The Anatomy of a Puzzle: Dissecting the BJP's Struggles with Poor Voters" Essay. In *Elite Parties, Poor Voters: How Social Services Win Votes in India*, 1st ed., Page 78. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2014.

<sup>32</sup>Thachil, "The Anatomy of a Puzzle" Pages 40-41

<sup>33</sup>Thachil, "The Anatomy of a Puzzle" Pages 38-58

fueled Hindu nationalism in this period.<sup>34</sup> Contrary to the party's elitist welfare conception, the party did have low-caste and poor support through the provision of welfare services through affiliated Hindu charity organizations, in a way similar to but distinct from the informal patronage network the INC utilized to mobilize poor voters.<sup>35</sup> However, the party's inherent weakness among poor voters limited the party's electoral power throughout the 2000s and early 2010s, as the INC recovered under Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi. The rise of Modi in 2014 would greatly expand the vote base of the BJP in a profound manner, while keeping the basic form the party had formed.

Modi honed his unique blend of Hindu nationalism and populism as Chief Minister of Gujarat from 2001-2014. This laid the basis to test the style that has proven to have immense appeal to the Indian electorate, especially his perception as a highly competent and honest politician from the masses fighting the secular order to keep India safe from Muslim threats and on the path to prosperity.<sup>36</sup> After the height of the BJP in their landslide 2019 electoral victory, which further entrenched their government at the national level, and combined with authoritarian tendencies<sup>37</sup> that have quashed dissent within India,<sup>38</sup> it has appeared the Modi government was unassailable. Yet in each of the cases, the BJP and its allies have faced defeat in recent elections, and face a much more difficult fight in Uttar Pradesh than its landslide 2017 victory would

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<sup>34</sup>Thachil, "The Anatomy of a Puzzle" Pages 60-61

<sup>35</sup>Thachil, "Why Rich and Poor Voters Support an Elite Party in India." Page 102

<sup>36</sup>Thachil, "The Anatomy of a Puzzle" Pages 67-73

<sup>37</sup>Jaffrelot, "Deinstitutionalizing India" In Modi's India: Pages 255-310

<sup>38</sup>Jaffrelot, "Electoral Authoritarianism" In Modi's India: Pages 310-349

suggest. The main reasons for this weakness highlights the fundamental, structural weaknesses of the BJP and Modi in achieving a hegemonic status in Indian politics, due to the nature of political entrepreneurship in India.

There are three challenges this paper lays out as a research design to highlight limitations to the BJP's creation of a hegemonic party system across India. The first challenge is the centrality of rural policy to any successful Indian political movement. India remains a predominantly rural country<sup>39</sup> and so rural politics remain hugely significant. In each of the cases, the votes of farmers have proven decisive, and anger at the BJP or its allies over agrarian issues have proven decisive to the electoral outcome. Whether or not the BJP has been able to successfully mobilize farmers, and address their concerns, is thus a huge point that will be examined in each case. This paper theorizes that failures in BJP rural policy will decrease support for the BJP and empower its rivals to mobilize on a salient political issue, thus weakening the BJP's hegemony of the policy atmosphere and allowing its rivals to decrease its support. The second challenge this paper lays out is that the BJP has had to try and displace existing political actors in each state they have expanded in. Along with the remaining INC forces in each state, these parties can vary hugely from Communist parties, ex-INC parties like the NCP or TMNC, caste-based parties like the SP or JDU, or regionalist parties like the DMK and TGP. As a result, the BJP has had to build up its organizational capacity in each state or make alliances with other parties in the NDA to gain influence. This paper theorizes that already successful state parties, which had to themselves enter an already existing party system in their

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<sup>39</sup>“Covid-19 Impact on Rural Economy Eng - 164.100.47.193.” Parliament Library and Reference, Research, Documentation and Information Service (LARDIS). Research and Information Division, Published July 2021. [http://164.100.47.193/Refinput/Research\\_notes/English/16072021\\_171901\\_1021204139.pdf](http://164.100.47.193/Refinput/Research_notes/English/16072021_171901_1021204139.pdf).

state and create a lasting political coalition, are going to be more capable of opposing the BJP than the Indian National Congress. The lessons learned from entering the political scene in each party's case means that it will have greater institutional organization, political flexibility, and leadership able to successfully win out over other opposition forces in the state. This history is essential in the party's creating a united opposition front to successfully oppose the BJP in the state.

On top of the two other reasons, regional identity has proven incredibly important in modern Indian history and politics, which makes it a third challenge to BJP hegemony in India. Compared to most other electoral democracies, localist political parties representing a state or community have immense political influence in India, and dominate or are present in almost every Indian state. No other electoral democracy has as many state parties exerting such a large amount of electoral influence in states,<sup>40</sup> due to the amazing linguistic, ethnic, and religious diversity in India and linguistic federalism in India. This paper theorizes that the creation of another layer of identity that these linguistic or regionalist states create allows political entrepreneurs to mobilize on an identity that puts the BJP at a significant disadvantage compared to regions where that regional identity is weaker, or where the BJP shares that regional tie, as in the Hindu Belt.

Other lesser factors also show themselves. The BJP under Modi has proven to be almost too successful, as Modi is so closely tied with his party and state leaders so subservient to him, that anger at Modi translates to anger at BJP generally. There is also a converse effect, where the

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<sup>40</sup>Milan Vaishnav, "The Complicated Rise of India's Regional Parties." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Last Modified November 13, 2013. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2013/11/13/complicated-rise-of-india-s-regional-parties-pub-53585>.

figureheads of the BJP, Modi and others, are liked, but the party generally is seen as corrupt and ineffective, which creates a “good tsar, bad boyars” relationship that hurts the party’s long-term ability to maintain power. In each state, there is a decrease in the Modi effect, i.e. a decrease between how the state voted in the national 2019 elections and the state elections. In Tamil Nadu the relationship is so severe as to show a reverse Modi effect, where the AIADMK actually did better in the 2021 state elections than their 2019 performance at the national level, due to their association with the BJP. This means that Modi, while a federal electoral asset, has had problems mobilizing voters when national considerations are not front and center. Additionally, the influence of covid-19 in delegitimizing the Modi government’s effectiveness cannot be understated,<sup>41</sup> as it has highlighted the Federal government’s failings while focusing the election on local issues and not more national considerations, further limiting Modi’s ability to be a vote-getter.

For each case, the main question at the heart of this paper is how parties in each case have reacted to the rise of the BJP, and what movements, be they state parties or the INC, have been best able to react to this politically successful coalition. This paper theorizes that state-based, regionalist political parties will be successful in each case of opposing the BJP, and the paper also hopes to prove that these explanations have greater salience across the rest of India as well. The example of Uttar Pradesh will be used in order to act as a fresh counterexample in order to examine the applicability of this theory broadly across India, and how it operates in the BJP’s home base of the Hindi Belt.

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<sup>41</sup>Peter Ronald deSouza, “The Intrinsic Limits of Hindutva as an Ideology of the Indian State.” The India Forum, Last Modified July 6, 2021. <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/intrinsic-limits-hindutva-ideology-indian-state>.

## **Maharashtra**

### *Background*

One would not expect Maharashtra to become a base for the BJP in India given the predominance Marathi politics have had in the state since independence, especially since the state is a bastion of the Congress. The Indian National Congress ruled the state from independence until being displaced by the Janata Party in 1977, from 1980-1995, and from 1999-2014. This enviable electoral record makes the INC a historic powerhouse in the state, or one would presume. The traditional caste alliance of INC parties, with local rural and urban notables being linked to a coalition with lower-caste, poor voters, especially dalit and Muslim voters, and fueled by patronage, worked extremely well in Maharashtra given the dominance of Marathi's in the state. The caste, which is the single largest in the state at around 33% and which dominates Mumbai and most rural areas of the state, is traditionally the most important vector for politics.<sup>42</sup> In the INC's heyday, they dominated the Marathi elite and were able to rule the state with very little challenge to its power, beyond internal INC factionalism. Sharad Pawar represents this factionalism best, given his extremely long-lasting influence in the state since the late 1970s, becoming Chief Minister on three separate occasions.

In the landslide anti-INC wave of 1978, the INC managed to hold on even after losing 159 seats by joining together the two factions in the state, the INC and INC(Indira). However, Pawar was angered by someone else being chosen for Chief Minister, so he intrigued to topple

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<sup>42</sup>Prachi Deshpande, "Caste as Maratha: Social Categories, Colonial Policy and Identity in Early Twentieth-Century Maharashtra." *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 41, no. 1 (February 2004): 7-32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001946460404100102>.

the Chief Minister, form his own INC breakaway party, the INC (Socialist), and became Chief Minister with the backing of the Janata Party. He managed to rule until 1980 when Indira Gandhi, upon her return to power, imposed President's Rule on the state and fresh elections in 1980 saw the united INC win back power.<sup>43</sup> Though his party performed adequately in the 1980 election, helped by his tactical alliance with the SHS and the Janata Party, he lost most of his MLAs to defections after Indira's assassination. After a poor performance in the 1985 election caused further defection, he merged his party with the INC.<sup>44</sup> He managed to become Chief Minister twice as head of the INC, from 1988-1991 and 1993-1995. However, the INC was defeated in the 1995 Maharashtra elections by the alliance of the BJP and SHS, first formed in the 1990 election and led by SHS parliamentary leader Manohar Soshi. Shiv Sena is the other pillar of Marathi dominance in the state, as it has tried to mobilize a different coalition compared to the INC.

While the party has not been in government often in the state, Shiv Sena, since its founding by Bal Thackeray in 1966, has represented the most Marathi-nationalist force in the state. A long-time journalist and activist, the SHS got started as the party of Marathi anger against the waves of migrant workers going to the state for jobs in bustling Mumbai, with Thackeray publishing lists of South Indians holding positions of power in Mumbai, positions that should have been rightfully Marathi. It was agitation about a border dispute between

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<sup>43</sup>Manoj Dattatrye More, "Maharashtra Govt Formation: 1980, 2014, and Now - Pawar the Key Figure." The Indian Express, Last Modified November 12, 2019. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/maharashtra-govt-formation-1980-2014-and-now-pawar-the-key-figure-6116782/>.

<sup>44</sup>CL Manoj, "The Maratha Warrior Sharad Pawar's Third Resurgence in 40 Years." The Economic Times, Last Modified November 27, 2019. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/the-maratha-warriors-third-resurgence-in-40-years/articleshow/72250863.cms?from=mdr>.

Maharashtra and Karnataka in 1969 that really thrust his movement to prominence, when Thackeray led a Sena morcha that was fired upon on orders from the Deputy Prime Minister Moraji Desai, killing 56 people and resulting in the arrest of Thackeray and his allies. The resulting week of riots and street violence forced the Chief Minister Vasant Naik to ask Thackeray to ask his followers to stand down, which he assented to, cementing his power in Mumbai. Thackeray over the next two decades slowly built up power in Mumbai by, with the assent of the INC, destroying the power of Communist trade unions in Mumbai and Thane to ensure his dominance of the street. He then used tactical seat alliances to slowly gain power, strategically making alliances with everyone from Sharad Pawar to the BJP to socialist parties. He further added a wrinkle to the ethnic nationalism of the SHS by adopting Hindu nationalist stances in the 1980s as the BJP gained momentum.<sup>45</sup> It further cemented its strength due to the horrific communal rioting that rocked Mumbai in 1992, which cemented communal antagonism in the city. The SHS has dominated the municipal corporation of Mumbai ever since.<sup>46</sup> All of this ensured that by 1995, the SHS was the second-largest party in Maharashtra, even as the BJP began mobilizing high-caste and Hindutva voters. This did not mean the state was becoming a BJP stronghold, however.

Soshi's SHS-BJP government lasted a full four years, but was defeated by the resurgent INC in 1999, though the election set up the new standard for the state's politics. Sharad Pawar

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<sup>45</sup>Ambarish Mishra, "The Man Who Changed Maharashtra Politics [Mumbai]." *The Times of India*, Last Modified Nov 19, 2012. <https://proxy.wm.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/man-who-changed-maharashtra-politics-mumbai/docview/1168006789/se-2?accountid=15053>.

<sup>46</sup>Kamlesh Damodar Sutar, "25 Years of Bombay Riots: How the Mayhem Changed a City and Its People Forever." *India Today*, Last Modified December 8, 2017. <https://www.indiatoday.in/fyi/story/bombay-riots-demolition-of-babri-masjid-aftermath-behrampada-radhabai-chawl-1102454-2017-12-07>.

left the INC in 1999 over his anger that the “foreigner” Sonia Gandhi, who was Italian, was taking charge of the INC, and formed his own party, the Nationalist Congress Party. Pawar’s electoral organ managed to perform quite well, dominating the rural parts of Maharashtra and especially the Western region of the state. The party has attempted to mobilize young voters in Mumbai, but has never managed to break into the urban areas of the state.<sup>47</sup> This election result ensured a hung parliament, with neither the INC nor the NDA having a majority, so Pawar’s NCP became the kingmaker. In a surprise move given his recent defection from the INC, he joined up with the INC to form a coalition government. This coalition would go on to rule the state continuously from 1999-2014, and witnessed the culmination of several trends that allowed the BJP to rise in the state.

Fragmentation of the party system in Maharashtra allowed the vaunted INC electoral coalition, combining the Marathi elite with poor voters, to become undone. The slow and steady unraveling of Marathi elite cohesion since the 1980s meant that, almost glacially slow, the INC-dominated Marathi party system slowly lost out. This is unique compared to most other states in India in this case study, as West Bengal saw clean breaks with the INC in 1977, and then the Communists in 2011, and in Tamil Nadu with the INC in 1962. As elites became more decentralized, going to the INC, NCP, SHS, and with smaller breakaway parties like the MNS, founded by a member of the Thackeray family in 2005 as an even more extreme Marathi

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<sup>47</sup>Sandeep A Ashar, “Maharashtra: 20 Years on, Sharad Pawar’s Party Still Struggling to Break the Urban Jinx.” The Indian Express, Last Modified June 10, 2019. <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/maharashtra-20-years-on-sharad-pawar-ncp-still-struggling-to-break-the-urban-jinx-5774236/>.

nationalist party.<sup>48</sup> The voters themselves also began to disassociate from the preferences of Marathi elites. In 2009, 54 seats went to independents and to parties that won less than 6% of the vote, larger than both the BJP's and SHS's seat totals.<sup>49</sup> Fragmentation among the elite due to political entrepreneurship, namely Pawar's development of power among rural farmers in Western Maharashtra, and Thackeray's mobilization of Marathas in Mumbai, helped create this political opening. That both were able to develop electoral niches for themselves, while remaining electorally relevant, reveals the strength of the success of political entrepreneurship in the state. Instead of withering away, the state has proven to have a strong demand for the style of politics the two parties, so unlike ideologically, have in keeping their base together. The entry of the BJP into the state in the 1980s further cemented this siloed political fragmentation, as it created an electoral base of voters left out of the Marathi coalitions. Along with the INC with its traditional state-wide base among Dalits, Muslims, and other Marathi communities, it created a two-coalition system where the non-Marathi party joined with a Marathi party to govern. It proved an enduring political constellation, as the NCP with the INC throughout 1999-2014 and the SHS keeping with the BJP. It took the rise of Modi to finally break the spell and remake the state's politics.

### *2014 Maharashtra Election*

As much of a shock the 2014 general election was to India on the whole, the 2014 Maharashtra election was a shock to the state. The BJP, for the first time, became the single

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<sup>48</sup>Suhas Palshikar, "Maharashtra Assembly Elections: Farewell to Maratha Politics?" *Economic and Political Weekly*, Published Nov 01, 2014, <https://proxy.wm.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/maharashtra-assembly-elections-farewell-maratha/docview/2153719831/se-2?accountid=15053>.

<sup>49</sup>"Maharashtra Assembly Election Results in 2009." *Elections In India*, Last Modified April 22, 2020. <https://www.elections.in/maharashtra/assembly-constituencies/2009-election-results.html>.

largest party, due to their innovative electoral strategy, and competed without the SHS for the first time since the 1990s. Similar to its national strategy, the party expanded outside its traditional base of urban middle-class and Brahmins by focusing on the OBC community. The BJP itself, while winning only 27% of the overall vote, bagged 52% of the upper caste vote and 38% among OBCs,<sup>50</sup> while also winning 52 out of 99 seats in urban areas. The Congress parties managed to hold on in rural areas,<sup>51</sup> but they still saw the loss of over 60 seats between them. Independents and small parties were almost wiped out, as instead of 54 seats the third force in the state's politics<sup>52</sup> bagged only 20 seats. BJP strategy also benefited heavily from the personal charisma and popularity of Modi, who, competing along with the SHS at the Federal level, won 42 out of 48 constituencies in the state mere months earlier. This provided the main push for BJP's knockout results, as Modi campaigned heavily in the state to win his party a majority.<sup>53</sup> The BJP, led by Devendra Fadnavis, did not win a majority, and at first considered a coalition with NCP, which had abandoned its own alliance with the INC months earlier.<sup>54</sup> Nothing came of this dalliance, as the BJP ended up forming a coalition with Shiv Sena under Bal Thackeray's

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<sup>50</sup>Palshikar, "Farewell to Maratha Politics?"Page 4

<sup>51</sup>Vibha Attri and Himanshu Bhattacharya. "Assembly Elections 2014–2016." *Studies in Indian Politics* 5, no. 1 (June 2017): 105–58. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2321023017698276>.

<sup>52</sup>Abhay Datar, "Maharashtra 2014 - A Two-and-a-Half Horse Race." *Economic and Political Weekly*, Published Apr 19, 2014, <https://proxy.wm.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy.wm.edu/magazines/maharashtra-2014-two-half-horse-race/docview/2153723487/se-2?accountid=15053>.

<sup>53</sup>"Maharashtra Assembly Polls 2014: Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Address 15 Campaign Meetings." *The Economic Times*, Last Modified September 27, 2014. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/maharashtra-assembly-polls-2014-prime-minister-narendra-modi-to-address-15-campaign-meetings/articleshow/43634482.cms?from=mdr>.

<sup>54</sup>"Maharashtra Assembly Polls 2014: NCP Ends Alliance with Congress." *The Economic Times*, September 25, 2014. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/maharashtra-assembly-polls-2014-ncp-ends-alliance-with-congress/articleshow/43448370.cms?from=mdr>.

youngest son, Uddhav Thackeray by December.<sup>55</sup> The state ended up seemingly casting out the Congress parties and potentially broke the two-coalition system of Marathi+non-Marathi politics, forcing a recalibration and threat to the traditional political entrepreneurs in the state who had created a lucrative and powerful niche for themselves. Further, the BJP had a choice in either attempting to integrate itself with Maratha elites and slowly displace the SHS and Congress parties for dominance there, or focus its mobilization on cementing its urban and OBC base.<sup>56</sup> What the BJP in the state ended up deciding would set the stage for the 2019 election and the creation of a truly novel coalition government.

### *The 2019 Election*

Going into the 2019 election, the BJP was confident that it had played the coalition game to remain in power. It was hoped that Modi's revocation of Article 370 of the Indian constitution after the 2019 Indian general election, which pushed discourse in the BJP's home turf of national defense, and also popular social welfare schemes Modi had introduced, would boost the down-ballot BJP in the state. However, in a possible sign of discontent, the BJP did not gain in the state in the general election earlier that year, as the result, besides the INC losing 2 seats and the SHS gaining some votes, was the exact same as in 2014. The policies the BJP pushed through in the state, in their attempt to create a lasting political coalition, so threatened the existing balance of power in the state that in the state election, not only did the NDA coalition lose a surprising amount of seats, but the BJP itself found itself pushed out of power and, for the first time, the

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<sup>55</sup>“Devendra Fadnavis' Cabinet Expansion Today.” The Hindu, Last Modified April 7, 2016. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/devendra-fadnavis-cabinet-expansion-today/article6664656.ece>.

<sup>56</sup>Palshikar, “Farewell to Maratha Politics?” Page 5

Congress parties governed with Shiv Sena. This unexpected result belies the expected BJP dominance in the state.

The First Fadnavis Cabinet from 2014-2019 had embarked on a series of policies that had attempted to ensure the BJP would become the dominant party in Maharashtra. This strategy had flaws from the start. Fadnavis had been chosen as the BJP's Chief Minister candidate unexpectedly, over long-time BJP veterans Nitin Gadkari and Eknath Khadse. Further, he was a Brahmin, who only accounted for 3-8% of Maharashtra, compared to the around 31% who are Maratha. This was part of a BJP strategy to consolidate non-Maratha voters under the BJP umbrella, a model it had used in Haryana to great success.<sup>57</sup> Further, while in office Fadnavis had governed hierarchically, prioritizing bureaucratic-driven administration over grassroots mobilization, which, to his enemies within the BJP, isolated him from the party's base and larger party while surrounding himself with a loyal clique. This isolation of Fadnavis from his BJP allies fed party disunity, especially as party heavy-hitters such as Khadse, part of the Leva Patil community which has electoral significant pockets in northern Maharashtra, and Chandrashekhar Bavankule, an OBC influential in Vidarbha, lost out their nominations to their seats. Combined with a strategy of courting defections from the Congress party representatives, this undercut BJP unity.<sup>58</sup> These concerns exacerbated the poor political conditions for the BJP in Maharashtra due to their record of governance, which the Congress parties exploited.

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<sup>57</sup>Dhaval Kulkarni, "Maharashtra Assembly Elections 2019: Local Versus 'National' Issues." *Economic and Political Weekly*, Last Modified Nov 09, 2019, Page 2 <https://proxy.wm.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy.wm.edu/magazines/maharashtra-assembly-elections-2019-local-versus/docview/2313351618/se-2?accountid=15053>.

<sup>58</sup>Kulkarni, "Maharashtra Assembly Elections 2019: Local versus 'National' Issues" page 3

In office, the Fadnavis government had attempted to break the Congress political machine within the Maratha community through rural policy. The cooperative sector was one of the biggest targets of the BJP government, especially as declining sugar prices had devastated rural incomes. This highly Maratha sector, based mostly in Western Maharashtra, is a base of Sharad Pawar, especially as during the Congress coalition he had prioritized protections for the industry and farmer protections. However, the BJP was perceived to handle the sector poorly, as the industry was hit hard by demonetization and the government provided little assistance to the district cooperative banks, which was exacerbated by increased income tax enforcement on the sugar cooperatives. A committee appointed by the Center to investigate drought and flooding in Maharashtra, led by Sunil Kendrekar, a local Aurangabad's divisional commander, recommended the banning of growing sugar in drought-prone regions across Maharashtra,<sup>59</sup> which further discredited the BJP in the eyes of this key constituency.

Beyond the sugar industry, rural Maharashtra was in crisis by 2019. farmers' protests broke out in late 2018 and early 2019 due to “persistent droughts, hailstorms, and unequal distribution of water for irrigation” pushing farmers into deep poverty. Overproduction had lessened incomes for soya bean and cotton producers, on top of insect infestations, pesticide exposure deaths, and rising debts had pushed many farmers toward suicide, all of which caused a breaking point for farmers. The BJP's electoral campaign promises of doubled farmers' incomes, loan waivers, crop insurance schemes, and remunerative prices for produce, all had not been fully implemented, which further distanced farmers, predominantly Marathas, from the BJP in

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<sup>59</sup>Makarand Gadgil, “Ban Sugarcane Production in Marathwada, Says Divisional Commissioner Sunil Kendrekar.” Mumbai Mirror, Last Modified August 30, 2019. <https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/mumbai/other/ban-sugarcane-production-in-marathwada-says-divisional-commissioner-sunil-kendrekar/articleshow/70907193.cms>.

key constituencies.<sup>60</sup> Shiv Sena managed to avoid the blame for this poor implementation in rural areas due to their agitations against private insurance companies for their failure to implement Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana, a farmer insurance program enacted by Modi. The backlash from rural voters was so severe for the BJP that Fadnavis' agricultural minister was defeated by a farmers' organization activist in the 2019 election.<sup>61</sup> It was not just rural Marathas who were angered by the BJP's rural policy, as the caste policy of the BJP had failed to resolve the party's weakness among that key community.

The BJP under the Fadnavis government had attempted a two-pronged effort to create a caste coalition in Maharashtra. Fadnavis had publicly backed a 16% Maratha reservation in the 2014 campaign, in order to alleviate unemployment in the state and gain electoral benefits. The decision was a long-time demand among the Maratha's going all the way back to the 1990s, with marches by the community in favor of the proposal starting in 2016, but was subject to a lengthy legal battle when it was passed in 2018<sup>62</sup> until it was eventually ruled unconstitutional in 2021.<sup>63</sup> Further, neoliberal reforms by the government lessened the possibility of the reservation to alleviate unemployment, as government jobs were cut or left vacant (around 35% according to one metric) and education privatized, thus making the overall amount of government jobs

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<sup>60</sup>Vivek Ghotale and Mukta Kulkarni. "Maharashtra Legislative Assembly Elections 2019: Changing Social Equations." *Economic and Political Weekly*, Published Dec 28, 2019, pages 2-3 <https://proxy.wm.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy.wm.edu/magazines/maharashtra-legislative-assembly-elections-2019/docview/2331256518/se-2?accountid=15053>.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid

<sup>62</sup>Sonam Saigal, "Maratha Reservation: A Timeline of Events." *The Hindu*, Last Modified May 5, 2021. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/mumbai/maratha-reservation-a-timeline-of-events/article34487593.ece>.

<sup>63</sup>Krishnadas Rajagopal, "Supreme Court Declares Maratha Quota Law Unconstitutional." *The Hindu*, Last Modified November 30, 2021. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/sc-declares-maratha-quota-law-unconstitutional/article60685975.ece>.

smaller and lessening the impact of the reservation among unemployed Marathi youth.<sup>64</sup>

Conversely, outreach to Maratha elites was energetic, with even descendants of Shivaji Maharaj being put forward as candidates, which created an impression that the party did not really understand the Maratha community beyond playing at regional symbols.<sup>65</sup> This Maratha outreach policy was in spite of the BJP's traditional strategy of empowering OBCs in the state, which alienated this broad community from its traditional alliance with the BJP. The conflict Fadnavis had with prominent BJP figures like Khadse and Munde further had a caste dynamic, as these OBC figures were displaced by the Brahmin Fadnavis and replaced by Maratha figures who lacked legitimacy within the party and broadly across Maharashtra.<sup>66</sup> All of this ensured that the BJP had significant weakness within Maharashtra leading to the 2019 elections, which was capitalized by Sharad Pawar and other political entrepreneurs.

The mobilization by Pawar to defeat the BJP, even as he said he would possibly join a BJP government in 2014, highlights the enduring flexibility and opportunism of a prototypical political entrepreneur. Pawar had seen many of his MLAs defect to the BJP since, had seen his party perform poorly in the Lok Sabha elections earlier in 2019, and further had been targeted by the Enforcement Directorate for a money-laundering case before the 2019 campaign, all of which seemed poised to ruin Pawar's political fortunes. He managed to fight back and force the ED to relent, but it created a lasting impression that the BJP was targeting a key opposition figure,

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<sup>64</sup>Amey Tirodkar, "Elections 2019: Unemployment to Affect BJP's Performance in Maharashtra, Say Youth Leaders." NewsClick, Last Modified April 8, 2019. <https://www.newsclick.in/Elections-2019-Unemployment-BJP-Performance-Maharashtra-SYouth-Leaders>.

<sup>65</sup>Ghotale and Kulkarni, "Maharashtra Legislative Assembly Elections 2019: Changing Social Equations" page 3-4

<sup>66</sup>Ghotale and Kulkarni, "Maharashtra Legislative Assembly Elections 2019: Changing Social Equations" page 5-7

especially one as veteran and respected as Pawar.<sup>67</sup> He soon began touring the state mobilizing support, partly to sideline his nephew Ajit Pawar, who was perceived to be interested in a linkup with the BJP.<sup>68</sup> In one of the most memorable moments of the campaign he gave a rally in Satara during heavy rains, refusing an umbrella as, “Varun Raja has blessed the NCP. With his blessings, Satara district will now do magic in the upcoming polls” and then launched a savage attack against the BJP-SHS government.<sup>69</sup> He especially focused on Maratha pride and identity during the campaign, focusing on the threat that the Center posed against the Marathas, and making rural issues the central theme of the campaign, and not the national issues that dominated the BJP campaign.<sup>70</sup> He further consciously promoted its OBC leaders, from the old guard like Sunil Tatkare, to rising leaders like Amol Kolhe, linking Maratha and OBC concerns in the rural economy, which gained significant OBC support.<sup>71</sup> This focus on every weakness of the BJP in the state was possible due to Sharad Pawar’s unique status as long-time entrepreneur with everything to lose from electoral defeat, and so mobilized tenaciously.

Due to this strategy, the NCP thus consolidated its support within the Marathi community while winning increased support from OBCs. This helps explain its consolidation in Western

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<sup>67</sup>Press Trust of India, “Not Surprised at Ed's Move, Says NCP Chief Sharad Pawar on Bank Scam Case.” India Today, Last Modified February 8, 2022. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/not-surprised-at-ed-move-nep-chief-sharad-pawar-bank-scam-case-1602832-2019-09-25>.

<sup>68</sup>Faisal Malik “Ajit Pawar: A Political Force Not Far from Financial Controversy.” Hindustan Times, Last Modified November 5, 2021. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/mumbai-news/ajit-pawar-a-political-force-not-far-from-financial-controversy-101636050668593.html>.

<sup>69</sup>FPJ Web Desk. “This Day, Last Year: When Sharad Pawar Delivered His Iconic Satara Speech in Pouring Rain.” Free Press Journal, Last Modified October 18, 2020. <https://www.freepressjournal.in/mumbai/this-day-last-year-when-sharad-pawar-delivered-his-iconic-satara-speech-in-pouring-rain>.

<sup>70</sup>Ghotale and Kulkarni, “Maharashtra Legislative Assembly Elections 2019: Changing Social Equations” Page 4-5

<sup>71</sup>Ghotale and Kulkarni, “Maharashtra Legislative Assembly Elections 2019: Changing Social Equations” Page 7

Maharashtra, its traditional stronghold, but also in North Maharashtra, Marathwada, and Vidarbha. The party experienced a 13 seat rise, highlighting Sharad Pawar's successful mobilization of both regional Maratha identity with rural discontent given his unique place as one of the most flexible political entrepreneurs in the state. The stakes were extremely high for the party to win or face possible extinction, and jail for Pawar, and so the party was able to use its tight electoral organization to try and maintain its power base through an explicitly localized campaign. This is compared to the mixed electoral outcomes of the SHS and INC in the same election.

The Shiv Sena, even though it was associated with the BJP government, also showed political flexibility in surviving a poor incumbent condition. The party had historically been larger than the BJP in the state and Bal Thackeray had always flaunted this fact, but Modi's rise had lessened this dominance. The breakup of the SHS-BJP alliance meant the party lost its influence over BJP policy, especially given the NCP was willing to join with the BJP in government after the 2014 election. However, the party was not happy with its now subordinate position, as the two parties had sniped at each other over the 5 years of the coalition. Further, the party faced rare rebellions, as of the 13 independent legislators elected in the 2019 election were Shiv Sena or BJP leaders who ran against the official nominees of either party, which ensured the Thackeray family lost its traditional home seat in Mumbai. The 2019 election also was the first time members of the Thackeray family had directly fought in elections or been put forward as Chief Minister, ending the division between the party leadership and legislative wing. The reason for the consolidation of the SHS by the Thackeray's was thus obvious, as the party had much to lose from a consolidating BJP, especially as the two fought tenaciously for control of the

lucrative Mumbai civic corporation.<sup>72</sup> The Thackeray's thus faced a decision: keep with the BJP and slowly find itself cut out from its base as the BJP capitalized on Modi and Indian nationalism, or try and fight the BJP and risk losing control of its Mumbai fiefdom. Further, internal anger within the party was rising as the party accepted running fewer candidates than the BJP, with Uddhav Thackeray apologizing for not negotiating a 50:50 split of seats and for his party's limited influence in government.<sup>73</sup> Thus, Uddhav Thackeray, as a rational political entrepreneur fearing eventual political irrelevance, was primed to pursue an independent policy vis-a-vis the hegemonic BJP.

Compared to the NCP and SHS, the INC seemed utterly unconcerned about the election. Sonia Gandhi did not even campaign in the election, and when Rahul Gandhi came to speak at the Dharavi constituency in Mumbai, he focused on national issues like aircraft purchases. This was instead of focusing on the specific concerns of the constituency, which had seen its leather industry hurt by the government decision to ban cow slaughter and had been hit hard by demonetisation. The party still gained 2 seats, due to mobilization by Zeeshan Siddique in Mumbai among poor Marathi-speaking voters, a traditional Sena constituency, and which capitalized, almost by accident, on anti-incumbency the BJP had provoked.<sup>74</sup> Thus the INC, a party who could capitalize on its own inertia to win most elections, continued its unpopular electoral strategy and found itself behind both the SHS and NCP to a fourth place finish. Smaller

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<sup>72</sup>Kulkarni, "Maharashtra Assembly Elections 2019: Local Versus 'National' Issues." Page 2

<sup>73</sup>Abhinav Ranjan, "Maharashtra Assembly election 2019: Uddhav Thackeray apologises to Shiv Sena workers for giving away seats to ally BJP" Financial Express. Last Modified October 9, 2019. <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/maharashtra-assembly-election-2019-uddhav-thackeray-apologises-to-shiv-sena-workers-for-giving-away-seats-to-ally-bjp/1730275/>.

<sup>74</sup>Kulkarni, "Maharashtra Assembly Elections 2019: Local Versus 'National' Issues." Page 5-6

parties also did well in this election, with the most notable being Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi led by Prakash Ambedkar, grandson of Dr Ambedkar, who had attempted a Dalit-Muslim alliance against the traditional parties of Maharashtra.<sup>75</sup> The party did well, winning 4.5% of the vote but winning no seats, and was blamed by Pawar and the INC for acting as a spoiler, stopping it from winning more seats and votes in both the Federal and State elections.

After the results of the election, the BJP found itself politically isolated. The alliance between the BJP and SHS broke down immediately, as both sides began mutual recrimination and allegations of not following through with agreed deals.<sup>76</sup> Negotiations between the SHS, NCP, and INC on forming a government began immediately, but Fadnavis announced he had formed a government with the NCP under Ajit Pawar. After legal and political wrangling, Ajit returned to the fold and Sharad Pawar announced he had formed a majority coalition with Shiv Sena, the NCP, and the INC.<sup>77</sup> The Thackeray cabinet thus took power, marking for the first time a Thackeray Chief Minister, and an alliance between the vigorously nationalist Shiv Sena and secular Congress parties.

Faced with a BJP that threatened all of their interests, Pawar had managed to create a highly diverse political coalition and survive at the pinnacle of Maratha politics for one more legislative term. The coalition, while surprising ideologically for every party involved, makes

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<sup>75</sup>Akash Gulankar, "How Prakash Ambedkar's Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi Split Cong-NCP Votes, Benefiting BJP-Sena in 9 Seats." News18, Last Modified May 29, 2019. <https://www.news18.com/news/politics/how-prakash-ambedkars-vanchit-bahujan-aghadi-split-cong-ncp-votes-benefiting-bjp-sena-in-9-seats-2161569.html>.

<sup>76</sup>Gyan Varma, "BJP-Shiv Sena Ties Reach Breaking Point with Fadnavis Resignation." mint, Last Modified November 8, 2019. <https://www.livemint.com/elections/assembly-elections/bjp-shiv-sena-ties-reach-breaking-point-with-fadnavis-resignation-11573236257743.html>.

<sup>77</sup>Roy, Siddharthya. "Understanding Maharashtra's Political Game of Thrones." The Diplomat, Last Modified December 9, 2019. <https://thediplomat.com/2019/12/understanding-maharashtras-political-game-of-thrones/>.

sense given the nature of the political entrepreneurs involved. Sharad Pawar and Uddhav Thackeray depend on maintaining their constituency to remain relevant, and the BJP was the biggest threat to their continued existence.<sup>78</sup> They represent differing, and almost exclusive, electoral coalitions, and so can quite cynically join together safe in the knowledge each will not seriously hurt the other. Thus, it counts as a victory for localist politicians in defeating a national party that threatened their interests, and has managed to survive as a coalition even in spite of internal fighting.<sup>79</sup> Maharashtra also highlights the salience of rural politics and caste-regional identities that act as a programmatic wedge against the BJP. It further highlights that state political entrepreneurs have to focus their attention and resources on their respective state elections. Compared to an INC that made the strategic decision to not waste its resources in what it considered a doomed campaign, the NCP and SHS had to fight and orient themselves to survive long-term, as each party lacked the strategic depth of the INC. Thus, even as the state parties were able to outmaneuver the BJP, it also highlights the inherently locally salient political orientation of the party and how each faces possible problems expanding outside their well-developed electoral niche compared to the more versatile INC and BJP.

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<sup>78</sup>"A Shift in the Politics of Maharashtra." *Economic and Political Weekly*, Last Modified Nov 30, 2019, Pages 2-3 <https://proxy.wm.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.proxy.wm.edu/magazines/shift-politics-maharashtra/docview/2321084994/se-2?accountid=15053>.

<sup>79</sup>Manoj Dattatrye More, "Explained: Tracking the Churn in Maharashtra's Ruling Coalition." *The Indian Express*, Last Modified July 15, 2021. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/maharashtra-ncp-congress-shiv-sena-bjp-7401498/>.

# **Tamil Nadu**

## *Background*

Tamil Nadu is unique in India for its totally regionalized political party system. Since 1967, Dravidian parties have ruled the state, as it was one of the first states to totally displace the INC. A two-party system developed by the 1980s between the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), with smaller Dravidian parties competing in the mix as well. The Indian National Congress has always had a presence in the state, but after the 1960s it has been marginalized, usually competing along the Dravidian parties or by itself, and the BJP historically has never really had a unique breakthrough in the state compared to the rest of India. However, as India turned into a two-party coalition system in the 1990s at the federal level, both Dravidian parties joined with the Bharatiya Janata Party's National Democratic Alliance (NDA) or the Indian National Congress' United Progressive Alliance (UPA) as the situation demanded in order to gain federal benefits. This alliance-making, originally pragmatic, has now cemented into a party system mirroring the Federal divide between the BJP and INC. The state's 2021 election thus provides key details about what can happen when two state parties compete against each other in a federalized and polarized atmosphere in the two-coalition system.

Dravidian parties themselves evolved from political movements from India's colonial period. Compared to Northern India, which was dominated by Muslim dynasties going back to the original Ghazi dynasty in the 12th century, Tamil Nadu kept the country's indigenous social and class makeup over time. As the British came to dominate and rule the land of Tamil Nadu,

elite Brahmins began exerting influence in the British administration to achieve dominance there. As the 19th century progressed into the 20th century and urbanization and cultural literacy spread, this activated landowning non-Brahmins, who historically had been in a social alliance with the Brahmins. Elite members of this landowning non-Brahmin community began agitating and formulating a position distinct from that of the mostly Home Rule-supporting Brahmins, and so a specific Tamil cultural nationalism ideology began to be formed in the 1920s with the moderate Justice Party and the radical Self-Respect Movement.<sup>80</sup> This meant in Tamil Nadu, as time progressed the state developed a conflict between the Brahmin-dominated INC, with Tamil nationalists divided between moderates and radicals.<sup>81</sup> This dichotomy did ensure the state had a regionalist politics earlier than almost any other state in India, compared to the more communalist agitation seen in Northern India, with the Muslim League combatting the INC.

The Tamil nationalist movement charted a new course in 1944 as Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, the long-time leader of the Justice Party, founded the Dravidar Kazhagam, helped by his lieutenant C.N. Annadurai, as a radical Dravidian party. The party was split though Annadurai who wanted social reform, independence, and entry into mass parliamentary politics, and Periyar, who wanted to focus on social reform and then independence and politics, partly due to his long-time association with the British.<sup>82</sup> This conflict over strategy ensured that in 1949,

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<sup>80</sup>Marguerite Ross Barnett, "The Justice Party, The Non-Brahmin Movement, and Early Conceptions of Dravidian-ness" Chapter. In *Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*, 1st ed, Pages 15–32. Princeton University Press, 1976.

<sup>81</sup>Barnett, "Developing the Politics of Radical Social Reform" *Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*, Pages 32-56

<sup>82</sup>Barnett, "The Dravida Kazhagam, The Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, and Radical Politics in a Changing Political Arena" In *Politics of Cultural Nationalism in South India*, Pages 56-89

Annadurai, who was explicitly anti-Hindu, pro-land reform, anti-caste, and a distinct Tamil community, would leave the DK and found the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, the DMK, along with other electoralists from the DK, more than 3/4ths of members of the DK.<sup>83</sup> This movement was targeted specifically to win power electorally against the predominantly Brahmin Indian National Congress at the time, who had ruled the Madras State (modern Tamil Nadu, parts of Karnataka, and Andhra Pradesh) since the 1930s after the state was opened to local elections by the British authorities.<sup>84</sup> After the party's founding, it led a series of protests and agitations against the INC government, namely early on after their 1952 electoral debut on education bills they demeaned "caste",<sup>85</sup> but the INC under Kamaraj Nadar developed a strong electoral base under Brahmins, landowning non-Brahmins, and a mass base from patronage networks which kept it in power throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Support by Periyar's DK also helped keep the INC alive among Tamil's generally.<sup>86</sup> This period where the DMK was out of power and building its power professionalized it and gave it a tighter electoral grassroots, while also moderating its ideology to be less anti-Hindu, abandoning its secessionist tendencies, to focus more explicitly on their constituents, fighting for the "common man".<sup>87</sup> As the 1960s progressed, the DMK focused on building alliances with other parties and attacking the INC record in office. INC language policies were a large flashpoint, with compulsory Hindi in schools provoking fierce

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<sup>83</sup>Ibid

<sup>84</sup>V.K. Ananth "Fragmented Politics in Tamil Nadu." *Economic and Political Weekly*. Apr 12, 2014. page 1

<sup>85</sup>Barnett, "DK, DMK, and Radical Politics" in *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in Tamil Nadu*, pages 32-55

<sup>86</sup>Barnett, "Emergent Cultural Nationalism" in *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in Tamil Nadu*, Pages 97-101

<sup>87</sup>Barnett, "Emergent Cultural Nationalism" in *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in Tamil Nadu*, Pages 89-118

protests and riots,<sup>88</sup> but also INC corruption, giving India's states more power, and bread and butter issues like inflation. With this litany of issues dragging the INC down, and amid a generally bad atmosphere for the INC in 1967, the DMK won a decisive victory: winning 138 seats and with the entire Congress cabinet being defeated.<sup>89</sup> A new era had dawned in Tamil Nadu.

The DMK would go on to entrench Dravidian parties in Tamil Nadu. They soon rechristened Madras state into Tamil Nadu in 1969,<sup>90</sup> though Annadurai died within the year. Party leadership then went to his long-time ally M Karunanidhi. He would go on to win another legislative majority in 1971, cementing the Tamil politics of the state and further sidelining the remnants of the INC. The success of the DMK in creating a sustainable electoral majority in the state highlights the variable nature of political entrepreneurs. To be a political entrepreneur does not mean one lacks ideology or strong political beliefs, but it does mean that one is able to find existing issues within their society to mobilize politically. The mobilization of land reform, Tamil politics, and anti-INC sentiment all combined to help the DMK leaders create a strong electoral niche for themselves, which meant total dominance throughout the 1970s. During the period of Congress dominance, they relied on patronage and upper-caste support, which forced the DMK to aim "appeals at castes and classes not already politicized by Congress; by trying direct rather than indirect methods of mobilization in order to erode that portion of the Congress vote based on social deference; and by penetrating new regions and rural areas that the Dravidian movement

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<sup>88</sup>Barnett, "Politics of the Loyal Opposition" in *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in Tamil Nadu*, pages 131-135

<sup>89</sup>Barnett, "Politics of the Loyal Opposition" in *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in Tamil Nadu*, pages 135-158

<sup>90</sup>Ananth, "Fragmented Politics" page 2

had not yet thoroughly organized. In these attempts to expand support, the DMK articulated an ideological alternative (Tamil cultural nationalism) and linked it to important pragmatic and emotional issues, such as language”. This mobilization saw turnout shoot up through the 1960s, from only 49.3% in 1957 to 76.8% in 1967.<sup>91</sup> The DMK under Annadurai, and extended by Karunanidhi, highlights the enduring electoral body created by the DMK to compete against the INC, an organ that would soon develop into a distinct political tradition of its own.

The singular hegemony of the DMK did not last long. After the death of Annadurai, the long-time DMK member and famous movie star M.G. Ramaachandran would soon leave the DMK and found his own movement, the AIADMK. MGR, as Ramaachandran is better known, would sweep to power in the 1977 elections based on his own unique blend of heroic, charismatic populism based on his long-time film reputation.<sup>92</sup> His party would go on to govern for the next 10 years, and after his own death in 1989 the party leadership was eventually taken up by J. Jayalalitha, a famous Tamil actress. From then on, the two parties would compete against one another, the DMK led by Karunanidhi and the AIADMK led by Jayalalithaa, for the next 7 elections between 1989-2016. Tamil politics had evolved into a unique political scene, based on political entrepreneurs mobilizing local linguistic nationalism to cement a regional system first against a powerful INC, and then against one another.

### Tamil Politics, 1989-2016

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<sup>91</sup>Barnett, “Politics of the Loyal Opposition” in *The Politics of Cultural Nationalism in Tamil Nadu*, pages 138-139

<sup>92</sup>Anjana Shekar. “The MGR Magic: Looking Back at How Cinema Propelled the Leader of the AIADMK.” *The News Minute*, Last Modified May 27, 2021. <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/mgr-magic-looking-back-how-cinema-propelled-leader-aiadmk-74881>.

Tamil politics from the death of MGR to 2016 exhibited several unique characteristics.

As both the DMK and AIADMK had the same political heritage, they were, seemingly, both populist, vaguely socialist, personalist, and aggressively Tamil. However, from these original characteristics, they evolved into distinct political traditions to represent distinctive political constituencies within the state. The DMK exhibited a form of “assertive” populism, which attacked the narrow elite for limiting the power of the common people and so demanded greater privileges for the common people. The people were mostly middle class, neither overtly Brahmin nor Dalit focused, and was exhibited for its affirmative action policies for backward castes, land reform, and expanded education. The DMK also showed itself more anti-Hindi and even anti-Hindu at times,<sup>93</sup> helped by the atheistic positions of Karunanidhi and the rationalist position of Keriya.<sup>94</sup> The AIADMK showed a different version of populism, which was more based on a paternalistic idea of the great heroic leader protecting the less well-off, which was foundational to MGR’s acting reputation. It showed itself through the party’s free meals for school children, which was in line with the party’s policies of alleviating poverty but not disrupting the power dynamics that cause poverty. It also was, at this point, more inclusive of other identities and mobilized different identities than the DMK, mostly more Brahmin and Hindu than the DMK.<sup>95</sup>

This populist distinction is vital to political entrepreneurship, as creating distinct forms of

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<sup>93</sup>Andrew Wyatt. “Populism and politics in contemporary Tamil Nadu, Contemporary South Asia”, May 31, 2013. Commonwealth & Comparative Politics Volume 51:1, Pages 366-369

<sup>94</sup>India Today Web Desk. “M Karunanidhi: An Atheist Who Ruled Even as Religion Ruled Politics.” India Today, Last Modified August 8, 2018. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/m-karunanidhi-an-atheist-who-ruled-even-as-religion-ruled-politics-1308328-2018-08-08>.

<sup>95</sup>Andrew Wyatt. “Populism and politics in contemporary Tamil Nadu, Contemporary South Asia”, May 31, 2013. Commonwealth & Comparative Politics Volume 51:1, Pages 366-369

populism meant mobilizing distinct communities that kept the two parties going over time, even as the party's original founders died off. The quest for larger electoral bases facilitated the two parties making national alliances for political clout and federal resources, as both parties joined quite opportunistically the INC's UPA and the BJP's NDA.<sup>96</sup> The truly important election of Tamil Nadu before 2019 was the 2006 election, which introduced programmatic development to the state more so than any other previous election.

The quest for even broader political coalitions means broadening a party's populist base and evolving into programmatic parties. Political entrepreneurs facilitate this development once they have created an electoral niche for themselves, to expand out of that niche they must appeal to a broader community and so must turn to more universalist and broader politics than their initial more limited appeal. The 2006 election showed this element fully. The DMK in this election campaigned on an electoral manifesto based on explicit universalist programs for the poor and vulnerable. The party won the election over the AIADMK under Jayalalithaa, and even though it only won a minority government, the party still attempted to push through its electoral manifesto in full.<sup>97</sup> The party still engaged in clientelism patronage and had one infamous corruption scandal in a vote-buying scandal in a Thirumangalam by-election in 2009,<sup>98</sup> but the introduction of programmatic politics did change Tamil politics. It forced the AIADMK to adopt programmatic universalism itself, though in its own unique way. Jayalalithaa criticized the DMK

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<sup>96</sup>Arun G. Kumar, "Changing facets of Tamil Nadu Politics: Emergence of Hindu Nationalist Party in Dravidian Land" *International Journal of Applied Social Science* Volume 6:3, Mar 2019, pages page 715-716

<sup>97</sup>"A Swing of 4.13% Votes Help DMK-Led Alliance Capture Power." *Outlook India*, Last Modified May 12, 2006. <https://archive.ph/20120717133355/http://news.outlookindia.com/item.aspx>.

<sup>98</sup>Andrew Wyatt, "Combining clientelist and programmatic politics in Tamil Nadu", Jan 24, 2013, *South India, Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 51:1, Page 33

for not managing its ambitious programs competently and for making a society of, “parasites, dependent on freebies, doles and sops”,<sup>99</sup> but still put through its own electoral program focusing on similar programs.<sup>100</sup> The rise of Modi in 2014 and its aftermath further upset the state’s politics, forcing political entrepreneurs in the state to reform their practices in key ways.

Originally, neither the DMK nor the AIADMK joined the BJP’s NDA in 2014. The DMK had supported the INC government from 2004-2014, but had left the UPA for the 2014 election. The AIADMK maintained its neutrality and ran on its own coalition, capitalizing on its successful term in government since 2011. The BJP ran in the state along with smaller Dravidian parties aligned to it with the NDA, which created a broad NDA coalition with the BJP as an anchor. Together, the BJP achieved its best ever result in the state and the alliance itself gained 18.9% of the vote, winning 2 seats as the AIADMK won all other seats. This still was a huge shock to the political system given the BJP had always been a hugely marginal political force in Tamil Nadu. This innovation highlighted how minor Tamil political entrepreneurs were willing to align with Modi to exploit his charisma for their own political ends. Jayalalithaa kept her distance from the BJP through Modi’s term, as she was unwilling to subvert her own political hegemony by aligning with an equally dominant politician in his own right. It took her death in 2016 at the age of 68, and the death of Karunanidhi in 2018 at the truly venerable age of 94, to radically shift Tamil politics into a highly polarized referendum on the BJP.

### *2021 Tamil Election*

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<sup>99</sup>Wyat, “Populism and Politics” Pages 371-376

<sup>100</sup>Wyatt, “Clientelism” Pages 42-46

Tamil Nadu entered a new phase of its history upon the death of Jayalalithaa and Karunanidhi. For the first time since 1989 for the AIADMK, and for the first time since 1969 for the DMK, the parties would receive new leadership. The DMK would be led by Karunanidhi's son, MK Stalin, who had been a fixture of the party and his father's deputy for decades. He was so close with his father he was actually made Deputy Chief Minister in 2009, the first time someone had been put in that position in Tamil Nadu's history, and so had a long reputation as a committed party man.<sup>101</sup> Stalin had to endure some dynastic infighting from his older brother,<sup>102</sup> but this did not stop him from going through with deep reforms of the party, asserting more centralized control on the historically decentralized DMK dominated by regional party bosses, which increased his own power within the party.<sup>103</sup> Though the party succession was dynastic in nature, Stalin, already an old man upon taking leadership of his party at the age of 66, had proven his competence within the party and had even been mayor of Chennai from 1996-2002, earning a reputation as a competent administrator.<sup>104</sup> Thus, he took power with a developed party and leadership behind him, allowing him to establish himself as a potent political entrepreneur immediately upon taking power, unlike the AIADMK.

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<sup>101</sup>Divyva Chandrababu, "The Political Life of DMK's MK Stalin." Hindustan Times, Last Modified March 26, 2021. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/elections/tamil-nadu-assembly-election/the-political-life-of-dmk-s-mk-stalin-101616745689721.html>.

<sup>102</sup>PTI. "MK Stalin Takes over Reins of DMK." Bloomberg Quint, Last Modified August 28, 2018. <https://www.bloombergquint.com/politics/mk-stalin-takes-over-reins-of-dmk>.

<sup>103</sup>Sruthisagar Yamunan, "Will MK Stalin's Reshaping of the DMK Pay off – and Vindicate Karunanidhi's Succession Plan?" Scroll.in, Last Modified March 30, 2021.

<sup>104</sup>B. Kolappan, "An Administrator with a Good Track Record." The Hindu, August 27, 2018. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/an-administrator-with-a-good-track-record/article24795862.ece>.

By comparison, the AIADMK had a much more chaotic succession. Edappadi K Palaniswami (EPS) would eventually take power, but only after a protracted succession battle with long-time Jayalalithaa deputy O. Paneerselvam (OPS), who became Chief Minister upon Jayalalithaa's death. EPS managed to take power only by making OPS his Deputy Chief Minister in a power-sharing agreement in 2017, but the two factions would still be at cross-purposes.<sup>105</sup> Under Palaniswami's leadership, the AIADMK has taken a different tack towards the BJP and Modi than Jayalalithaa ever did, joining the NDA in 2019, though discussions about joining the government began in 2017. The strategy was multifold. It would cement Palaniswami's leadership of the AIADMK by sidelining anti-BJP elements within his party, it would ensure more regional influence for Tamil Nadu in government, and it would link the party with a proven vote-getter.<sup>106</sup> With the death of Jayalalithaa and his own fragile political base, it thus made sense he would track a new path for the party by, ideally, giving it further electoral strength after the death of its long-time and iconic leader. Further, as a political entrepreneur, it would expand the party's voter base to the type of Hindu nationalist supporters who were placated by Jayalalithaa throughout her tenure but who might turn off the AIADMK in future elections. Whether or not this dual strategy, of entrenching his coalition while expanding it outside the Dravidian tradition that was historically hostile to BJP hindu nationalism, would be successful would be tested in the 2019 general election in the state, which was tied with multiple by-elections for control of the legislative assembly.

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<sup>105</sup>Yamunan, "Reshaping of the DMK" Scroll.in

<sup>106</sup> G.C. Shekhar, "Will AIADMK Join the NDA Government?" Outlook India, Last Modified July 31, 2017. <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/will-aiadmk-join-the-nda-government/299940>.

India's 2019 election would be a decisive defeat for the AIADMK. The DMK won 38 out of 39 Federal seats, up from 0 from 2014, and 13 out of 24 by-election seats, gaining 10 seats.<sup>107</sup> The decisive victory did not remove Palaniswami from power, but it did serve as a great shock to the party that had dominated the 2010s. The election served as a dry run for the 2021 election, with MK Stalin focusing tightly on the state's Dravidian identity, rural unrest, and relentless anger at Modi, helped by his united coalition of the INC and the Communist parties.<sup>108</sup> Further, Modi's unique unpopularity in the state provided key electoral support in this general election, strengthening Stalin's electoral appeal.<sup>109</sup> The 2021 election would thus be a test to see whether or not these issues would have salience in a state-wide, and not a Federal, context.

For Tamil Nadu, the April 2021 election was again a clear referendum on Modi. MK Stalin himself, a political entrepreneur as effective as his father, linked the AIADMK tightly to the BJP, saying in one interview that, "People have understood that even if AIADMK gets a single-seat this time, their MLA will function as a BJP MLA." and that the, "BJP wants to break AIADMK and establish their foot in this land" with a government led by the DMK able to fight, "against the BJP and not allow it into the state".<sup>110</sup> Though it was not a straight DMK-BJP fight,

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<sup>107</sup>Venkatesha Babu, "Lok Sabha Election Result 2019: DMK's Stalin Emerges from Father Karunanidhi's Shadow with Emphatic Lead." Hindustan Times, Last Modified May 23, 2019. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/lok-sabha-elections/lok-sabha-election-result-2019-dmk-s-stalin-emerges-from-karunanidhi-s-shadow-with-emphatic-lead/story-O2BRVgG3SXMO6wZ0J8uDeL.html>.

<sup>108</sup> Kavitha Muralidharan, "Why Tamil Nadu Voted the Way It Did." The Wire, Last Modified May 24, 2019. <https://thewire.in/politics/election-results-2019-tamil-nadu-dmk>.

<sup>109</sup> Aditya Menon, "PM Modi Least Liked In South & Punjab, Popularity Just 2.2% In TN." BloombergQuint, Last Modified March 22, 2019. <https://www.bloombergquint.com/politics/pm-modi-most-disliked-in-south-india-tamil-nadu-kerala-punjab-lok-sabha-polls-2019>.

<sup>110</sup>Dhanya Rajendran, "I'm a Tamil Nadu Soldier Fighting BJP's Fascism & AIADMK's Corruption: MK Stalin to TNM." The News Minute, Last Modified April 1, 2021. <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/im-tamil-nadu-soldier-fighting-bjps-fascism-aiadmks-corruption-mk-stalin-tnm-146332>.

to the voters MK Stalin was portraying it just as that and, for all intents and purposes, it became that given how Federalized the election became. MK Stalin, as a rational political entrepreneur, was able to move the election away from a fight just about the AIADMK's legacy in government from 2011-2021, but, because of its alliance with the BJP, make the entire election about the BJP, as if the BJP had been ruling the state for the past 10 years. He played on his state's almost exceptionally strong regionalist identity and social-justice focused Dravidian tradition to oppose the BJP and use his party's tighter organization, which he himself had reformed, to even more effectively convey this central message. His coalition allies, namely the Indian National Congress, attempted to capitalize on these same themes, as Rahul Gandhi gave a large rally across Tamil Nadu in January 2021 to highlight many of the same themes as the DMK, highlighting Tamil pride, but focused mostly on the BJP's overall economic policy and policies against China.<sup>111</sup> Rahul Gandhi himself was much more popular than Modi in Tamil Nadu, which made the INC in Tamil Nadu have the most competent and coherent campaign out of the cases discussed.<sup>112</sup> By comparison, the DMK acted on more salient Tamil anger against the BJP and AIADMK, namely intense rural anger that had developed since 2016.

Part of the reason the BJP was so unpopular in Tamil Nadu was the BJP's perceived failure to alleviate rural Tamils' distress. The state had experienced a 41% rain deficit compared to its usual monsoon rains in 2017, with 32 districts being declared drought, and 21 of

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<sup>111</sup>SS. Kumar, "Rahul Gandhi's Three-Day Visit to Tamil Nadu Energised the Party in the State." National Herald, Last Modified January 26, 2021. <https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/rahul-gandhis-three-day-visit-to-tamil-nadu-energised-the-party-in-the-state>.

<sup>112</sup>IANS. "Rahul Gandhi Preferred as next Prime Minister of India in These Two States." The Bridge Chronicle, Last Modified February 27, 2021. <https://www.thebridgechronicle.com/news/nation/rahul-gandhi-preferred-as-next-prime-minister-of-india-in-these-two-states>.

those severely in drought. A Supreme Court case over water access with Karnataka ended in Tamil Nadu's favor in 2018, but that failed to alleviate the crisis. Farmers began going to Delhi to protest the lack of adequate Federal support, and were ignored by the government. They then engaged in bizarre protests like holding rats in their mouths, displaying the skulls of farmers who had decided to take their own lives due to the crisis, and drinking urine. Palaniswami went out and spoke to the farmers eventually,<sup>113</sup> but the damage was done to the BJP's perception in the state. Further, the BJP had banned beef slaughter in 2017,<sup>114</sup> after a Supreme Court case had banned Jallikattu, a traditional Tamil bull-taming competition as part of Pongal competitions, in 2014. The winners of the competition would be given money and prizes, and even if the bull won a competition the owner would win prizes for themselves for raising a bull unable to be felled, plus fetching huge prizes for the owner in cattle fairs. Thus, the combined decisions wiped out a key part of Tamil farmer's incomes, and a point of huge Tamil pride, right when the state was facing an agricultural crisis and farmers were desperately needing cash. Further, the introduction of cross-bred species of cow, while increasing milk yields, had displaced existing species of Tamil cows, those most prized for Jallikattu.

Protests would soon break out starting January 8th 2017 to defend Jallikattu, right at the time when Jayalalithaa had died and Karunanidhi was severely ailing, thus becoming a largely leaderless protest movement. Without leadership, the protests became intensely Tamil nationalist

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<sup>113</sup> Karthikeyan Hemalatha, "#Tamilnadu: Are Farmers' Woes and Rural Distress on Government's Waitlist?" NewsLaundry, Last Modified April 6, 2019. <https://www.newslaundry.com/2019/04/06/election-2019-kerala-karnataka-agrarian-crisis>.

<sup>114</sup> Kumar Shakti Shekhar, "BJP Shows Flexibility over Beef Ban, Says States Are Free to Decide on Slaughter of Cows." India Today, Last Modified June 1, 2017. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/cow-slaughter-bjp-states-free-decide-beef-ban-980421-2017-06-01>.

and regionalist, playing on the deep anger of central government dominance.<sup>115</sup> The Tamil Assembly passed a law unanimously legalizing Jallikattu on January 23rd 2017,<sup>116</sup> but the anti-BJP feelings were already triggered and ripe for reaping. Beyond these Tamil-specific protests, Tamil Nadu farmers also joined anti-Farm Amendment protests,<sup>117</sup> with almost 3,000 charged for the protests, and another almost 6,000 charged for protesting various AIADMK development projects that had elicited local opposition.<sup>118</sup> Responding to this, MK Stalin did not let the opportunity to play on rural anger go to pass, and he launched his own “going to the village” outreach scheme in 2019 upon taking power of the DMK in order to hear rural grievances.<sup>119</sup> Thus, MK Stalin was very well-prepared to capitalize off rural anger and exploit this groundswell of anger for electoral benefit, combining a Dravidian political tradition to the specifics of the situation like the most seasoned political entrepreneur.

The results of the 2021 election would vindicate MK Stalin’s strategy. The DMK would win 134 out of 234 seats, a rise of 44, with their allies, including the INC and Communists, gaining 18 more, for a total of 159 seats. The DMK managed a single-party majority for the

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<sup>115</sup>Amritha Dinesh, “Tamil Nadu’s Jallikattu Protest Is Just That: A Rampaging Bull on the Loose in the Delicate Indian Landscape.” Quartz, Last Modified January 20, 2017. <https://qz.com/india/889264/tamil-nadus-jallikattu-protest-is-just-that-a-rampaging-bull-on-the-loose-in-the-delicate-indian-landscape/>.

<sup>116</sup>Times Now Bureau. “Jallikattu Now Legal in Tamil Nadu, Assembly Passes Bill Unanimously.” Times Now News, Last Modified January 23, 2017. <https://www.timesnownews.com/india/article/jallikattu-now-legal-in-tamil-nadu-assembly-passes-bill-unanimously/54595>.

<sup>117</sup>Special Correspondent, “Protests Conducted against New Farm Laws.” The Hindu, Last Modified January 27, 2021. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/protests-conducted-against-new-farm-laws/article33671646.ece>

<sup>118</sup>Special Correspondent, “Tamil Nadu Withdraws 5,570 Cases against Protesters.” The Hindu, Last Modified September 14, 2021. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/tamil-nadu/tn-government-withdraws-5570-cases-against-protestors-of-controversial-projects-cao/article36446419.ece>.

<sup>119</sup>TNN, “DMK President M K Stalin Launches 'Go to the Village' Outreach Programme: Trichy News - Times of India.” The Times of India, Last Modified January 10, 2019. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/trichy/stalin-launches-go-to-the-village-outreach-programme/articleshow/67462554.cms>.

party, the first time in 25 years the party had done so. The AIADMK lost 70 seats, though the BJP managed to win, for the first time in a Tamil state election, 4 seats. A combination of regional identity, political entrepreneurship, and rural anger had given the DMK one of its best-ever performances. Thus, for Tamil Nadu the specific combination of its history provided a key defeat for the BJP and its ally the AIADMK, and it makes sense as to why. Tamil Nadu had an existing political elite in the DMK well versed in an alternate identity and political tradition that could mobilize an extremely emotional identity, Tamilness, while also exploiting the government's, both state and federal, weakness on rural policy. MK Stalin provided the lead by organizing a broad electoral coalition to polarize the results and acting as a political entrepreneur to mobilize voters using the longstanding style and tactics of the Dravidian tradition his father had helped popularize. Thus, the state stands as a clear example of the BJP failing to have an electoral breakthrough and finding itself electorally toxic, weakening the very political allies it had hoped to use to create a bridgehead. For the AIADMK, it found itself in a bind between aligning with a toxic BJP or going its own way and losing its influence in the central government, and potentially antagonizing the most powerful politician in India. It was a lose-lose situation that could have been worse, but still highlights the complexity of Indian politics in the BJP's quest to have a genuine electoral breakthrough in states it lacks a history in. The ideological tradition of Tamil political entrepreneurship thus provided an effective counter-mobilization to BJP attempts to have an electoral breakthrough.

## West Bengal

### *Background to 1977*

West Bengal is unique among the rest of the cases discussed in that the state was a Communist Party of India (Marxist) stronghold from 1977-2011, and so was ruled by a different sort of party than the INC, ex-INC, or regional party dynamics discussed in the other cases. The Communist Party of India itself was founded in 1925 in Bengal,<sup>120</sup> and remained a prominent political force in opposition to British colonialism and in, at times, alliance with the Indian National Congress for the rest of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. Upon independence, the party was one of the few truly national parties in India, and had an uneasy relationship to the INC, on the one hand supportive of it as a “progressive element” but also seeing it as a capitalist party that was not amicable to CPI interests. These tensions, with the revolutionary communist ideology of the CPI coming into conflict with collaborationist policies of the CPI leadership when it came to the INC,<sup>121</sup> and ongoing tension related to the Sino-Soviet split,<sup>122</sup> meant that the party would eventually break apart in 1964.<sup>123</sup> The CPI was the section of the party in favor of collaborating with the INC, with the CPI(M) being associated with the left-wing of the party who were most opposed to the INC. They faced an Indian National Congress branch in West Bengal that had

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<sup>120</sup>Anil Rajimwale, “Foundation of the Communist Party of India (CPI) in 1925: Product of Genuine National and Working Class Movements: Anil Rajimwale.” *Mainstream*, Last Modified September 12, 2020. <http://www.mainstreamweekly.net/article9916.html>.

<sup>121</sup>Marcus F. Franda, “Electoral Politics in West Bengal: The Growth of the United Front.” *Pacific Affairs* 42, no. 3 (1969): 279–93. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2753899>.

<sup>122</sup>Manoj C.G, “CPM@50: A Look at the History and Future of India's Largest Communist Party.” *The Indian Express*, Last Modified November 1, 2014. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/politics/cpm50/>.

<sup>123</sup>Ouseph Varkey, “The CPI-Congress Alliance in India.” *Asian Survey* 19, no. 9 (1979): 881–95. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2643809>.

ruled the state since independence, but one that was much weaker than its dominance would suggest.

The INC had faced several splits themselves, with key figures leaving in 1950 to join what eventually became the Praja Socialist Party, and in 1966 with the Bangla Congress led by Ajoy Kumar Mukherjee. This defection, and ensuing alliance with the CPI(M) in a United Front against the INC, meant they were ready to exploit the Food Movement of 1966, as the state, after Partition ensured that millions of Hindu refugees from East Pakistan flooded into the state, had deep problems with food production. The rural aspect of this movement, not just isolated to Kolkata but agrarian districts of the state, ensured that there was intense anger at the incumbent INC government amid a wider kerosene shortage.<sup>124</sup> This culminated in the 1967 election, in which Bangla Congress leaders aligned with the CPI(M) to exploit this crisis to build their own support among rural and urban Bengalis. Their alliance, called the United Front, would form a government after the INC lost their majority, and the government, of which the CPI(M) was the largest single party, only lasted around 8 months before President's Rule was imposed. The state government was dismissed and the state became ruled by the Central Government, until new elections.<sup>125</sup> Even this early on in the state, the CPI(M) began to show itself, uniquely in India besides in Kerala, as a potent electoral force willing and capable of exploiting popular anger against the INC, especially in rural and urban areas.

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<sup>124</sup>Sibaji Pratim Basu, "West Bengal: The Food Movements of 1959 & 1966." Mahanirban Calcutta Research group. Accessed March 14, 2022. [http://www.mcrg.ac.in/RLS\\_PML/RLS\\_PM/RLS\\_PM\\_Abstracts/Sibaji.pdf](http://www.mcrg.ac.in/RLS_PML/RLS_PM/RLS_PM_Abstracts/Sibaji.pdf).

<sup>125</sup>Marcus F. Franda, "Electoral Politics in West Bengal: The Growth of the United Front." *Pacific Affairs* 42, no. 3 (1969): 279–93. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2753899>.

The CPI(M) soon faced challenges in West Bengal, however. The left-wing of the party soon split because they felt the party was not pursuing an armed revolution, with this faction being influenced by Maoism. The movement, led by Charu Mazumdar, began armed attacks in 1967 in the north of West Bengal, in the area of Naxalbari, which is how the Naxalite rebellion got its name, as the Maoist insurgency in this region has remained ever since.<sup>126</sup> The 1969 elections saw a repeat of the victory for the United Front coalition once again, with the coalition winning 214 seats to the INC's 55.<sup>127</sup> A Kerala-esque alternating of power between a Communist-dominated socialist front and a INC-front did not develop however, as the coalition soon broke down by the 1971 election, with the CPI(M) running against a CPI alliance and a reformed and energized INC under Indira Gandhi's leadership. The Bangla Congress joined the INC in government, and soon rejoined the party, but President's Rule was soon reimposed again due to the state's instability. Further, after India's decisive victory against Pakistan in the 1971 War, the party won a reclaimed majority in alliance with the CPI.<sup>128</sup> Thus, by 1972, the CPI(M) found itself out of power and with its enemies united, at the nadir of its desire to rule the state. This would not last long in the rapidly shifting politics of West Bengal.

In 1977, the CPI(M) formed an electoral coalition with the other Communist and left parties to dislodge the INC government, but it would not be a two-ring competition. The Janata Party ran in the state as well, though as part of their own bloc as the CPI(M) and the Janata had

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<sup>126</sup>Shoaib Daniyal, "As CPI and CPI-M Mull Merger, a Short History of How They Split up in the First Place." Scroll.in, Last Modified April 26, 2015. <https://scroll.in/article/722209/as-cpi-and-cpi-m-mull-merger-a-short-history-of-how-they-split-up-in-the-first-place>.

<sup>127</sup>Franda, "The Growth of the United Front." Pages 279–93

<sup>128</sup>John Osgood Field, and Marcus F. Franda, *Electoral Politics in the Indian States : the Communist Parties of West Bengal*. Delhi: Manohar Book Service, 1974.

originally negotiated for a common front, but the negotiations fell through. The CPI(M) became the main beneficiary of the public anger against Indira Gandhi's Emergency, though the scale of their victory surprised even them, as the party had negotiated with the Janata to have 52% of the seats in their arrangement.<sup>129</sup> Their coalition won 231 seats out of 294, with the CPI(M) as the dominant party having 174 out of 231, becoming the single largest party in West Bengal. It was not a fluke, as the party then won an increased majority in 1982. The Communists were in charge in West Bengal, and they would go on to govern from 1977 to 2011, an unprecedented period of stability for a non-Congress party in India.

*West Bengal under the Left Front and the TMNC*

Now in government, the CPI(M) took the state in a unique direction compared to most states in India. Importantly, the party actively downplayed religion, discouraging it officially.<sup>130</sup> This, combined with the CPI(M)'s downplaying of caste as an important social fault-line, ensured that party affiliation, not communal ties, dominated state's politics as the CPI(M) entrenched itself in power and used party patronage networks to create an electoral machine for itself. There were clear reasons for this downplaying of caste and religion in the state, not just because of the ideology of the ruling party. The state has always had a fractured caste and communal outlook, varying ethnically and linguistically from the Bihari-dominated east to the

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<sup>129</sup>"Forty Years Ago, February 4, 1977: Janata, Ram Deal." The Indian Express, Last Modified February 3, 2017. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/editorials/forty-years-ago-february-4-1977-janata-ram-deal-4506611/>.

<sup>130</sup>Anindya Sekhar Purakayastha, "Communalisation of Politics in West Bengal: Religion and the Public Sphere." Economic and Political Weekly, Apr 21, 2018, <https://proxy.wm.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/communalisation-politics-west-bengal-religion/docview/2138039008/se-2?accountid=15053>.

tribal interior and Gurkha-dominated Darjeeling district.<sup>131</sup> More importantly, no single caste makes up a significant land-holding class compared to a caste like the Yadavs or Jats in Uttar Pradesh, which in those states created political incentives for political entrepreneurs to form the community into a coherent and electorally potent group. The caste makeup of the whole state is highly localized, with some castes dominating a district or two, but nothing at all on the scale of more regional caste identities seen in other states.<sup>132</sup> The CPI(M) did engage in tactical caste mobilization through candidate selection at the local level, but the state did not develop a backward caste movement, or a dominant caste movement, as seen in Maharashtra or Tamil Nadu.<sup>133</sup> This reality even impacted landholding classes, with large landholders being from diverse castes and thus not able to be unified into a single, unified electoral movement.<sup>134</sup> Demands for land reform thus did not take a caste dimension, but a class dimension, which greatly facilitated the mobilization of the landless against large landowners by the Communists along class lines.

The results of the Communist land policy further cemented this fractured caste makeup. Landholding by the end of the CPI(M)'s tenure was roughly equal across castes. In 2011, 46.5% of households do not own land other than their homesteads, compared to the 54.1% of Dalits households who are landless, and further, 82.18% of holding, across all holdings in the state, are

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<sup>131</sup>Ayan Guha, "Caste and Politics in West Bengal: Traditional Limitations and Contemporary Developments." *Contemporary Voice of Dalit* 9, no. 1 (May 2017): Page 29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2455328X17689861>.

<sup>132</sup>Guha, "Caste and Politics in West Bengal" page 31-32

<sup>133</sup>Guha, "Caste and Politics in West Bengal" page 29

<sup>134</sup>Guha, "Caste and Politics in West Bengal" page 32

marginal, compared to 86.6% for Scheduled Caste holdings.<sup>135</sup> Uniquely in India, West Bengal breaks up easy lines of caste mobilization, which in part explains why the CPI(M) was able to dominate the state by mobilizing party affiliation and not other identities.

Party society became the watchword of the CPI(M)'s governance in West Bengal, which involved the almost total dominance of the public sphere by the party. Party became "an intermediary between the government and the communities" that jealously guarded its ability to remain in power, which also explains in part the high levels of political violence that affects the state.<sup>136</sup> The early successes of the CPI(M) in land reform were down to this total politicization of the society, with land activists going across the state at the grass-roots to ensure land reform was achieved and spreading its message. As time wore on, the ideological comrades going to the villages were replaced by a more professional cadre of loyalists, from solvent farmers, to local club owners, to the salaried and moneyed classes more generally.<sup>137</sup> Left Front dominance was achieved at the local level through control at the village level, which eventually became a system of clientelist alleviation of political concerns through continued electoral support,<sup>138</sup> which in part also explains how the Left Front was able to govern the state until 2011. This mobilization of the party's traditional middle-class rural and urban base made the party give up its more radical linkages with the mass populace, even as it entrenched itself to become a party of

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<sup>135</sup>Guha, "Caste and Politics in West Bengal" page 32-33

<sup>136</sup>Guha, "Caste and Politics in West Bengal" page 34-35

<sup>137</sup>Purakayastha, "Communalisation of Politics in West Bengal: Religion and the Public Sphere." page 2-3

<sup>138</sup> Suman Nath, "Farmers' Politics in West Bengal: Left Front and Post-Left Front Period." *Economic and Political Weekly*, Apr 10, 2021, Page 2 <https://proxy.wm.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/farmers-politics-west-bengal-left-front-post/docview/2515150404/se-2?accountid=15053>.

government and not ideology.<sup>139</sup> Elite capture weakened control of the party and took it away from its rural base, which ensured the party stagnated as a party of government and eventually was unable to continue to provide the goods and services that its clientelist networks needed.<sup>140</sup> Political entrepreneurs, long sidelined, were thus able to mobilize support for these disaffected groups and mobilize them into a coherent movement. The political entrepreneur most associated with this new era was Mamata Banerjee.

It's worth mentioning Banerjee's early origins because it's both essential to her own political story, and also explains in part her style as a political entrepreneur. Mamata Banerjee was born to a lower-middle class family in South Kolkata, but the family fell into poverty upon the death of her father when she was quite young. She carried on with her education, however, and early on became an activist in the INC's student wing in the mid-1970s. She earned fame in the 1980s by defeating the CPI(M) heavyweight Somnath Chatterjee in a safe Communist seat in Kolkata, quickly shooting to prominence as a wonder-girl for the party. She throughout the 80s fought against the Left Front's industrial policies, and adopted numerous populist positions, earning a reputation as an ebullient personality but frequently butting heads against the long-time powerbrokers in the INC. Her tenure as a Cabinet Minister under PM Rao from 1991-1993 was quickly cut short when she abruptly resigned as she felt the Government was not doing enough to resolve "atrocities" in West Bengal. Throughout the 1990s she soured on the INC for, in her mind, a lack of commitment to defeat the CPI(M), as she was willing to form any and all

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<sup>139</sup>Atig Ghosh, "Long March or Garden Path-The Left Front's First Term in West Bengal (1971-1982)." Mahanirban Calcutta Research group. Accessed February 17, 2022. [http://www.mcrg.ac.in/RLS\\_PML/RLS\\_PM/RLS\\_PM\\_Abstracts/Atig\\_2017.pdf](http://www.mcrg.ac.in/RLS_PML/RLS_PM/RLS_PM_Abstracts/Atig_2017.pdf).

<sup>140</sup>Nath, "Farmers' Politics in West Bengal: Left Front and Post-Left Front Period." Page 11

alliances to defeat the party, even with the BJP. She would eventually leave the Congress on December 17th, 1997, over her lingering battle over control of state party, culminating in a battle over candidate lists which brought in Sonia Gandhi and the top leadership to try and resolve the crisis.<sup>141</sup> After leaving the party, she held a mega-rally on December 29th, 1997 to found her new political organ, the Trinamool Congress. Thus, Banerjee has had to work her way up in Bengal politics and create her own electoral niche without an institutional party to support her, unlike Sharad Pawar, Uddhav Thackeray, and MK Stalin, all of whom had very established parties and movements to fall back on.

She developed a reputation as unpredictable throughout the 2000s.<sup>142</sup> She first made an “agreement” with the BJP for the 1998 election, but quickly said she would not join any BJP cabinet but support from the outside if it followed policy programs. Within the year she then joined as Railway Minister under PM Vajpayee in 1999, but left it in 2001 over a corruption scandal in the Ministry of Defense. She then joined her party with the INC for the 2001 West Bengal election. The Congress alliance, though Banerjee’s party immediately became the second largest party, actually lost seats compared to the unified Congress in 1996, and the TMNC did worse than in assembly by-elections in 1998. She then rejoined the NDA and would become Minister of Coal for a short period in 2004.<sup>143</sup> The reason for this dizzying array of coalition marks her as a more obvious version of political entrepreneur than what the other cases highlight.

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<sup>141</sup>Bhattacharyya Dwaipayana, “Making and Unmaking of Trinamul Congress.” *Economic and Political Weekly* 39, no. 14/15 (2004): 1529–32. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4414871>. pages 1-3

<sup>142</sup>Sumantra Bose, “Class, Culture, and Politics: The Making of Mamata Banerjee.” *South Asia@LSE*, September 26, 2012. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2012/09/26/class-culture-and-politics-the-making-of-mamata-banerjee/>.

<sup>143</sup>Bhattacharyya, “Making and Unmaking of Trinamul Congress.” Pages 1536

Mamata had to create her own niche that built on her time in the INC, but still had to do that while still trying to overthrow the CPI(M), but could not find the right combination of issues and alliances beyond her own personal appeal. She ran into the same problems the INC had had against the Left Front, namely that the rural party machine the CPI(M) had created was hugely difficult to displace by the more individual focused electoral organ of the Congress party.<sup>144</sup> Her appeal at this stage mostly rested on her personality, which while extremely potent in building an electoral coalition among the Kolkata slums, the rural poor, and anti-communists,<sup>145</sup> lacked the organizational capacity to sustain its victory or build outward. The only way to defeat the party state would be to take over the party state themselves, and to find some cleavage to exploit to build her own durable political base. She would solve both problems as the 2000s drew on.

As time wore on, Banerjee built up her party infrastructure to replace the Communists in control of the organs of the party state. She especially mobilized against Communist public domain policy, which took land away from farmers to build industrial projects, specifically two projects, a car factory at Sanjur and a chemical plant at Nandigram.<sup>146</sup> The anger at the special economic zone being created around Nandigram culminated in 2006-2007 with local villagers being massacred by police during one protest,<sup>147</sup> which allowed Banerjee and the TMC to mobilize public outrage against the CPI(M). Banerjee, as a rational political entrepreneur finding

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<sup>144</sup>Bhattacharyya, "Making and Unmaking of Trinamul Congress." Pages 1533-34

<sup>145</sup>Bhattacharyya, "Making and Unmaking of Trinamul Congress." Pages 1537

<sup>146</sup>Nath, "Farmers' Politics in West Bengal: Left Front and Post-Left Front Period." Page 1

<sup>147</sup>ANI. "14 Years of Nandigram Violence: Ahead of Kolkata Rally, Mamata Says Will Fight against 'Anti-Bengal Forces.'" The New Indian Express, Last Modified March 14, 2021. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2021/mar/14/14-years-of-nandigram-violence-ahead-of-kolkata-rally-mamata-says-will-fight-against-anti-bengal-2276470.html>.

her niche, mobilized massively off the emotive dispute, with Banerjee herself going on hunger strike to protest the land acquisition. This paid immediate political dividends, with the party and its allies winning 26 out of 42 seats in the 2009 general election. In the 2011 regional election, for the first time since 1977, the CPI(M) and its allies were swept from power, and Mamata Banerjee and the TMC took power.<sup>148</sup>

### *West Bengal Through the 2021 Election*

Unlike the other cases discussed, in West Bengal the BJP nor any of its regional allies have been in power in the state. Once in power, Mamata Banerjee and the TMC have remained in power. Upon winning in 2011, the party managed to win reelection in 2016 for a variety of factors. Her government implemented several popular welfare schemes aimed at key constituencies, from a financial aid scheme to keep girls in school and avoid marriage, to direct food aid for almost 80% of the population.<sup>149</sup> The TMC platform further focused on affordable housing construction, infrastructure development, and doubling health expenditures,<sup>150</sup> on top of government improvements, namely higher revenue collection and improvements to civic services, though her government was tainted by several corruption scandals.<sup>151</sup> The result of

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<sup>148</sup>PTI. “Assembly Election 2011 West Bengal: Trinamool Congress Rises like Phoenix.” The Economic Times, Last Modified May 13, 2011. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/assembly-election-2011-west-bengal-trinamool-congress-rises-like-phoenix/articleshow/8293363.cms>.

<sup>149</sup>Ghosal, Sutanuka. “How Trinamool Congress Hopes to Use Mamata Government's Welfare Programmes to Return to Power in West Bengal.” The Economic Times, Last Modified May 5, 2016. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/how-trinamool-congress-hopes-to-use-mamata-governments-welfare-programmes-to-return-to-power-in-west-bengal/articleshow/51263275.cms?from=mdr>.

<sup>150</sup>Vasudha Venugopal, “TMC Manifesto Promises Basic Income, Sops for Women, Farmers, Students.” The Economic Times, Last Modified March 18, 2021. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/elections/assembly-elections/west-bengal/tmc-promises-basic-income-to-women-10-lakh-msmes/articleshow/81556321.cms?from=mdr>.

<sup>151</sup>Maitreesh Ghatak, “Mamata Hasn't Delivered Much for Bengal – Take a Look.” South Asia@LSE, Last Modified May 17, 2016. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2016/04/21/mamata-hasnt-delivered-much-for-bengal-take-a-look/>.

these policies, on top of her own dominant political personality, meant that the TMC cruised to re-election in 2016 bringing them to 211 out of 294 seats and 44.91% of the vote.<sup>152</sup> On top of the TMC's victory, the opposition parties fared poorly, with the INC becoming the largest party but the Left Front sliding even further, losing 10% of their vote to 19.75%, in part because poor voters had gone over to the TMC.<sup>153</sup> However, the BJP, which had never really had a presence in the state before 2011, rose 6 points to a not too distant fourth place. Banerjee was crafting a broad electoral constituency by using universalist programs to broaden her base, and then entrench it through use of the party state. The nature of the party state was changing though, partly due to Banerjee's own political entrepreneurship but also due to the collapse of the hegemonic CPI(M) and what it meant for the BJP.

Without the ideological suppression of communal identities by the Left Front, West Bengal has seen a resurgence of local identities since 2011. Communal violence, long marginal in the state compared to political violence, has slowly increased, especially since 2017 with overtly political and violent celebrations of Ram Navami and Hanuman Jayanti in the state.<sup>154</sup> Hindu nationalism had been historically weak in the state, where, even though the Rana Singh party tried to mobilize Hindu refugees in the state in the 1940s and 50s, they found themselves an extremely marginal political force. The BJP did get a small foothold, but the mobilization of

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<sup>152</sup>Jyoti Mishra, and Asmita Aasaavari. "Historic Sweep Powered by Mamata." The Indian Express, Last Modified May 22, 2016. <https://indianexpress.com/article/elections-2016/explained/mamata-banerjee-tmc-west-bengal-historic-win-analysis-2812918/>.

<sup>153</sup>Shreyas Sardesai, and Suprio Basu. "Poor Dump Left for Trinamool, Muslims Solidly behind Didi." The Indian Express, Last Modified May 21, 2016. <https://indianexpress.com/article/elections-2016/explained/west-bengal-muslims-mamata-banerjee-tmc-left-2812930/>.

<sup>154</sup>Purakayastha, "Communalisation of Politics in West Bengal: Religion and the Public Sphere." page 1

refugees by the Communists, and explicit downplaying of caste and religion by the Left Front once it took power,<sup>155</sup> meant the party faced decades of marginal influence. The Left Front, in creating a hegemony ideology outside the normal bounds of Indian politics, namely caste, regional identity, and religion, helped cement the bhadralok civil society tradition in the state, with its famous rationalism, liberalism, and secularism and most associated with the intelligentsia of Calcutta. Once that disappeared, and with the rise of social media outside the traditional elite opinion formation spheres, it allowed the BJP and Hindu nationalism to proliferate throughout the state.<sup>156</sup> Thus, the BJP has massively exploited the gap the fall of the Left Front has provided to mobilize identity and build political coalitions that previously had not existed in the state, which would massively impact the 2021 election in the state.

Counter-mobilization by the Muslim population of the state has also occurred, as in 2016 51% of Muslims in the state voted for the TMC, with the amount voting for the Left Front going from 42% in 2011 to 24% in 2016.<sup>157</sup> With this rise of Hindu nationalist discourse, Mamata Banerjee and her government have mobilized cultural nationalism to mobilize another vector of identity to mobilize their voter base against the BJP. Bengali identity and regional identity have always expressed themselves in Banerjee's politics, both as political entrepreneurship to create her own unique political brand but also as a genuine cultural identity.<sup>158</sup> This mobilization thus

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<sup>155</sup>Koushiki Dasgupta, "The Bharatiya Jana Sangh and the First General Election in West Bengal: The Enigma of Hindu Politics in Early 1950s." *Studies in Indian Politics* 8, no. 1 (June 2020): 58–68. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2321023020918063>.

<sup>156</sup>Purakayastha, "Communalisation of Politics in West Bengal: Religion and the Public Sphere." page 3-4

<sup>157</sup>Shreyas Sardesai and Suprio Basu, "Poor Dump Left for Trinamool, Muslims Solidly behind Didi." *The Indian Express*

<sup>158</sup>Sumantra Bose, "Class, Culture, and Politics: The Making of Mamata Banerjee." *South Asia@LSE*

creates an authentic personal appeal for the TMC and Banerjee as purporting to be the authentic voice of the Bengali people against supposed BJP dominance, giving her a rhetorical and ideological tool against the BJP. Though, even as religious and regional identity have expanded since 2011, caste identity has not been activated. Party identity is still the dominant form of mobilization in the state, with the TMNC replacing the CPI(M) as the dominant party in local institutions. Because the party society is still extremely potent, political violence has remained uniquely prolific in the state.<sup>159</sup> For the 2021 election, the stage was set for these trends to fully come into play.

For the 2021 election, unlike in Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra, the BJP wanted to take power in the state and unseat their fierce rival. The BJP explicitly played on Hindu nationalism, corruption scandals within the TMC government, and focused on non-Bengali speaking migrant workers predominantly in Kolkata,<sup>160</sup> with Modi heavily campaigning in the state. Though Modi was forced to halt campaigning due to the Covid-19 pandemic ravaging India towards the last of the final election stages,<sup>161</sup> he still held 23 rallies in the state, while Amit Shah, Modi's right-hand man and Union Home Minister, held 79.<sup>162</sup> Mamata Banerjee, however, built off her prior

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<sup>159</sup>Ayan Guha, "Caste and Politics in West Bengal: Traditional Limitations and Contemporary Developments." Page 34-35

<sup>160</sup>PTI, "West Bengal: BJP, Trinamool Congress Change Strategies as Campaign for Assembly Election Progresses: India News - Times of India." The Times of India, Last Modified April 20, 2021. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/west-bengal-bjp-trinamool-congress-change-strategies-as-campaign-for-assembly-election-progresses/articleshow/82165609.cms>.

<sup>161</sup>Abishek Law, "As Covid Surges, Modi Calls off Bengal Rallies." The Hindu BusinessLine, Last Modified April 22, 2021. <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/elections/as-covid-surges-modi-calls-off-bengal-rallies/article34387925.ece>.

<sup>162</sup>Himadri Ghosh, "Bengal: Key Factors That Led to TMC's Defeat of the Modi-Shah Behemoth." The Wire, Last Modified May 4, 2021. <https://thewire.in/politics/bengal-key-factors-that-led-to-tmcs-defeat-of-the-modi-shah-behemoth>.

policies to hold on to power. While rural policy was not at the heart of the election, unlike Maharashtra or Tamil Nadu, this is not to say rural West Bengal was not suffering.

Various farmer groups voiced complaints about poor irrigation and price supports, and the state has lagged behind on GDP growth compared to urban areas.<sup>163</sup> The state has also faced severe rainfall deficits, which hit 49% in 2019. The TMC government alleviated some concerns with a crop insurance program and a cash program for farmers in 2019, but enrollment was slow and crop prices remained low in the state.<sup>164</sup> However, the broad linkage of the poor in rural and urban areas since the Left Front dominance seems to have made rural issues a less salient issue, especially due to the welfare schemes introduced by the government since 2011.<sup>165</sup> This was in spite of the BJP doing well in rural areas in 2019, when it came within 3% of displacing the TMNC, and also lukewarm reaction to the farm bills,<sup>166</sup> with mostly political strikes against it but without a mass outbreak of protests.<sup>167</sup> Mamata's campaign focused heavily on her government's programs in the first phase of the campaign, and the party won 52% of poor

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<sup>163</sup>Amjigeesh, "Growing Problems of Bengal's Farm Sector." The Hindu BusinessLine, Last Modified January 20, 2018. <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/national/growing-problems-of-bengals-farm-sector/article64334359.ece>.

<sup>164</sup>Soumya Das, "Bengal Farmers Struggle to Come out of Debt-Credit Web." Deccan Herald. DH News Service, Last Modified September 7, 2019. <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/bengal-farmers-struggle-to-come-out-of-debt-credit-web-759544.html>.

<sup>165</sup>Shoaib Daniyal, "Cash Transfers, Votes from Women and Muslims: 7 Reasons Why Mamata Banerjee Crushed BJP in Bengal." Scroll.in, Last Modified May 2, 2021. <https://scroll.in/article/993899/cash-transfers-votes-from-women-and-muslims-7-reasons-why-mamata-banerjee-crushed-bjp-in-bengal>.

<sup>166</sup>Manogya Loiwal, "Bharat Bandh in Bengal: Not All Farmers Know Why Others Are Protesting over Farm Bills." India Today, Last Modified December 9, 2020. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/bharat-bandh-in-bengal-not-all-farmers-know-why-others-protesting-farm-bills-1747797-2020-12-08>.

<sup>167</sup>Express News Service. "West Bengal: Protests against Farm Bills Sweep State." The Indian Express, Last Modified September 25, 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/west-bengal-protests-against-farm-bills-sweep-state-6616085/>.

women, 55% of lower class women, and beat the BJP among Adivasi women by close to 10%.<sup>168</sup>

The party's traditional base in Kolkata and other urban areas further helped the TMNC,<sup>169</sup> with it winning all 93 out of 108 seats in the Presidency division, which includes Kolkata, a decrease of only 2 seats from 2016. Further, the BJP's focus on Hindu nationalism caused a counter-mobilization by Muslim voters, who went even stronger for the TMC than they did in 2016.<sup>170</sup> In the majority Muslim, and highly rural, electoral district of Murshidabad, the TMNC won 20 out of 22 seats. All of this meant that even as the TMNC had a rural weakness compared to the other cases, the specifics of West Bengal allowed Banerjee to still perform well and outperform the BJP.

Beyond the fundamentals of the race, the party organization and personal gravitas of Banerjee helped push the party over the edge, and score a decisive victory by even gaining the vote share by 3.11% and gaining 4 seats, even as the BJP gained 27.81% to 37.97% and gained 74 seats to 77. Mamata Banerjee had managed to remain in power and hand the BJP one of its clearest failures, a rare feat. She had achieved this victory, and achieved her dominance in Bengali politics, due to her political entrepreneurship. As time wore on, she has proven highly adept at mobilizing political issues and identities to remain in power, from anti-Communism early in her career, to vehement opposition to Left Front land policy in the 2000s, to Bengali

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<sup>168</sup>Indrajit Roy, "Welfare, Hindutva and Bengali Nativism: The Political Ideas That Shaped the 2021 Bengal Polls." Scroll.in, Last Modified May 8, 2021. <https://scroll.in/article/994272/welfare-hindutva-and-bengali-nativism-the-political-ideas-that-shaped-the-2021-bengal-polls>.

<sup>169</sup>Ashish Ranjan, "Despite 2019 Rural Boost, Why BJP May Find It Tough to Dislodge Mamata in Bengal." India Today, Last Modified April 7, 2021. <https://www.indiatoday.in/diu/story/despite-2019-rural-boost-why-bjp-may-find-it-tough-to-dislodge-mamata-in-bengal-1787814-2021-04-06>.

<sup>170</sup>Shoaib Daniyal, "7 Reasons Why Mamata Banerjee Crushed BJP in Bengal." Scroll.in

nationalism throughout her tenure in office in the 2010s. Further, her takeover of the Left Front party state and welfare programs have both cemented her voter base and alleviated their material concerns, which has guaranteed her staying in power. Thus, another model of political entrepreneurship in the era of Modi is incumbent Chief Ministers opposed to Modi utilizing universalist programs to expand their political base. On top of that, the state provides a clear sign of the potency of regionalist identities to displace the hegemony of the BJP's appeal to Hindu identity. Banerjee is in many ways the most stellar political entrepreneur of the cases, as she has had to develop her own party organization from its charismatic beginning, to institutionalization, to now hegemony in the state. In her, it highlights the paths Indian political entrepreneurs have available to themselves in building a lasting coalition and the multiple paths to power they have, and also the opportunities they face once in power to use the benefits of incumbency for their own ends.

## **Conclusion**

As seen throughout the cases, resistance to Modi and the BJP government at the state level has played on several key themes. State political entrepreneurs have shown greater flexibility, competence, and dynamism in opposing the BJP, and have been able to play to the BJP's weaknesses in state elections from 2019-2021. The three different models of winning against the BJP, in Maharashtra uniting state parties in alliance against an incumbent BJP Chief Minister, in Tamil Nadu ousting the BJP and its ally based on a united front of anti-BJP parties, and in West Bengal where an incumbent state party Chief Minister used the benefits of her incumbency to maintain power against a rising BJP. Each case, while distinct, highlights the same points: dynamic state political entrepreneurs being able to defeat the BJP through uniting together disparate state parties and through the use of electoral cleavages, in each case most notably regional identities and rural distress. The cases elaborated on these points, but they do have an exception to broader applicability in Indian politics, as noted in the recent state election in Uttar Pradesh in March 2022.

In this case, Uttar Pradesh highlights several of the key points outlined in other cases, but the trends were not enough to ensure an opposition victory. The Samajwadi Party under Akhilesh Yadav had an energetic, rural-focused campaign to try and unseat the popular incumbent government of Yogi Adityanath.<sup>171</sup> He was able to form alliances with the RLD party representing

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<sup>171</sup>Ashutosh Mishra, "Sugarcane Farmers Will Decide Fate and Taste of next Regime in UP." India Today, Last Modified September 19, 2021. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/sugarcane-farmers-will-decide-fate-and-taste-of-next-regime-in-up-1854383-2021-09-19>.

Yadavs mostly in Western UP,<sup>172</sup> and other smaller parties to show a surprisingly united front to the BJP.<sup>173</sup> Though his alliance gained 71 seats overall and the SP had its best ever state-level result, the BJP and their allies retained their majority. The reasons behind this failure of the opposition highlight the limitations of this study. First, there was a significant third party in Uttar Pradesh that did exist in other cases, namely the BSP party under Mayawati. The party ran in all 403 seats in Uttar Pradesh, but garnered almost 13% of the vote and lost all but one of their seats, their worst ever result. Thus, the BSP acted as a spoiler and divided what, in other cases, has been a united opposition to the BJP, as in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and West Bengal parties outside of the main opposition alliance (NCP-INC in Maharashtra, the Secular Progressive Alliance in Tamil Nadu, and the TMC+ in West Bengal) only garnered around 6-8% of the vote. The BSP thus acted as a significant limitation on the chances for opposition victory. Further, the state lacked a unique regional identity or linguistic tradition compared to the other cases, which limited the identities the SP could mobilize compared to Tamil nationalism for the DMK, Marathi identity for the NCP, and Bengali regionalism for the TMC. Along with this, the BJP was the dominant political player in Uttar Pradesh and has been ruling the state since 2017, and lacked in-state allies as seen in Tamil Nadu or Maharashtra. West Bengal has seen the BJP catapult to second place in recent years, but the party still lacks the history of governance the BJP in Uttar Pradesh has. Though the BJP government still had problems with rural constituents, the party was thus able to hold their coalition together enough to remain in power. Thus, even as

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<sup>172</sup>Jens Lerche, "Jat Power and the Spread of the Farm Protests in Northern India." The India Forum, Last Modified April 7, 2021. <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/jat-power-and-spread-india-s-farm-protests>.

<sup>173</sup>Arunabh Saikia, "Will Uttar Pradesh 2022 Be a Straight Contest between BJP and Samajwadi Party?" Scroll.in, Last Modified October 30, 2021. <https://scroll.in/article/1009351/will-uttar-pradesh-2022-be-a-straight-contest-between-bjp-and-samajwadi-party>.

the UP case highlights a model of anti-BJP campaigning by state-level political entrepreneurs, it also highlights the limitation of this model without regional identity and nationalism creating that other level of identity to decrease the potency of BJP hindu and caste mobilization.

What this means for the future of Indian politics is unclear. The cases discussed do show that even as the BJP is hegemonic at the Federal level, at the state level the party faces a much more challenging path to one day achieving power across every Indian state. The BJP is not unassailable, and in the right circumstances can be decisively defeated or sidelined politically. For the 2024 Indian general Election, this has mixed outcomes for any opposition strategy. This study has highlighted the benefits of a united, polarized campaign against the BJP and playing on rural distress and regional nationalism, but also the limits of state political entrepreneurs. While parties like the DMK, NCP, and TMNC successfully deal with the BJP, expanding their campaigns outside their home states will be hugely difficult, as it would be odd to campaign with Dravidian Tamil nationalism in a state like Haryana, just as it'd be odd to have a full-throated defense of the Bangla language in Telangana. This means that the INC, for all its poor decision-making in the cases outlined, remains the sole party with the national organization to campaign across India, and the INC can learn much from these state cases. Focusing on rural issues, and showing greater discipline with campaigns in forming coalitions with state parties in states where the party is weak, is the party's main hope for continued relevance. The systemic leadership failures the party has seen from the Gandhi dynasty since 2014 also strongly suggests the need for deep reforms to the party leadership to better capitalize off BJP weakness. The possibility does exist of another path, in a coalition of state parties forming together and attempting to win an electoral majority, as seen in the United Front governments from 1996-1998. This would

capitalize off the advantages state parties have against the BJP as discussed in this study, but whether or not these fractious parties united only in opposition to the BJP, and with limited electoral pull outside their home states, can truly win against Modi in a possible 2024 matchup is difficult to say.

Regardless of this paper's findings, Indian politics still revolve around the unique electoral power of Narendra Modi, though the nature of the Federal system in India means he can still face significant electoral defeats. Whether the 71 year old Modi will want to campaign for another general election in 2024, or allow himself or his party to choose a successor, will be hugely significant to future Indian politics. At this point in 2012, 3 years after the INC managed to win another term in office, it appeared unthinkable that the BJP would be in this position of hegemony just 10 years later. Whether the INC and state opposition parties can repeat this upset will depend on the specific leadership of the INC and state parties and who they run to replace Modi. What is certain is that, for as moribund the INC is, the state of the opposition in India is not totally hopeless. State political entrepreneurs highlight the vibrancy and potency of an anti-BJP alternative in Indian politics, much more so than the INC does in its current state. Whether state victories can translate to Federal Indian politics, or if India will remain for the foreseeable future dominated by the BJP, is for the future to decide. Only time will tell where India goes from here.

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