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Hindutva, Caste, and State Vigilantism

Christophe Jaffrelot

The rise to power of the Bharatiya Janata Party in 2014 was a reaction to the growing assertiveness of middle and lower castes that Narendra Modi's predecessors had permitted in the wake of government reforms taken to elevate these groups. For the core group of BJP supporters, made up of the urban upper-caste middle class, Modi was the instrument of a counterrevolution as he combined a plebeian face (himself being from a lower caste) and a socially conservative ideology (as a pure product of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, or RSS, a Hindu nationalist militant organization). By mobilizing Hindus in the name of religion and polarizing society along communal lines, the BJP ostensibly sought to neutralize caste divisions.

The rise to power of the BJP in 2014 not only enabled upper castes to stage a comeback at the helm of the central government but it also allowed this government to dilute policies of positive discrimination, which, in India, are also known as "reservations" consisting in quotas for lower castes and tribal groups in the bureaucracy and the public sector. Apart from politics and policies, Modi, the BJP, and the RSS have sought to recraft society: the new dispensation has made it possible to propagate an extreme version of Brahminical Hinduism and to impose these norms, via vigilante groups first, and secondly through state vigilantism.

Caste Conflict in the Political Arena: The Making of a Post-Mandal Counterrevolution

In 1979, a commission led by B. P. Mandal was organized to identify the socially and educationally “backward” classes of India. The Mandal Commission identified lower caste groups (including more than 50 percent of the country’s population at the time) and recommended reservations for government jobs and for education. In 1990, Prime Minister V. P. Singh decided to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission report regarding the reservations of 27 percent of the public sector and the bureaucracy to Other Backward Classes (or OBCs, the government’s term). The Mandal moment that started in 1990 was a phase of social democratization of India’s political democracy that I have described as a “silent revolution,”¹ because it resulted in the rise to power of OBCs and Dalits, at least at the state level and in north India, at the expense of the upper castes. It then brought on a counterrevolution—a sequence of action/reaction that one could find elsewhere in the last decades, as Michael Walzer has shown.²

Opposing Mandal

The Hindu nationalist movement reacted negatively to Singh’s announcement to adopt the recommendations of the Mandal Commission. From the very start, this movement has been borne by the upper castes due to the social conservatism it promotes. Indeed, while in theory it aims to abolish the “nation-dividing” caste system, such an ambition does not rule out a strong adherence to Brahminical values³ and the Hindu traditional social order. Deendayal Upadhyaya, the most prominent post-Independence Hindu nationalist ideologue, claimed that the original caste system, known as the *varna vyavastha*, needed to be restored in its pristine form. In his book *Integral Humanism*, published in 1965, he argues that “society is ‘self-born’” and forms an “organic unity” inherited from a caste-based antiquarian arrangement that should not be disturbed:

In our concept of four castes, they are thought of as an analogous to the different limbs of Virat-Purusha.⁴ . . . These limbs are not only complementary to one another, but even further, there is individuality, unity. There is a complete identity of interest, identity of belonging.⁵

This social, organic harmony is necessarily hierarchical, as is evident from the metaphor of the body inherent in the Virat-Purusha (where the Brahmin comes from the mouth, whereas the Shudra was born from the feet). Attached as they are to the social status quo, Hindu nationalists could, in particular, only be hostile to positive discrimination, which they found particularly problematic when it set castes against one another, thereby hampering the Sangh Parivar's efforts to unite the Hindu majority behind a common cause, as during the mobilization brought about by the implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations.

When, on August 7, 1990, Prime Minister V. P. Singh announced he would implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission, the RSS reacted vehemently. Its English-language weekly magazine, *The Organiser*, called it a reactivation of the "caste war" that was a source of division in a nation that the Sangh was striving to unify over and above caste and class differences. One editorialist even wrote: "The havoc the politics of reservation is playing with the social fabric is unimaginable. It provides a premium for mediocrity, encourages brain drain and sharpens caste-divide."⁶ *The Organiser* then came to embrace the cause of the upper castes. Another columnist for instance wrote of "an urgent need to build up moral and spiritual forces to counter any fall-out from an expected Shudra revolution."⁷

The BJP, which could no longer disregard OBCs, who made up 52 percent of the population and therefore of the electorate, was faced with a dilemma: if it did nothing for them, it was destined to remain in the opposition; if it defended quotas, it would lose a large portion of its traditional base made up of upper castes. Paralyzed, BJP leaders did not dare openly attack Singh's decision to implement the recommendations of the Mandal Commission so as not to alienate OBC voters. They instead experimented with three strategies, sometimes in succession, sometimes simultaneously. They first suggested replacing caste-based quotas by other categories based on income.⁸ Second, in autumn 1990, the BJP attempted to divert lower caste attention to quota policies by relaunching the movement for the construction of a temple (Mandir) on the site where, they claimed, Lord Ram (a very popular Hindu god) was born, in Ayodhya—and where, they said, a mosque had been built in 1528. BJP president L. K. Advani himself led the Rath Yatra, a long procession of cars started in Somnath (Gujarat) that crossed nine Indian states in September-October 1990, to unify all Hindus behind the issue of Lord Ram's birthplace on which the Babri Masjid supposedly stood. The BJP thus hoped to put caste divisions aside and encourage the OBCs to view themselves as Hindus first and foremost.

TABLE 14.1. Castes and Tribes among BJS and BJP Voters, 1971–2009

Castes and Tribes	Population (%) ^a							
	1971	1980	1996 ^b	1998 ^b	1999	2004	2009	
Upper and Intermediate Castes ^c	17.6	6.7	17.1	23.6	38.5			
Upper Castes						46	38	34
Intermediate Castes						30	26	15
OBCs	52	3.5	10	23.6	34.6			
<i>Lower OBC</i>						19	24	22
<i>Upper OBC</i>						21	22	22
Scheduled Castes	15.05	2.1	14.3	14.4	20.9	12	13	12
Scheduled Tribes	7.51	4.1	5.4	19	25.6	19	28	23

Source: Data for specific years collected from the following sources. For 1971–1998: “CSDS Data Unit” surveys cited in S. K. Mitra and V. B. Singh, *Democracy and Social Change in India: A Cross-Sectional Analysis of the National Electorate* (New Delhi: Sage, 1999), 135–37. For 1999: Y. Yadav, with S. Kumar and O. Heath, “The BJP’s New Social Bloc,” *Frontline*, November 19, 1999, 32, <https://frontline.thehindu.com/politics/article30159297.ece>. For 2004 and 2009: Y. Yadav and S. Palshikar, “Between Fortuna and Virtue: Explaining the Congress’ Ambiguous Victory in 2009,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 39 (September 26, 2009): 41.

^a These figures are taken from the Mandal Commission Report.

^b BJP and its allies.

^c In 1971, 1980, 1996, and 1998, intermediate castes and upper castes are bracketed together.

The third strand of the party strategy was to orient its discourse to a more favorable stance on the quotas recommended by the Mandal Commission. The chief advocate of the first strategy, K. N. Govindacharya, called the policy to which caste was to be the principal application “social engineering.”⁹ Lower caste leaders were co-opted into the party apparatus in the early 1990s. Hukumdev Narain Yadav, an Ahir (OBC), was thus appointed to the National Executive in January 1994 and Uma Bharti, a Lodhi (OBC), was made head of the Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha (the BJP youth wing).

The BJP nevertheless remained a party of upper castes from the standpoint of the social background of both its cadres and its elected officials,¹⁰ as well as its voters (see table 14.1).

While the BJP’s electoral allies helped it top the symbolic mark of 30 percent of OBC voters in 1998, the percentage of OBCs who voted for the party fell back to slightly over 20 percent in 1999 and remained at this level throughout the first decade of the 2000s. The proportion of Scheduled Castes (or Dalit) voters hovered around 12–13 percent. With such scores, the party could not hope to rule alone. The defeats it suffered in 2004 and 2009 represented even greater challenges for the Sangh Parivar as the winning coalition, the United Progressive Alliance led by the Congress, con-

ducted policies that tended to upset the social status quo. Thus in 2006, the Central Educational Institutions (Reservation in Admission) Act allocated a 27 percent reservation for OBCs in public institutions of higher education, including the highly selective Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs). In June 2006, *The Organiser* vigorously opposed this plan, in vain:

The Congress-led-UPA government at the center is bent upon destroying the last bastion of merit in the country by introducing the extended reservation system to allow the students of socially disadvantaged groups to get admission in our institutions of excellence like the IITs, IIMs, etc., not on the basis of merit but on the strength of quota.¹¹

After the BJP was defeated in 2004, and even more so in 2009, it became urgent to hone a strategy that would enable it to seize power and prevent the deepening of social policies that went against the Hindu nationalist ideology and the interests of its base. It was in this context that Narendra Modi was picked as the man of the moment, owing in part to his ability to transcend caste barriers, wielding a variety of Hindu nationalist populism that he had already fine-tuned in Gujarat.

Modi's Populism and Caste

Narendra Modi was the second BJP chief minister coming from an OBC caste (after Kalyan Singh). He belongs to the Ghanchi caste, which produces and sells cooking oil, a caste that has been classified as part of the OBCs since the late 1990s. His father traded in it, but also ran a tea shop where Narendra, as he narrated later, served customers as a child. In 2014, Modi made copious use of his lowly social background, a theme that he had not highlighted to that extent as Gujarat chief minister. This was because in some parts of India, such as Bihar, the lower caste repertoire had far more resonance.¹² He resorted to this register to distinguish himself from the Nehru/Gandhi family whom he continued to depict as monarchical heirs who held the underprivileged in contempt. He now called Rahul “Mr. Golden Spoon.”¹³ He laid into Priyanka Gandhi, Rahul’s sister, whose popularity was a source of concern for the BJP. Modi explained in a rally that the only reason she was in politics was out of filial piety. Priyanka retorted that the level of such a remark was “low,” a word Modi immediately—and

tactically—interpreted as a reference to his caste. In a television interview with Arnab Goswami, he went on the defensive:

Don't I have the right to at least state the truth? Is it because I come from a humble background, from a humble family? Has this country become like that? Has my democracy submitted itself to one family? And when a poor man says something, there is uproar.¹⁴

Goswami, whose interview was a model of sycophancy, of course did not object that there were no insinuations about social hierarchy in Priyanka Gandhi's remark. Casting himself as the standard-bearer for India's downtrodden—for the people against the patricians—in an election rally in Muzaffarpur, Bihar, Modi added that the next decade would belong to Dalits and OBCs.¹⁵ In the 2019 campaign he again emphasized his plebeian background and reiterated that his family belonged to a “most backward caste.”¹⁶

This discourse fits in Modi's populist repertoire. Pierre Ostiguy has convincingly argued that the populist, to relate to the masses, has to show that he shares their culture, their manners, and their language, by opposition to the elites' “propriety.”¹⁷ Not only do populists “act like” ordinary people, but they enjoy transgressing the codes of good behavior, shocking the establishment in the name of an authenticity that the elites have betrayed by their cosmopolitanism or their bourgeois or even aristocratic *ethos*. From that standpoint, like the common people, populists readily claim to be victims. The repertoire of victimization is all the more powerful when the political *establishment* is perceived as betraying the people. But on the other hand, as Ostiguy aptly demonstrates, populists exhibit the exceptional virtues through constantly staged performances (especially in the media), drawing on a performative repertoire. As a result, “the leader is both *like me . . . and an ego ideal*.”¹⁸

In the case of Modi, if the “strong man” dimension has been well documented, the victimization side of his story remains under-studied. But he constantly claimed that he had been victimized by the “Delhi Sultanate,” an establishment he would call the “Khan Market Gang” in 2019 and which has always been identified with the Nehru/Gandhi family. As head of a peripheral state, he cast himself as a victim.¹⁹ “I have been facing negativism of the center at every front. It often appears as if they are dealing with an enemy nation when it comes to Gujarat.”²⁰ His victimhood rhetoric reached new heights during the 2012 election campaign in which Modi claimed, “Of all the Chief Ministers that the country has seen in the last 60

years, I have suffered the maximum injustice at the hands of the center.”²¹ But Modi appeared to be the victim of the English media too. A founding incident, from this standpoint, occurred in 2010 on NDTV²² when Karan Thapar began an interview with Modi by talking about the communal violence he allegedly encouraged in Gujarat in 2002, and a defensive Modi could not come up with a retort and instead walked off the set.²³

For some OBCs, it meant that one of them was victimized for the same reason they felt victimized. They believed they did not benefit as much as the urban, upper-caste middle class from economic growth and the modernization process for which they do not have the codes, lacking as they are the necessary education and social networks: they do not speak English (or not well) and do not know how to deal with female assertiveness in the public sphere. This prompts them all the more to take refuge (and find self-esteem) in a staunch defense of Hindu traditions and to support Modi who, even more importantly perhaps, promised jobs too.

This shift of OBCs toward the BJP opened a new sequence in the social and political trajectory that had begun with the Mandal affair in the 1990s: the mobilization that had been set in motion at that time had precipitated the emancipation of OBCs, who were still living in the shadow of the dominant castes. Starting in the 1990s, these groups had formed their own political parties and began to dream of climbing the social ladder, not only because they benefited from quotas in the civil service but also because of the promise of growth contained in the economic liberalization of 1991. Twenty-five years later, not only were the jobs not there but the OBCs, not having a command of English, were still in a position of inferiority vis-à-vis the middle class. On the rise but frustrated, they found an alternative identity in Hindutva by identifying with Modi, in whom they had high hopes. For many OBCs, Modi was “like me” and the “ego ideal,” to use the words of Ostiguy.

While the BJP had already obtained the support of the urban, upper-caste middle class, Modi brought to the party voters who resented their sociocultural marginalization by the establishment, mostly OBCs—the “plus vote” that the BJP needed, as evident from table 14.2. The percentage of OBCs who supported the BJP jumped from 22 percent in 2009 to 34 percent in 2014 and 44 percent in 2019.

However, populists claim to be the spokespersons of the plebeians when, in fact, they simply want to mobilize the poor by making promises and by polarizing society along identity-based lines. Modi did just that: he claimed that he was a man of the people, but he prepared the ground for the upper castes' comeback to power.

TABLE 14.2. The 2009, 2014, and 2019 Lok Sabha Elections: Votes by Caste, Tribe, and Religion

Parties	Congress			Congress Allies			BJP			BJP Allies		
	2019	2014	2009	2019	2014	2009	2019	2014	2009	2019	2014	2009
Upper castes	12	13	25	5.5	3	9	52	48	28	7	9	7
OBC	15	15	24.5	7	4	7	44	34	22	10	8	6
Scheduled Castes	20	19	27	5.5	1	6.5	33.5	24	12	7	6	3
Scheduled Tribes	31	28	39	6	3	8	44	38	24.5	2	3	2
Muslims	33	38	38	12	8	9	8	8.5	4	1	1	2
Others	39	23	35	4	4	8	11	20	11	12	15.5	12.5

Source: CSDS-Lokniti, NES for 2009, 2014, and 2019, cited in C. Jaffrelot, "Class and Caste in the 2019 Indian Election—Why Have So Many Poor Started Voting for Modi?," *Studies in Indian Politics* 7, no. 2 (November 2019): 1–12.

Caste, Power, and Policies: An Upper-Caste Elite Revenge at the Expense of Reservations

In terms of promises, the BJP electoral platform in 2014 included a section entitled "Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other Weaker Sections: Social Justice and Empowerment," which read:

The BJP is committed to bridge the gap, following the principle of *Samajik Nyaya* (social justice) and *Samajik Samrasata* (social harmony). The social justice must be further complemented with economic justice and political empowerment—we will focus upon empowering the deprived sections of society. Steps will be taken to create an enabling ecosystem of equal opportunity—for education, health and livelihood. We will accord highest priority to ensuring their security especially the prevention of atrocities against SCs and STs.²⁴

As for SCs, or Dalits, the aim at the top of the list of BJP campaign pledges was to form an "ecosystem" conducive to furthering education and the sense of enterprise. In practical terms, however, the funds earmarked for Dalit education in the Indian budget have been reduced. While this budget item, within the Special Component Plan (a subcategory of the annual budget), is supposed to be proportional to the demographic weight of the Dalits (16.6 percent of the population), it fluctuated between 6.5 and 9 percent during Modi's first term.²⁵ As a result, scholarship funds were cut drastically. Nearly five million Dalit students have been affected by this reduction and by delays in payment.

In parallel, the Modi government and BJP state governments have undermined the system of positive discrimination that had been a large factor in helping the Dalits emancipate themselves from the legacy of centuries of caste oppression. First, the erosion of the public sector has resulted in a steady decrease of the number of jobs occupied by Dalits in the reservations framework. For instance, the number of civil service candidates shortlisted by the Union Public Service Commission (UPSC) dropped by almost 40 percent between 2014 and 2018, from 1,236 to 759.²⁶ This evolution was not only due to the continuation of old trends (like the rise of vacancies and the privatization of public sectors undertakings) but also to new policies. The creation of a lateral entry into the Indian administration is a case in point. This reform was intended to “to draw expertise from the industry, academia and society into the services.”²⁷ In February 2019, 89 applicants were shortlisted (out of 6,000 candidates from the private sector) to fill 10 posts of joint secretary.²⁸ This new procedure diluted the reservations system because the quotas did not apply.

Second, the introduction of a 10 percent quota in 2019 for the economically weaker sections has altered the standard definition of backwardness, that is, the foregrounding of economic backwardness, while at the same time restricting such a quota to upper castes alone who are neither socially nor educationally backward. By setting an income limit of Rs. 8,00,000 (10,667 US dollars) per annum, below which households are classified under the economically weaker sections, the government made this quota accessible to about 99 percent of the upper castes—not to the poor only. For Ashwini Deshpande and Rajesh Ramachandran, it “completely overturn[ed] the original logic of reservations on its head.”²⁹

By stipulating a quota for non-SC–ST–OBC (Other Backward Class) families earning Rs. 8,00,000 or less, the government is effectively creating a quota exclusively for Hindu upper castes who are not in the top 1 percent of the income distribution. This means that despite being presented as a quota on economic criteria and not caste, the reality is that this is very much a caste-based quota, targeted towards castes that do not suffer any social discrimination; on the contrary, these rank the highest on the social scale of ritual purity.³⁰

By introducing this quota, the Modi government sent a twofold message: one, the Mandal moment is over, as caste-based quotas are not the only reservation technique anymore; and, two, the upper castes will be in a

position to get jobs that would otherwise have been taken by OBCs or SCs. Indeed, the SCs/STs/OBCs who, thanks to their marks, would have made it through the general category, would not anymore because the 10 percent quota in this general category decreases the number of seats available.³¹

Modi, Champion of the Elite

Not only has the Modi government undermined the reservation system, but it has also enabled upper caste leaders to make an impressive comeback in Indian politics and allowed them to promote conservative values.

The Resurgence of Upper Castes in Indian Politics

While in the Hindi belt—a meta-region that represents almost half of the seats of the lower house—the proportion of Lok Sabha MPs from the upper castes had already started to increase in 2009 at the expense of OBCs and Muslims, this trend continued in 2014, largely due to the BJP's unprecedented win. Indeed, 47.6 percent of BJP MPs came from upper castes in 2014.³² As a result, the percentage of Hindi belt MPs from upper castes rose to 44.5 percent, on par with its representation in the 1980s, whereas the share of OBCs dropped to 20 percent.³³ Among the BJP upper caste MPs, Brahmins and Rajputs are especially overrepresented. This overrepresentation of upper castes among the BJP MPs was nothing compared to the composition of the Modi government, where they represented 79.4 percent of the ministers and ministers of state. As K. Adeney and W. Swenden have shown, such an overrepresentation had never prevailed since the Mandal moment.³⁴

The BJP certainly did not ignore the lower castes. For instance, many were given new responsibilities in the party machine.³⁵ But most of the time, the move was limited and very calibrated so as not to alienate the upper castes: rather than putting newcomers in places occupied by existing cadres, they were appointed to additional posts created especially for them. In Uttar Pradesh, for instance, out of 75 district president jobs, 54 were now occupied by OBCs and 3 by Dalits.³⁶

The 2019 elections reconfirmed the 2014 trend. In fact, the social profile of the 17th Lok Sabha suggests that 2019 marked the culminating point of the reaction to Mandal that BJP had tried to orchestrate since the 1990s. The main beneficiaries of the Mandal moment, the dominant OBCs of the Hindi belt, appeared, indeed, as the collateral casualties of these

elections. The Yadavs (a very large caste of cowherders that represented about 10 percent of the population of UP and Bihar in the 1931 census, the last one where castes were enumerated) are a case in point, as there is probably no better example of a dominant OBC in terms of numbers and socioeconomic clout, but they are not the only ones: for the first time, the share of the nondominant OBCs (smaller and not so affluent caste groups, or both) has been larger than the share of the dominant OBCs among the Lok Sabha MPs of the Hindi belt.³⁷

In UP, 59 percent of the “poor” OBCs supported the BJP, against 33.5 percent who turned to the alliance of the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP). The fact that “rich” and “middle” class OBCs voted more for the BSP-SP alliance and that “poor” OBCs supported the BJP more is understandable when this big category that is the OBCs is disaggregated along caste lines and caste is factored in: the SP remains a Yadav party to a large extent, and Yadavs tend to be richer than the average OBC.³⁸ As the non-Yadav OBCs, who often belong to poorer strata of society, usually resent Yadav domination and especially the way they have cornered most of the reservations, the BJP has successfully wooed them by nominating many candidates from this milieu. Whereas 27 percent of the SP candidates were Yadavs in 2019, Yadavs represented only 1.3 percent of the candidates of the BJP, which, on the contrary, gave tickets (electoral candidacies) to 7.7 percent Kurmis and 16.7 percent “other OBCs,” who often came from small caste groups.³⁹ This strategy translated into votes: while 60 percent of the Yadavs voted for the SP-BSP alliance, 72 percent of the “other OBCs” supported the BJP,⁴⁰ showing that the OBC milieu was now polarized along *jati* (caste) lines.

In the same way that the BJP consolidated the non-Yadav voters against the SP, the party has also become the rallying point of the non-Jatav voters against the BSP, the Jatavs representing the largest and most affluent Dalit caste in Uttar Pradesh: here again, the BJP has cashed in on the resentment of small Dalit groups that accuse the Jatavs—who are indeed better off than other Dalits⁴¹—of monopolizing access to reservations. In Uttar Pradesh, the BSP has given more than 20 percent of its tickets to Jatavs, whereas the BJP's nomination list was 5 percent Jatav, 7.7 percent Pasis (another Dalit caste opposed to Jatavs), and 9 percent “other SCs.”⁴² Certainly, the BSP-SP got 75 percent of the Jatav vote, but it received only 42 percent of the “Other SCs” vote, against 48 percent that went to the BJP. In a way, therefore, the 2019 elections marked the revenge of the plebeians.

But it marked even more clearly the second episode—after that of 2014—of the revenge of the upper-caste elite, which had already rallied

TABLE 14.3. The Caste Profile of the Lok Sabha BJP Members of Parliament in the Hindi Belt

	1989	1991	1996	1998	1999	2004	2009	2014	2019
Upper castes	32	49	56	58	45	32	30	87	80
Intermediate castes	2	4	8	9	9	7	2	14	14
OBC	10	13	21	24	21	13	11	38	35
SC	10	16	26	21	22	14	8	36	33
ST	7	3	7	9	13	11	11	16	15
Muslims	1	1			1				1
Others	1	1	1	1	0	1	0	0	0
<i>Total</i>	63	87	119	122	111	77	62	191	178

By Percentage	1989	1991	1996	1998	1999	2004	2009	2014	2019
Upper castes	50.8	56.3	47.1	47.2	40.2	41	47.6	45.5	44.9
Intermediate castes	3.2	4.6	6.7	7.3	8	9	3.2	7.3	7.9
OBC	15.9	14.9	17.6	19.5	18.8	16.7	17.5	19.9	19.7
SC	15.9	18.4	21.8	17.1	19.6	17.9	12.7	18.8	18.5
ST	11.1	3.4	5.9	7.3	11.6	14.1	17.5	8.4	8.4
Muslims	1.6	1.1	0	0	0.9	0	0	0	0.6
Others	1.6	1.1	0.8	0.8	0	1.3	0	0	0

Source: Data from SPINPER, the Social Profile of the Indian National and Provincial Elected Representatives. SPINPER is a CNRS-supported international virtual lab between Ashoka University and Sciences Po.

behind the BJP against Dalits' and OBCs' assertiveness. Like in 2014, upper-caste representation among BJP Lok Sabha MPs was significantly higher (at 36.3 percent, more than 7 percentage points above the average) than for its opponents (23.1 percent for Congress and 19.3 percent for regional parties), as evident from table 14.3.

The overrepresentation of upper-caste MPs on the BJP side reflects the distribution of its electoral candidacies. Across the country, the BJP nominated 146 upper-caste candidates (out of 414 candidates); 109 of these tickets went to Brahmins (71) and Rajputs (38) alone.⁴³ This overrepresentation of upper castes largely stemmed from the Hindi belt states, the BJP's stronghold. In these 10 states,⁴⁴ 90 out of the BJP's 198 candidates belonged to the upper castes. Eighty-one of them were elected. If one removes SC and ST candidates from the picture to consider only those who contested nonreserved seats, 62 percent of the "general" category candidates of the BJP for members of Parliament were upper castes, against 37 percent for all other parties' candidates combined.

But the overrepresentation of upper-caste politicians among the BJP MPs is nothing compared to the situation prevailing among the BJP ministers in the government that Narendra Modi formed after the 2019 elec-

tions. Out of 55 government members, 47 percent were from the upper castes (including 18 percent Brahmins), 13 percent were from intermediate castes (including Jats, Patels, and Reddys), 20 percent were OBCs, 11 percent were from the Scheduled Castes, and 7 percent from the Scheduled Tribes. The rest—two people—were from the minorities, one Muslim and one Sikh.⁴⁵

In 2019, as in 2014, the national-populist repertoire of Narendra Modi achieved what it was designed for: to submerge caste identities by using religion as the most effective unifying factor of the Hindus—beyond caste and class—to enable the upper castes to rule.

Reasserting Upper-Caste Hegemony in Society

Valorizing Brahminical Values and Legitimizing Caste-Based Hierarchy

Not only were upper castes back in larger numbers at the helm of the Indian state(s), but BJP leaders eulogized their moral superiority without any inhibition. At a “Brahmin Business Summit” in Ahmedabad, the chief minister of Gujarat, Vijay Rupani, emphasized the Brahminical roots of the Sangh Parivar, something the organization, till then, avoided. He declared that “the Brahmin community has always spoken about national interest, and because of that, the community has joined with the BJP and the RSS.”⁴⁶ The BJP Speaker of the Lok Sabha itself, Om Birla, went one step further, as the way he eulogized the Brahmins came as a defense of the caste system:

Brahmin community always works towards guiding all other communities, and the community has always held a guiding role in this nation. It has always played a role in spreading education and values in the society. And even today if just one Brahmin family lives in a village or a hutment, then that Brahmin family always holds a high position due to its dedication and service. . . . hence, Brahmins are held in high regard in society by the virtue of their birth.⁴⁷

Until then, Sangh Parivar ideologues had been shy to attribute the superiority of Brahmins to their birth. Birla also defended caste endogamy as the best way to sustain the social order and unity. Speaking on the occasion of a Brahmin Parichay Sammelan, that is, a meeting of Brahmins meant to help them to choose Brahmin spouses for their sons and daughters, he added: “If we want to bind the society together, then there is only

one arrangement today; like our ancestors used to forge alliances for marriage, we today have *parichay sammelan* (and if we want to save the society, then this is the lone alternative).⁴⁸ For Om Birla the unity of his society can only come from the caste order—it has, therefore, to be hierarchical.

Indeed, BJP leaders have displayed caste-based observances that reflected their belief in the lower castes' impurity. For instance, after Yogi Adityanath was elected chief minister of Uttar Pradesh, Hindu priests "made elaborate arrangements for sacred purifying rituals at the sprawling chief minister's bungalow,"⁴⁹ which had been previously occupied by Akhilesh Yadav, Kumari Mayawati, and Mulayam Singh Yadav—all members of lower castes.

Incidentally, the Information and Broadcasting Ministry and the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment issued orders stating that the word "Dalit" should not be used anymore in official communication, but only the term "Scheduled Caste."⁵⁰

Caste-Based (State) Vigilantism

The ruling party not only eulogized the upper castes and revived upper caste practices: it tried to impose them on society. During Narendra Modi's first term, Hindu nationalist vigilante groups launched campaigns targeting Muslims in the name of their fight against "love jihad" (as Hindu nationalists accused Muslim men of seducing Hindu women to marry them and convert them), reconversion, and cow protection. Lower castes, and Dalits in particular, have been collateral victims of these campaigns in several different ways. First, vigilante groups, like the *Bajrang Dal*, which were preventing Hindu girls from meeting Muslim boys by resorting to intimidation, in the street or on university campuses, implemented this kind of cultural policing also *vis-à-vis* intercaste relations. In fact, this was already very much commonplace in BJP-ruled states, as evident from the activities of the *Bajrang Dal* in Gujarat in the 2000s. One of its leaders, who had taken part in the 2002 pogrom, Babu Bajrangji, after that went on a crusade to "rescue" girls of his caste—the dominant caste of the Patels—who had married a Muslim or a man of a lower caste. One of his pamphlets explained that love marriages harmed Hindu traditions, and that rescuing a Hindu girl was equal to saving 100 cows.⁵¹ In the space of a few months, over 700 girls were thus "rescued," forced to abort when they were pregnant, and remarried to a man of the Patel caste—a sign of the orthopraxic obsession that plagues Hindu nationalists. Some parents whose daughter had "married beneath her station" without their approval and run away,

usually to Mumbai, use Babu Bajrangi's services to find them and bring them back home.

Second, the cow protection movement initiated (or relaunched) by the Gau Raksha Dal or the Bajrang Dal targeted not only Muslims but also Dalit groups—like chamars, whose main activity was leather work. In Gujarat, once again, Dalit leather workers were attacked by Hindu vigilantes in Una in 2016. Seven members of a Dalit family who had purchased a dead cow and were skinning the carcass were attacked by *gau rakshaks* who accused them of cow slaughter. They were not only stripped and paraded but also beaten up and the incident recorded on video.⁵² They were attacked again after they decided to convert to Buddhism.⁵³

Third, and precisely, vigilante groups played a similar role vis-à-vis conversion of Hindu Dalits to another religion. Thus, in 2018, Bajrang Dal activists in Uttar Pradesh forcibly reconverted (and shaved) a young Dalit who had become a Muslim, he said, “because upper caste people don't allow a decent life for Dalits.”⁵⁴ Again, such practices were already commonplace in Gujarat where the government, under Narendra Modi, had made it an official policy. In 2003 the Gujarat assembly passed a “Gujarat Freedom of Religion Act” prohibiting conversion “by use of force or by allurement or by any fraudulent means.” Besides, those who wished to convert needed to get prior permission from the district magistrate, a prefect-like, powerful bureaucrat.⁵⁵ Dalits resented this decision that could make changes of religion more difficult. Indeed, in October 2013, 60 Dalit families of Junagadh (Gujarat) converted to Buddhism, but problems occurred. One of the new converts justified his decision by citing his resentment that the Dalit children had “to sit separately while eating their lunch.”⁵⁶ But according to the state, these Dalits had not obtained the permission of the district magistrate in advance. The organizers claimed that they did, but a probe was initiated—an unprecedented move.⁵⁷

The involvement of the state in religious conversion not only found expression in laws and ordinances: police also started to implement upper-caste norms in society. This evolution is evident from the way Dalits were singled out in the context of the state's action against so-called Urban Naxals,⁵⁸ as evident from the Bhima-Koregaon case. In June 2018, the police of Maharashtra (a state ruled by the BJP at the time), in the course of investigating the Bhima Koregaon case, arrested five “Urban Naxals” who were accused not only of instigating violence but also of plotting a “Rajiv Gandhi style” assassination of Narendra Modi.⁵⁹ Among them were academics, lawyers, trade unionists, social workers, human rights activists, and a Dalit intellectual, Anand Teltumbde, who is a former business executive, regular

contributor to *Economic and Political Weekly*, a professor at the Goa Institute of Management,⁶⁰ and author of many books, including *Republic of Caste*.

While searching the houses of some of the accused, the police of Maharashtra indulged in cultural policing, listing books that were not banned as evidence against them⁶¹ and commenting upon their political ideas and social attitudes. The policemen who searched the house of the daughter of one of the accused, Varavara Rao, and his son-in-law, who heads the Department of Cultural Studies at the English and Foreign Languages University of Hyderabad, asked them, “Why are there photos of Phule [a low caste leader who played a pioneering role in the 19th century] and Ambedkar [a Dalit thinker and activist who played an equally important role in the 20th century] in your house, but no photos of gods?”⁶² To Rao’s daughter, they said, “Your husband is a Dalit, so he does not follow any tradition. But you are a Brahmin, so why are you not wearing any jewelry or sindoor? Why are you not dressed like a traditional wife? Does the daughter have to be like the father too?”⁶³ These policemen echo here the discourse of Hindu nationalist vigilantes when they try to make people comply with the high tradition of their religion associated with upper castes and specific forms of worship, and when they reject leftist ideologies in an anti-intellectual manner. But the fact that these vigilantes wear a uniform makes a big difference. The Bhima Koregaon case shows that the police repressed “urban Naxals” not only because of their ideas—therefore making them political prisoners—but also on account of their lifestyle, which betrayed the Hindu orthopraxy, including the caste system. In that sense, the state was now doing the job of the vigilantes, inventing a form of state vigilantism.

Conclusion

In India, as in the US after Barack Obama became president and in Brazil after Lula da Silva became president, national populism has been the instrument of elite groups that felt threatened by the new dispensation. For the Indian upper-caste middle class, Narendra Modi was the perfect antidote to the Mandalisation process because he believed in the Hindu high tradition but came from a low caste and could, therefore, bring to the BJP the “plus vote” it needed to take power. OBCs, who had started to emancipate themselves thanks to Mandal but who still felt frustrated because of their inability to join “the great Indian middle class,”⁶⁴ supported Modi, a man “like them” but still of a superior essence. The rise to power of the BJP has not only resulted in the comeback of upper-caste politicians

at the helm of governments and the dilution of reservation policies, but also in the legitimization of the Brahminical view of society and the correlative imposition of this hierarchical brand of Hinduism on everybody. This transformation of the public space was achieved by vigilante groups of the Sangh Parivar, which did not merely transgress the law but replaced it by the social norms—the orthopraxy—of the upper castes. While groups like the Bajrang Dal do it unofficially, BJP governments—at the center and at the state level—have invented a kind of “state vigilantism,” not only because of the new laws that have been created but also because of the cultural policing enforced by men in uniform. While there are different types of authoritarianism, the new dispensation in India exemplifies a style of control that is as much based on political power and surveillance as on the enforcement of social order, hierarchy, and orthopraxy.

NOTES

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2. Michael Walzer, *The Paradox of Liberation: Secular Revolutions and Religious Counterrevolutions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015).

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4. The primeval man whose sacrifice, according to the Rig Veda, gave birth to society in the form of the *varna vyavastha*.

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6. *The Organiser*, August 26, 1990, 15.

7. M. V. Kamath, “Is Shudra Revolution in the Offing?,” *The Organiser*, May 1, 1994, 6.

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9. Interview in *Sunday*, January 26, 1997, 13. See Christophe Jaffrelot, “The Sangh Parivar between Sanskritization and Social Engineering,” in *The BJP and the Compulsions of Politics in India Today*, ed. T. B. Hansen and Christophe Jaffrelot (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), 22–71 and 267–90.

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15. S. Palshikar and K. C. Suri, "India's 2014 Lok Sabha Elections," *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 39 (2014): 43–48.

16. O. Rashid, "Modi Hits Back on 'Fake OBC' Jibes, Says He Is 'Most Backward,'" *The Hindu*, April 27, 2019, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/lok-sabha-2019/modi-hits-back-on-fake-obc-jibes-says-he-is-most-backward/article26964347.ece> (accessed October 1, 2020).

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30. Deshpande and Ramachandran, "10 Percent Quota," 30.

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32. See Christophe Jaffrelot and Gilles Verniers, "The Representation Gap," *Indian Express*, July 24, 2015, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/the-representation-gap-2/> (accessed September 27, 2020).

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