



# ASIA MAIOR

Vol. XXXII / 2021

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## Asia in 2021: In the grip of global and local crises

**Edited by**  
**Michelguglielmo Torri**  
**Filippo Boni**  
**Diego Maiorano**

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CENTRO STUDI PER I POPOLI EXTRA-EUROPEI “CESARE BONACOSSA” - UNIVERSITÀ DI PAVIA

# ASIA MAIOR

The Journal of the Italian think tank on Asia founded by Giorgio Borsa in 1989

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## INDIA 2021: POLITICS AMID THE PANDEMIC

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*The most important development of 2021 in India was a devastating second wave of COVID-19 infections that brought the country's healthcare system to its knees between April and June. While the management of the pandemic in a country like India represented an enormous challenge in itself, the Bharatiya Janata Party-led government took a series of steps that failed to contain and most probably facilitated the spread of the virus. In particular, a combination of over-confidence, complacency and then outright political opportunism might have led to a huge increase in the number of infected people, which resulted in a very high death toll. The article will focus on the actions (and inactions) of the Modi government to explain the evolution of the pandemic during the first half of the year and then its economic impact.*

*The other two developments that will be analysed concern domestic politics. On the one hand, a round of state elections in four important states demonstrated the fragility of the BJP at the state level. On the other hand, the repeal of three laws of agrarian reform in the wake of prolonged and sustained farmers' protests showed the government's inability to push reforms in the agricultural sector.*

KEYWORDS – India; COVID-19; local elections; democracy; agriculture.

### 1. Introduction

The year 2021 was a terrible one for India. In fact, the optimism with which last year's article in *Asia Maior* ended,<sup>1</sup> turned out to be misplaced. The article showed that research suggested that a high number of people in the country might have contracted COVID-19 during 2020 and that the population was heading towards herd immunity. However, at the beginning of 2021, the number of cases started to rise, which resulted in a dramatic and much more severe second wave of infections that brought the country's healthcare system to its knees. The analysis of how the second wave came about and what impact did it have is the first and most important theme treated in this year's article and will be dealt with in section 2.

The second part of the article will deal with domestic politics and will focus on three main topics. The first one is the round of state elections

1. Diego Maiorano, 'India 2020: Under the COVID hammer', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020, pp. 303-30.

which were held in four important states (Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal) amid the devastating second wave of COVID-19 (section 3). Second, during 2021, further evidence emerged about the process of democratic erosion that began in 2014, a theme already analysed several times in previous issues of *Asia Maior*.<sup>2</sup> This new evidence will be briefly discussed in section 4.1. Finally, I will end the article by analysing the surprising decision of the Modi government to withdraw three controversial laws that aimed at reforming the agricultural sector, amid a widespread and long-lasting protest by farmers movements in North India (section 4.2).

## 2. *The Second Wave*

### 2.1. *How it came about*

This section will look at how the devastating second wave of infections, which ravaged the country from late March to late May 2021, unfolded. It will focus on the government's responsibility in first underestimating and then actively promoting the spread of the virus. Four factors were particularly important: first, the government's confidence that India had successfully contained the pandemic. Second, the government's unwillingness to take corrective actions, once data suggested that its confidence was misplaced. Third, the government's endorsement of unscientific practices. And, fourth, the government's decision to promote mass gatherings – for short-term political goals – despite low vaccine take up and skyrocketing infection rates.

On 28 January 2021, Prime Minister Narendra Modi addressed the World Economic Forum at Davos. The bulk of his speech<sup>3</sup> was dedicated to reassuring the world that the experts' fears regarding a COVID-19 «tsunami» in India turned out to be unfounded. Rather, Modi explained, India «worked on strengthening the Covid specific health infrastructure, trained our human resources to tackle the pandemic and used technology massively for testing and tracking of the cases». In short, Modi concluded, India «saved humanity from a big disaster by containing corona effectively» and was now exporting speech masks, protective equipment, test kits and vaccines.

Modi's speech aptly sums the Indian government's confidence that the worst was over, and that the country was ready to move ahead. With the benefit of hindsight, it also reveals that, at the beginning of the year under

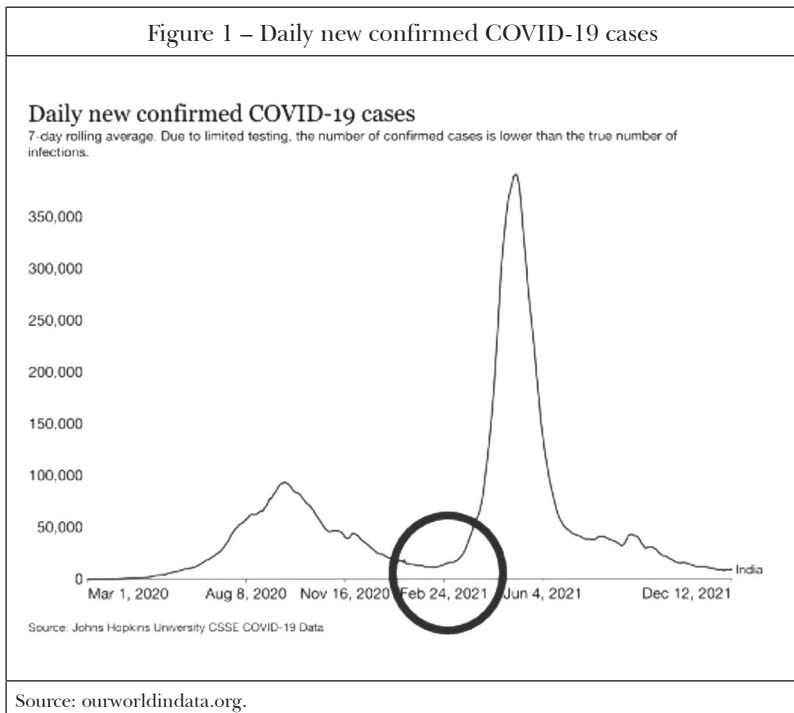
2. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2020: The deepening crisis of democracy', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXXI/2020, pp. 331-77; Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2019: Assaulting the world's largest democracy; building a kingdom of cruelty and fear', *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXX/2019, pp. 345-97; Diego Maiorano, 'Democratic Backsliding amid the COVID-19 pandemic in India', *Asia Maior*, Special Issue 2/2021, forthcoming.

3. An English rendering of the original in Hindi is available here: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1693019>. All quotations from the speech are taken from this source.



review, such confidence was probably genuine. Otherwise, it is difficult to understand why, within three months, India found itself on its knees amid severe shortages of protective equipment, vaccines and, above all, oxygen. In any case, while one might argue that it was premature to declare victory, there were indeed a number of factors that prompted optimism, including the results of serological tests (especially in big cities), low mortality rates and the fact that, since September 2020, the number of COVID-19 cases had decreased steadily, despite the fact that the economy was reopening after the harsh lockdown of the second quarter of 2020.<sup>4</sup> However, the Indian government's confidence did not falter even when data suggested that a second wave was about to come.

The crucial weeks were between the end of February and the beginning of March 2021 (circled in figure 1, below).



4. These factors were analysed in a previous issue of *Asia Maior*. See Diego Maiorano, 'India 2020: Under the COVID hammer'.

It was in that period that cases began to move along an upward trend, which should have at least moderate the government's confidence that the worst was over. However, on 21 February, the BJP issued a resolution lauding Modi's leadership in fighting the pandemic.<sup>5</sup> While this resolution was clearly tailored for the upcoming round of state elections, its core message was repeated by Cabinet members in the following weeks, despite growing signs that a wave was about to hit. On 6 March, when the daily number of cases stood at more than 18,000 – a 100% increase since 18<sup>th</sup> February – Health Minister Harsh Vardhan declared that COVID-19 was «in the endgame» in India.<sup>6</sup> These were also the days when India's scientists warned the government – to no avail – about a new and more contagious variant (which came to be known as the Delta variant), which was found in COVID-19 positive samples around the country.<sup>7</sup> A few days later, Vardhan lamented that cases were rising because of people's «inappropriate behaviour» (the Minister did not elaborate on whether such behaviour was the result of the government's consistent reassuring messages that the pandemic was almost over).<sup>8</sup> In any case, he later reassured the country once again, on 30 March, that the situation was «under control».<sup>9</sup> That day, the number of daily cases was 59,000, more than a threefold increase since Vardhan's declaration that the pandemic was «in the endgame». A month later, on 30 April, the number of cases had increased to 350,000 to reach the peak of almost 400,000 at the beginning of May 2021.<sup>10</sup>

It is unclear at what point the government's genuine confidence gave way to a not-so-hidden attempt to just ignore the situation for political reasons. Indicatively, between the end of March (when India halted the exports of vaccines to focus on domestic distribution) and mid-April (when the COVID-19 task force was reconvened after a gap of more than three months),<sup>11</sup> the government finally came to terms with reality. During the previous months, however, the government actively contributed – because of ill-based confidence or political reasons (or a mixed of the two) – to the spreading of the virus in at least three ways.

5. 'BJP resolution lauds PM Modi for farm reforms, Covid handling', *The Indian Express*, 22 February 2021.

6. 'We are in the endgame of Covid-19 pandemic in India: Harsh Vardhan', *The Times of India*, 7 March 2021.

7. 'Scientists say India government ignored warnings amid coronavirus surge', *Reuters*, 1 May 2021.

8. 'Negligence towards COVID-19 appropriate behaviour behind rising cases: Vardhan', *The Economic Times*, 15 March 2021.

9. 'COVID-19 situation under control in India: Health minister Harsh Vardhan', *Mint*, 30 March 2021.

10. All data on daily cases refer to the 7-day rolling average and are taken from [www.ourworldindata.org](http://www.ourworldindata.org).

11. 'India's COVID-19 taskforce did not meet in February, March despite surge, say members', *The Caravan*, 22 April 2021.

First, the government gave credit and endorsed unscientific theories about how to prevent or cure COVID-19. The Ministry of AYUSH (Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homeopathy) published a set of guidelines on its website<sup>12</sup> for «improving immunity» during the pandemic, which included applying sesame oil in the nostrils, consumption of Indian gooseberry and daily practice of Yoga and meditation. Meanwhile, other members of the ruling parties explicitly promoted unscientific practices and claimed that these were effective measures to stop the virus. Some BJP leaders organised steam inhalation sessions, cow urine drinking and cow dung applications, all claimed to be miracle remedies against the illness.<sup>13</sup> The minister of health, Harsh Vardhan, and the minister of transport, Nitin Gadkari, were also present on stage at the launch of Coronil, an ayurvedic treatment for COVID-19 which, the manufacturer claimed, was 100 per cent effective against the illness.<sup>14</sup> Baba Ramdev, the founder of Patanjali Ayurveda which produced Coronil – and Modi’s favourite guru<sup>15</sup> – even falsely claimed (with the two ministers present by his side) that the World Health Organisation (WHO) had certified the medicine (which the WHO promptly denied).<sup>16</sup>

Second, the government spared no efforts to organise the Kumbh Mela, a massive Hindu festival.<sup>17</sup> While the festival should have taken place in 2022 to respect the traditional 12-year cycle, the government decided to follow the advice of a group of ascetics associated with the Akhil Bharatiya Akhara Parishad, an organisation of Hindu saints and sadhus, to hold the festival one year ahead of schedule, because of their reading of the astrological calendar.<sup>18</sup>

The chief minister of Uttarakhand (where the Kumbh was to take place), Trivendra Singh Rawat, insisted to hold the festival amid tight restrictions. However, he was unceremoniously removed and replaced shortly before the beginning of the Kumbh in March 2021, because, BJP sources claimed, he insisted on organising a «symbolic» festival that would not attract crowds. The restrictions envisaged by Rawat were hurriedly removed

12. The guidelines are available here: <https://www.ayush.gov.in/docs/Ayurveda%20Preventive%20Measures%20for%20self%20care%20during%20COVID-19%20Pandemic.pdf>.

13. Ramachandra Guha, ‘Modi’s Hindutva irrationality makes India’s war on Covid-19 even more difficult’, *Scroll.in*, 23 May 2021.

14. ‘Patanjali’s Coronil gets another boost, courtesy a dubious clinical trial’, *Newslandry*, 22 February 2021.

15. ‘As Modi and his right-wing Hindu base rise, so too does a celebrity yoga tycoon’, *Reuters*, 23 May 2017.

16. ‘After Baba Ramdev’s claim on Patanjali’s Coronil, a clarification from WHO’, *The Hindustan Times*, 21 February 2021.

17. The following account is taken from an investigation that appeared in *The Caravan*. Shristi Jaswal, ‘BJP fired ex-Uttarakhand chief minister TS Rawat for restricting Kumbh gatherings’, *The Caravan*, 8 May 2021.

18. The Kumbh Mela usually follows a 12-year cycle and should have been held in 2022.

after his ousting and the decision to organise a full-scale festival was taken. This was the end result of the pressures from ascetic organisations, which are very influential in North India in general and in Uttar Pradesh in particular; where elections were scheduled for early 2022. «It made no sense to annoy a friendly ally just a year before elections», admitted a senior BJP leader to investigative journalist Shriti Jaswal. In fact, the Kumbh Mela is, besides an important Hindu festival, also a massive source of revenues for ascetic organisations. Modi even put his face on a full-page advertisement on 21 March 2021 inviting pilgrims to the Kumbh Mela and reassuring them that it was «clean» and «safe».<sup>19</sup> Eventually, some 14 million people attended the festival, which, numerous experts claimed, became (predictably) a super-spreader event.<sup>20</sup> In Uttarakhand alone, the number of recorded cases was 69 on the day of the first ritual dip in the Ganges (11 March); it rose to 5,703 on 27 April, the day the festival ended – a 8,165% increase. Furthermore, since pilgrims came from all over India, many spread the virus throughout the country, including in ill-equipped rural areas.<sup>21</sup>

Eventually, the government made a U-turn in mid-April and asked pilgrims to celebrate in a «symbolic» way for the remaining of the festival.<sup>22</sup> In the meantime, however, another mass Hindu festival, Holi, had been celebrated without restrictions on 29 March. Significantly, a much smaller (around 8,000 people) Muslim gathering occurred in early 2020, had been dubbed by the BJP leadership as a super-spreader event that was responsible for the spreading the virus in India.<sup>23</sup>

The third way in which the government promoted the spread of the virus is through large election rallies in the four states that went to polls in March-May 2021 (Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal). While technically the responsibility for not postponing the elections or posing a limit on the size of gatherings was of the Election Commission (EC), its independence from the government has been seriously compromised since 2014.<sup>24</sup> In fact, not only did the EC decide to stretch the West Bengal elections over eight phases (from 27 March to 29 April) – something that ana-

19. 'BJP Makes a Delayed U-Turn, Modi Says Kumbh Attendance Should Now Be «Symbolic»', *The Wire*, 17 April 2021.

20. 'Kumbh Mela Shahi Snans Biggest Super-Spreaders in Pandemic's History: Dr Ashish Jha', *The Wire*, 6 May 2021.

21. Shriti Jaswal, 'BJP fired ex-Uttarakhand chief minister TS Rawat for restricting Kumbh gatherings'.

22. 'BJP Makes a Delayed U-Turn, Modi Says Kumbh Attendance Should Now Be «Symbolic»'.

23. Sameer Yasir, 'India Is Scapegoating Muslims for the Spread of the Coronavirus', *Foreign Policy*, 22 April 2020.

24. Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021; Diego Maiorano, 'Democratic Backsliding amid the COVID-19 pandemic in India'.

lysts believe favoured the BJP in the state<sup>25</sup> – but refused to impose any restrictions on campaigning until the day after Modi had decided to stop campaigning himself (on 22 April).<sup>26</sup> It should also be noted that the responsibility for organising rallies was shared by all political parties, which continued their campaigns – with virtually no precautions in place<sup>27</sup> – well through April, when the number of daily cases was growing exponentially.

As mentioned, the most problematic state was West Bengal, particularly because of the inordinately long electoral period decided by the EC. Overall, Modi attended 23 rallies in the state and Amit Shah 79. The latter, who claimed that the elections could not be blamed for the spike of infections in poll-bound states, continued to attend rallies even after the 23 April ruling by the EC urging political parties to limit the size of their events.<sup>28</sup> While it is virtually impossible to establish to what extent these rallies contributed to the spread of the virus, it is certain that they did in some measure.<sup>29</sup>

## 2.2. *The second wave*

Another consequence of the government's confidence and complacency was the collapse of the health care system during the second wave. To give just one examples, it took the government more than eight months to invite bids for 162 oxygen generation plants; after an additional six months – in the middle of the second wave in mid-April – only 33 had been installed and far fewer were operational.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, India found itself in short supply of critical medical equipment during the second wave, including of vaccines, which India produces on a massive scale.

To be fair, even if the government had not underestimated the situation, actively promoted mass gatherings and used the months between September 2020 and February 2021 – when the number of cases were very low – to prepare for a possible second wave, India's health care sector would have been under severe stress anyway. In fact, in 2018, India spent just 0.95% of its GDP on public health, well below the average 1.46% for lower-middle income countries.<sup>31</sup> Out of 191 countries for which data are available, only 22

25. Ronojoy Sen, 'Mamata faces Strong BJP Challenge in Bengal', *ISAS Insights*, No. 658, 26 March 2021.

26. 'EC bans physical campaigning, expresses «anguish» over flouting of Covid norms', *The Indian Express*, 23 April 2021.

27. 'All Bengal rallies flouting Covid-19 norms', *The Hindustan Times*, 15 April 2021.

28. Christophe Jaffrelot, 'India's Second Wave: A Man-Made Disaster?', *Institute Montaigne*, 27 April 2021.

29. 'Is Amit Shah Right to Say Elections Can't be Blamed for COVID Spike?', *The Wire*, 19 April 2021.

30. 'India is running out of oxygen, Covid-19 patients are dying – because the government wasted time', *Scroll.in*, 18 April 2021.

31. This is the income group in which India is classified by the World Bank. Data are the latest available from the World Development Indicators.

spent less than India on public healthcare. This was both a historical legacy of underinvestment in the health sector – especially primary care – and of the liberalisation drive of the 1990s, which promoted the mushrooming of world-class private hospitals, effectively creating a «medical apartheid».<sup>32</sup> With the wealthy increasingly resorting to private care (and education), incentives to invest into India's public health infrastructure diminished, leaving behind a crumbling system in normal times. The second wave of COVID-19, however, made abundantly clear that not even the rich could afford to have a crumbling public health sector during a pandemic.

Supriya Sharma, executive editor at *Scroll.in*, wrote a moving (and quite depressing) story of her personal quest for a hospital bed, oxygen cylinders and medicines for her uncle. Sharma concludes that even for a privileged person like herself – who has money, contacts and status – it was excruciatingly difficult to secure care for her relative in Delhi, which has the best health infrastructure of the country. Most Indians, however, were not that fortunate.

In fact, Delhi ran out of Intensive Care Units in mid-April. The capital's hospitals struggled to get oxygen supplies to the point that they sent desperate appeals on Twitter saying that they would run out of oxygen within a few hours.<sup>33</sup> In a few cases, appeals were fruitless and hundreds of patients died because hospitals throughout the country simply finished the oxygen supply.<sup>34</sup> Hundreds more died at the doorsteps of hospitals because they could not find or afford medicines or oxygen cylinders at the black-market rates – oxygen cylinders were sold at 16 times the normal price in mid-April in Delhi.<sup>35</sup> Desperate people and hoarders ransacked hospitals in search for medical supplies.<sup>36</sup> Crematoriums soon ran out of space and wood.<sup>37</sup> In the capital, emergency crematoriums were set up in parking lots and along the river banks.<sup>38</sup> Hundreds of corpses were, in the following weeks, found floating in the Ganges or buried in the sands of its banks.<sup>39</sup> The state of Bihar even installed a net over the river to limit the flow of corpses coming downstream from neighbouring Uttar Pradesh.<sup>40</sup>

32. Vidya Krishnan, 'India Is What Happens When Rich People Do Nothing', *The Atlantic*, 27 April 2021.

33. 'Covid-19 in India: Patients struggle at home as hospitals choke', *BBC News*, 26 April 2021.

34. Vidya Krishnan, 'Uncritical support for Modi paved the way for India's COVID-19 crisis', *The Caravan*, 28 April 2021; 'Delhi hospitals plead for oxygen as more patients die', *BBC News*, 2 May 2021.

35. 'Covid-19 in India: Patients struggle at home as hospitals choke'.

36. 'Oxygen cylinders looted at Madhya Pradesh hospital, twice in two days', *India Today*, 21 April 2021.

37. 'Delhi running out of space for cremations', *BBC News*, 30 April 2021.

38. "Death Is the Only Truth.' Watching India's Funeral Pyres Burn', *The New York Times*, 30 April 2021.

39. 'Covid-19: India's holiest river is swollen with bodies', *BBC News*, 19 May 2021.

40. 'Net Across Ganga In Bihar To Catch COVID-19 Corpses From UP', *NDTV*, 12 May 2021.

As the health infrastructure collapsed, getting a COVID-19 test became difficult not only because of huge demand but also because of an increasing number of health personnel who contracted the virus or had to care for family members. The same applied to the logistical infrastructure necessary to move medicines, cylinders or vaccines, as the country experienced a shortage of truck drivers and other professionals needed to face the emergency.

It is difficult to grasp the scale of the tragedy and human loss, as the collapse of the system made official data completely unreliable. *The Economist* attempted to calculate an approximate death toll based on excess deaths, which are not a perfect measure, but it is perhaps the closest approximation to the actual death toll of the second wave. According to their calculations, between 1 March and 28 June 2021, 2.4 million excess deaths occurred in India (the official death toll is 240,000).<sup>41</sup> Rukmini S., one of India's most respected data journalists, estimates that about 1.5 million people died during the second wave (out of a total death toll between March 2020 and July 2021 of 2.5 million).<sup>42</sup> This is, however, only the most tragic impact of the pandemic in India. In the next section, we will look at emerging data on the economic impact of the pandemic.

### 2.3. *The pandemic's economic consequences*

India's GDP growth bounced back during 2021. Table 1 shows quarterly trends since the beginning of the pandemic.

Financial year	Quarter	Percentage change
2019/20	Jan-Mar	3%
2020/21	Apr-Jun	-24.4%
	Jul-Sep	-7.4%
	Oct-Dec	0.5%
	Jan-Mar	1.6%
2021/22	Apr-Jun	20.1%
	Jul-Sep	8.4%

Source: Ministry of Statistic and Programme Implementation (MOSPI)

41. *The Economist's* data and methodology are described in detail here: <https://www.economist.com/graphic-detail/coronavirus-excess-deaths-estimates>.

42. 'Estimates Suggest 25 Lakh Indians Have Died of COVID, Not 4 Lakh', *The Wire*, 10 July 2021.

In absolute terms, the Indian economy was, at the end of September 2021, 0.5% larger than it was before the pandemic. This is certainly a very remarkable achievement, given the ferocity of the second wave.

However, behind the headline figures, lies a more complicated picture. First, it should be remembered that India's GDP figures drastically underrepresent the unorganised sector, which contributes 45% to the GDP and employs the great majority of the workforce.<sup>43</sup> While this is problematic in normal circumstances, after the triple shock of demonetisation (2016), the introduction of the GST (2017) and, above all, the 2020 lockdown and its aftermath – all of which disproportionately impacted on India's informal economy – the GDP figures might actually conceal more than they reveal.

Second, if one looks at what sectors are driving the recovery, it is clear that the economic uptick is largely due to the very good performance of a section of the corporate world, while the great majority of firms and workers might actually be significantly worse off than they were before the pandemic hit.<sup>44</sup> This is signalled by a number of factors.<sup>45</sup>

First, private consumption (about 55% of the GDP) was still 3.5 percentage points below pre-pandemic levels, signalling that, although recovering, internal demand is still suppressed and does not contribute much to GDP growth.

Second, two of the most employment-intensive sectors, construction and trade, hotels, transport and broadcast services, were still struggling. While construction was just below its pre-pandemic levels, trade and hotels were a full 10 percentage points below (largely because of sluggish demand and government-imposed restrictions). This also signals that these two sectors (amounting to about 23% of the GDP) are not contributing much to employment generation.

Third, agriculture (about 14% of the GDP) performed well throughout the pandemic and employment increased significantly. However, this should be interpreted as a distress signal, as it is likely the result of people losing more lucrative jobs in the urban sector and returning to work on family land. This was, for example, the fate of millions of migrant workers who left big metros in the wake of the 2020 lockdown. In fact, the share of urban employment dropped from 31.6% in 2019/20 to 31.2% in November 2021.<sup>46</sup>

Fourth, Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSME) (about 30% of the GDP and 80% to 85% of the employment) continued to struggle.

43. Arun Kumar, 'Shadows of the Pandemic: What the Latest GDP Numbers Tell us about the Nature of India's Recovery', *The Wire*, 5 December 2021.

44. See Karan Thapar's in-depth interview with Pronab Sen: 'India's Economy Is Out of the Woods. Bharat's Is Not: Pronab Sen', *The Wire*, 6 December 2021.

45. The following data are taken from Government of India, Department of Economic Affairs, *Monthly Economic Review*, November 2021.

46. Manesh Vyas, 'Employment data disappoints in November', *CMIE – Unemployment Rate in India*, 6 December 2021.



The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) data showed a marginal increase in lending to MSME (after months of negative growth).<sup>47</sup> While this might signal the beginning of a slow process of recovery, the steep increase of wholesale inflation (which jumped to 12.5% in October 2021, largely on account of rising global prices of energy and other inputs),<sup>48</sup> means MSME will continue to struggle.

On the other hand, the corporate sector has done remarkably well. RBI data show that sales, production and profits of corporations have gone up significantly during 2021, also thanks to a remarkable increase in online sales.<sup>49</sup> Private investments have also increased by 11% over pre-pandemic levels and corporate wages have been rising. In the words of former member of India's Planning Commission and present director for the International Growth Centre (IGC) India Programme, Pronab Sen, the current state of the economy indicates that «India is out of the woods. Bharat is not».<sup>50</sup> In fact, it is worrisome that, according to a study conducted by researchers at Azim Premji University in Bangalore, 230 million people might have been pushed back into poverty during 2020.<sup>51</sup>

The two other dimensions of human development, education and health, were also very negatively affected by the pandemic, which represented a major shock to an already vulnerable population.<sup>52</sup> In fact, the proportion of people highly vulnerable to shock was very high before the pandemic hit. The Global Hunger Index 2021 ranked India 101 of 116 countries, signalling a high proportion of malnourished people (particularly children).<sup>53</sup> According to the latest round of the National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), conducted in 2019-20, 35.4% of the children under 5 years of age were stunted (low height-for-age) and 19.3% were wasted (low weight-for-height). Alarming, there has not been much progress since the previous round of the survey, conducted in 2015-16, when the proportion of stunted and wasted children was 38.4% and 21%, respectively. Even more alarmingly, the proportion of children who were severely wasted – a medical emergency – increased from 7.5% in 2015-16 to 7.7% in 2019-20.<sup>54</sup> It is

47. *Reserve Bank of India Bulletin*, October 2021.

48. *Monthly Economic Review*, November 2021.

49. Arun Kumar, 'Shadows of the Pandemic: What the Latest GDP Numbers Tell us about the Nature of India's Recovery'.

50. 'India's Economy Is Out of the Woods. Bharat's Is Not: Pronab Sen'.

51. Azim Premji University, *State of Working India 2021: One year of Covid-19*, Centre for Sustainable Employment, Azim Premji University, Bangalore 2021.

52. See Diego Maiorano, 'India 2020: Under the COVID hammer' for an analysis of the immediate impact of the 2020 lockdown on employment, education and health.

53. *Global Hunger Index 2021*, Dublin: Concern Worldwide, and Bonn: Welthungerhilfe, 2021.

54. *National Family Health Survey, Round 5 (2019-20)*, Mumbai: International Institute for Population Sciences, 2021.

very likely that the pandemic-induced shock further slowed the already very slow improvements in nutritional outcomes. In fact, the high proportion of people in informal employment (about 90% according to the International Labour Organisation) makes a very large proportion of Indian households very vulnerable to income shocks. A World Bank study showed that, in the months following the 2020 lockdown, 37% of the sampled households across six states ran into situations where, owing to the lack of money or other resources, they had to reduce portions or skip meals.<sup>55</sup> Additionally, schools (which, thanks to the midday meal scheme, are also a primary source of nutrition for children) suffered one of the longest periods of closure in the world and very few students were able to access online education, particularly in rural areas.<sup>56</sup> The long-term consequences in terms of human capital formation might be severe.

A more positive impact of the second wave was to trigger a marked acceleration of vaccinations, after a series of policy hiccups and U-turns that had made an already difficult logistical endeavour even more difficult.<sup>57</sup> At the time of writing in late December 2021, 61% of the population had received at least one dose of a vaccine and 44% were fully vaccinated.<sup>58</sup> Considering the large amount of people who were infected, it is safe to assume that a sizable part of the population is at least partially protected from severe disease. However, the spread of the Omicron variant in India (which at the end of December had been detected in 23 states)<sup>59</sup> might signal that India might be heading towards a new wave.

To sum up, the devastating second wave had an enormous impact on India, particularly in terms of a tragically high death toll. While the economy seemed to be back on track, there were signs that the pandemic might have further increased the gap between two Indias and left behind a very high number of people who were already very vulnerable before the COVID-19 tsunami hit the shores of India.

Indeed, other indicators suggest that inequality might have increased. For instance, consumption of petroleum, liquified petroleum gas and diesel (which are consumed mostly by the poor) decreased, while aviation turbine

55. More specifically, 37% of the respondents said that at least one of the following situations occurred to them: a) reduce portion sizes; b) ran out of food; c) someone in the household was hungry but did not eat; and/or d) someone in the household went without eating. Divya Murali & Diego Maiorano, 'Nutritional Consequence of the Lockdown in India: Indications from the World Bank's Rural Shock Survey', *ISAS Insights*, No. 660, 6 April 2021.

56. Vani Swarupa Murali & Diego Maiorano, 'Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic in India', *ISAS Working Papers*, No. 352, 6 October 2021.

57. Ramita Iyer and Diego Maiorano, 'India's COVID-19 Vaccine Policy', *ISAS Working Papers*, No. 353, 18 October 2021.

58. Data taken from ourworldindata.org.

59. 'Omicron has started replacing Delta variant in India, say sources', *The Hindu*, 31 December 2021.

fuel increased significantly after the end of the 2020 lockdown. Similarly, according to the Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy, sales of two wheelers (in India a widely accepted proxy for consumption of the lower classes) and sales of cars (an analogously widely accepted proxy for purchasing power of the rich), which, before the pandemic moved along roughly comparable trends, after the start of the pandemic widened significantly. Finally, that inequality might have increased is also reflected in consumers' self-perception of their own economic conditions in the year under review when compared to a year before.<sup>60</sup>

### 3. State elections<sup>61</sup>

The second major political development of 2021 was a round of state elections (March-April) in four states: Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal (plus the small Union Territory of Puducherry). Tables 1B to 4BE (in Appendix B) show the results.

The BJP won a second mandate in Assam with a convincing majority and consolidated its status as the main opposition party in West Bengal, where the incumbent chief minister, Mamata Banerjee, led her party (the Trinamool Congress) to a spectacular performance. In Kerala, the ruling Left Democratic Front (LDF) won a second mandate, while in Tamil Nadu the Dravidra Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) won a comfortable majority at the expenses of the incumbent (and BJP ally) All India Anna Dravidra Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK).

The electoral results in the four states do not lend themselves to an easy nation-wide narrative. The four states have highly distinctive party and social systems, political actors and political cultures. In fact, analysts of survey data spoke of a round of elections largely determined by local factors.<sup>62</sup> We will briefly look at factors that shaped the results in the two southern states, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, where local factors were dominant in shaping the electoral results, and then pass to the eastern part of the country, where national trends can more easily be seen.

In Kerala, the voters put an end to a decades-long process of alternation in power between the LDF and the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF), granting a decisive mandate to the incumbent LDF. For the first time in 44 years, a chief minister, Pinaravi Vijayan, will serve for a second term. The key to the LDF's victory was a much greater ability to convert

60. Roshan Kishore, 'Understanding the unequal nature of India's economic recovery', *Hindustan Times*, 27 December 2021.

61. See Appendix A for a summary table of all the state elections that were held in 2019 and 2020, which were not treated in previous issues of *Asia Maior*.

62. Suhas Palshikar *et al.*, 'Local factors determine electoral outcomes in States', *The Hindu*, 4 May 2021.

votes into seats. In fact, the CPI(M) and the Congress have nearly identical vote shares, but the former secured three times as many seats (62 as against 21). The localized nature of the Kerala contest is underscored by the sharp difference with the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, where voters voted decisively for the UDF, seen by many as the most credible alternative to the BJP. In 2021, however, local factors dominated.<sup>63</sup> In particular, it seems that voters rewarded the incumbent government for a strong record in managing a series of crises (the 2018 outbreak of the highly infectious Nipah virus, the devastating floods in 2018 and 2019 and the COVID-19 pandemic, which was managed far better than in most other states).<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, the LDF government was rewarded for providing and improving a range of welfare measures both before and after the pandemic hit.<sup>65</sup> In short, it seems that the deciding factor was the good governance that the LDF government was able to provide. The BJP, which had won its first seat in the state in 2016, failed to elect a single Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), despite securing 11.3% of the votes.

In Tamil Nadu, the decisive victory of the DMK was largely expected. Both dominant parties had lost their leaders during the last legislature (Jayalalitha, the leader of AIADMK, died in 2016 and M. Karunanidhi, the leader of DMK, in 2018). Both parties went through a complicated succession process, which was resolved much more successfully by the DMK, which elected Karunanidhi's son, M.K. Stalin, as the party supremo. The AIADMK, on the other hand, was engulfed in a bitter war of succession for much of the previous five years, which also impacted on governance.

Despite all this, the AIADMK remained a strong contestant in the state. However, the DMK was much better at converting votes into seats. In fact, a mere 4 percentage points difference in vote share resulted in the DMK winning twice as many seats as its rival (133 and 66, respectively). The major electoral theme was the DMK's accusation that the AIADMK, by associating with the BJP, was threatening Tamil Nadu's regional identity against the majoritarian forces of the 'North-Indian' BJP.<sup>66</sup> In particular, the strong *Hindutva* push of the BJP appeared to be alien and ill-suited to Tamil Nadu's political culture.<sup>67</sup> Yet, the BJP managed to conquer 4 seats, thus returning in the Legislative Assembly from where it had been absent since 2001.

63. Gilles Verniers *et al.*, '30 charts dissecting the Kerala verdict: LDF victory comes against backdrop of Congress decline', *Scroll.in*, 11 May 2021.

64. Vibha Attri, 'Votes for tackling the coronavirus', *The Hindu*, 7 May 2021.

65. Kesava Menon, 'The Implications of the Left Victory in Kerala', *The India Forum*, 4 June 2021.

66. Gilles Verniers *et al.*, 'How Tamil Nadu voted in 28 charts: DMK won a clean victory but AIADMK remained competitive adversary', *Scroll.in*, 9 May 2021.

67. S. Narayan, 'Tamil Nadu Elections 2021: Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam back in the Driver's Seat', *ISAS Briefs*, No. 836, 4 May 2021.

In Assam, the BJP-led coalition retained power. This is by far the best outcome for the BJP in the 2021 round of state elections. Not only was the party a marginal presence in the state until 2014 (it won only 5 seats in the 2011 state elections, but as many as half of the Lok Sabha seats in 2014), but it secured its position as the dominant party in the state, having effectively replaced its ally, the Asom Gana Parishad. Once again, the key to the BJP's victory was its ability to convert votes into seats.<sup>68</sup> In fact, the Congress and the BJP had similar vote shares (29.67 and 33.21, respectively), but a massive difference in terms of seats (29 and 60, respectively).

The electoral results in Assam show the high degree of religious polarization which, since the advent of the BJP as a main political actor, characterised politics in the state. The Congress performed very well in Muslim dominated areas, whereas the BJP swept Hindu-majority areas. In fact, the higher the proportion of Hindus in a constituency, the higher was the proportion of the votes for the saffron party.<sup>69</sup> The geographical determinant of the electoral outcomes has remained constant since 2014, signalling the high degree of consolidation of religious identities in the state. Remarkably, before 2014, the geographical distribution of the votes was almost specular: the Congress dominated where it now dominates the BJP.<sup>70</sup>

Post-poll survey data, collected by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), confirm that Hindus voted en masse for the NDA: 67%, as against 19% who preferred the Congress-led Mahajot (Grand Alliance). Muslims, on the other hand, voted decisively for the latter (77%). Significantly, the BJP-led alliance was able to attract the Hindu vote across ethnic and linguistic lines – a remarkable achievement in a state whose society is fractured along a number of overlapping identities.<sup>71</sup>

Assam is a key state for the BJP's expansion in the North-East. Moreover, the consolidation of the party as the major political actor in the state – a consolidation that was built upon the promotion of strong *Hindutva* agenda – shows that the Northeast of the country, which has long resisted assimilation with the rest of India, is in fact fertile ground for its inclusion into an (emerging) Hindu-state.<sup>72</sup>

The big prize of the 2021 round of state elections was, undoubtedly and for several reasons, West Bengal. First, the incumbent chief minister, Mamata Banerjee, consistently and aggressively, has attacked the Naren-

68. This was the results of both the functioning of the first-past-the-post electoral system, as well as a precise strategy of the party to concentrate resources on seats where it had reasonable chance to win.

69. Gilles Verniers *et al.*, 'Assam verdict: 29 charts that show just how polarised the election was', *Scroll.in*, 7 May 2021.

70. *Ibid.*

71. Suhas Palshikar *et al.*, 'Hindu consolidation pays off for BJP', *The Hindu*, 7 May 2021.

72. Arkotong Longkumer, *The Greater India Experiment – Hindutva and the North-east*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2020.

dra Modi government since its election in 2014, more than any other opposition leader. The battle for Bengal was thus also a battle between two of India's most prominent political leaders. Second, and connected to this point, Modi transformed the West Bengal contest «into a prestige battle»<sup>73</sup> and invested massive resources – both monetary and leadership – into winning the state. Third, West Bengal sends 42 Members of Parliament (MP) to Delhi and had been a key to the 2019 victory of the BJP at the national level.<sup>74</sup> The BJP was keen to consolidate its presence in the state, also with an eye to the 2024 general elections.

The state underwent a massive transformation of its political system over the last 15 years. The parties that, from 1977 onwards, dominated West Bengal's politics (the CPI(M)-led Left Front) were decimated, passing from half of the vote share in 2006 to 5% in 2021 (and no seats). The then main opposition party, the Congress, was also decimated, with its vote share plummeting to 3% in 2021 (and no seats).

On the other hand, the Trinamool Congress first replaced the Congress as the main opposition party and then proceeded to become the dominant one in 2011. Since then, the Trinamool Congress has won a consistently high (and increasing) vote and seat shares. In fact, not only has it replaced the Left Front electorally, but also in terms of penetration of Bengal's society. In fact, in many ways the Trinamool Congress has kept in place the «party-society»<sup>75</sup> framework that had ensured the Left Front dominance, whereby allegiance to the party (the Left Front or, later, the Trinamool Congress) is the main vehicle for political mobilisation (rather than identity, whether religious, linguistic or caste) and the main instrument through which people access welfare and other state services.<sup>76</sup> For a long time, identity politics has remained uninfluential.

The emergence of the BJP as a serious contender in the state, however, changed the equation in at least three ways. First, as evidenced from the results of the 2014 general elections, West Bengal was not immune to the first Modi wave. Undoubtedly, the Prime Minister's popularity helped enormously the BJP to assume centre-stage in the state. Second, religious polarisation, which was the BJP's trojan horse into the state, spread like wildfire. In fact, the BJP made inroads among the families of Hindu refugees from East Pakistan/Bangladesh – millions migrated during the partition in 1947 and

73. Ronojoy Sen, 'Mamata faces Strong BJP Challenge in Bengal', *ISAS Insights*, No. 658, 26 March 2021.

74. Diego Maiorano, India 2019: The general elections and the new Modi wave, *Asia Maior*, Vol. XXX/2019, pp. 327-44.

75. Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, 'Of Control and Factions: The Changing «Party-Society» in Rural West Bengal', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 44, No. 9, 28 February 2009, pp. 59-69.

76. Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, 'Whither West Bengal?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 56, No. 6, 6 February 2021, pp. 64-71.

in the wake of the creation of Bangladesh in 1971 – who were particularly receptive of the BJP’s strong anti-Muslim slogans and agenda.<sup>77</sup> Many were also allured by the promise of citizenship for non-Muslim migrants from neighbouring countries as per the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (2019).<sup>78</sup> Third, the BJP, in its attempt to consolidate the votes of the Hindus – about 70% of the state’s population – clearly targeted certain caste groups, in particularly Dalits, Scheduled Tribes and sections of the Other Backward Classes (OBCs).<sup>79</sup> This is a strategy that was termed «subaltern Hindutva», to highlight the BJP’s effort to mobilise and bring within the Hindutva’s fold caste groups that had been relegated to the margins of West Bengal’s politics by the dominance of the upper castes.<sup>80</sup> In 2019, the strategy seemed to have worked, as nearly 60% of the lower castes voted for the BJP (up from 20% in 2014).<sup>81</sup> In short, both religious and caste identities became the pillars upon which the BJP’s built its phenomenal ascendancy in West Bengal.

Mamata Banerjee was rapid to react. On the one hand, she tried to counter the BJP’s accusation of «minority appeasing» by both promoting a more «Hindu» public image of herself – seeing the Chief Minister offering pujas and visiting temples became a staple of West Bengal’s politics<sup>82</sup> – as well as reaching out to specific caste groups in a manner never seen before.<sup>83</sup> On the other hand, Mamata Banerjee sought to confront the BJP’s hyper nationalistic message with Bengali nationalism, well captured in the Trinamool Congress’s slogan «Bengal wants its own daughter» and terming the BJP as a party of «outsiders».<sup>84</sup>

The results eventually showed that the Trinamool Congress was much more firmly in control of the state than what media accounts in the months preceding the polls had led many to believe. In fact, Mamata’s party secured the largest electoral triumph of its history, even though the chief minister lost her own seat in Nandigram to Suwendu Adhikari, a former aide who jump shipped to the BJP shortly before the elections. A few factors influenced significantly the outcomes.

First, religious polarisation, the BJP’s main strategy to conquer the state, worked to a significant extent, but not quite in the way the BJP had

77. Rajat Roy, ‘Communal Politics Gaining Ground in West Bengal’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 52, No. 16, 22 April 2017.

78. Michelguglielmo Torri, ‘India 2020: The deepening crisis of democracy’.

79. Ronojoy Sen, ‘Mamata faces Strong BJP Challenge in Bengal’.

80. Indrajit Roy, ‘Why the subaltern chose, not Hindutva, but Trinamool in Bengal’, *The Indian Express*, 13 May 2021.

81. Ronojoy Sen, ‘Mamata faces Strong BJP Challenge in Bengal’.

82. ‘I am a Hindu girl: Mamata recites Chandipath at Nandigram day before filing papers’, *India Today*, 9 march 2021.

83. Himandri Ghosh, ‘West Bengal’s Landscape Is Shifting from «Party Society» to «Caste Politics»’, *The Wire*, 12 February 2021.

84. ‘MC amplifies «Bengal wants its own daughter» campaign’, *The Hindu*, 1 March 2021.

hoped.<sup>85</sup> According to survey data by the CSDS, 50% of Hindus voted for the BJP, as against 39% for the Trinamool Congress. On the other hand, 75% of Muslims voted for the Trinamool Congress (and 7% for the BJP). This shows that, while the BJP's Hindu consolidation strategy only partially worked, it had the effect of further uniting the Muslim vote in favour of the Trinamool Congress, to keep the BJP out of the state government.<sup>86</sup>

Second, the «subaltern Hindutva» strategy also did not work as expected by the BJP. Survey data suggest that the broad support that the BJP had enjoyed in 2019 among Dalits, Scheduled Tribes (STs) and OBCs waned in 2021. While many of the Dalits, OBCs and STs did vote for the BJP (see table 6), the Trinamool Congress was able to significantly increase its support base among these community compared to the 2019 general elections.

Table 6. Vote by community in West Bengal 2019-21.

	Community	Voted for AITC (difference with 2019)	Voted for BJP (difference with 2019)
	Upper castes	42 (6)	46 (-4)
	OBCs	36 (9)	49 (-19)
Dalits	Rajbanshis	38 (30)	59 (-16)
	Namashudras	31 (-7)	58 (4)
	Other Dalits	37 (1)	46 (-16)
	STs	42 (18)	46 (-16)
	Muslims	75 (5)	7 (3)

Source: Shreyas Sardesai, 'Subaltern Hindutva on the wane?', *The Hindu*, 6 May 2021.

Third, and linked to the point above, Mamata's outreach to the subalterns – both in terms of specific caste-based appeals and in terms of a number of welfare schemes targeted at these communities – seemed to have worked to win back their support. Nearly two-fifths of CSDS survey respondents said that they had personally benefited from a state government programme that provided free food rations and near half benefited from programmes that issued a health card to women and distributed bicycles to students. Schemes specifically targeting women were also popular, which might have contributed to about half of female voters to choose the Trinamool Congress.<sup>87</sup> Overall, the BJP's hopes to bank on anti-incumbency feel-

85. Suhas Palshikar *et al.*, 'West Bengal Assembly Elections: The limits to polarisation in Bengal', *The Hindu*, 6 May 2021

86. Ronojoy Sen, 'Mamata Resists the BJP's Might, Wins Big in Bengal', *ISAS Insights*, No. 669, 19 May 2021.

87. Ronojoy Sen, 'Mamata Resists the BJP's Might, Wins Big in Bengal'.



ings after three consecutive terms by Mamata Banerjee, collapsed under the weight of the enduring popularity of the Chief Minister, probably enhanced by the introduction of a set of well-liked welfare schemes.

Finally, a push for the Trinamool Congress might have come from the voting in the last phases of the elections, when the second wave of the pandemic was in full scale. The BJP was under severe criticism, and this might have convinced many voters to choose the Trinamool Congress. In fact, the gap between the Trinamool Congress and the BJP increased to 30 percentage points during the last two phases (although the Trinamool Congress was ahead of its rival in all phases).<sup>88</sup>

To conclude, the results in West Bengal were a big disappointment for the BJP, which failed to cross the 100-seat mark, which was considered the minimally acceptable result.<sup>89</sup> The BJP did not hide its disappointment. Just a few days after the results were declared, the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI)<sup>90</sup> arrested two Trinamool Congress Ministers and a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) in a seven-year-old corruption case.<sup>91</sup> The CBI even refused to release the ministers after its own special court had granted them bail (eventually, they were put under house arrest after a hearing of the Calcutta High Court). The whole episode added fuel to the fire in what was already an extremely tense atmosphere in the wake of a long a bitter electoral campaign, which resulted in a wave of violence which lasted for weeks.<sup>92</sup>

To sum up, the round of state elections of 2021 did not bring much joy in the BJP quarters. While the BJP retained one state (Assam) and performed exceedingly well in West Bengal, the spectacular performance of the Trinamool Congress and of its leader, Mamata Banerjee, projected her as a possible nation-wide opposition leader in 2024. On the other hand, it is clear that the BJP's ideological drive, *Hindutva*, keeps gaining momentum even in areas that, traditionally, had resisted it, like West Bengal. The other notable point, which might work as a model for other states, is that state-level parties like the DMK and the Trinamool Congress contrasted the BJP's nationalism with state-nationalism and this brought electoral divi-

88. Gilles Verniers *et al.*, 'Bengal verdict: 25 charts show how the Trinamool conclusively beat the BJP', *Scroll.in*, 5 May 2021.

89. Diego Maiorano, 'India's State Election Results: Implications for the BJP', *ISAS Insights*, No. 664, 14 May 2021.

90. The CBI functions under the Ministry of Personnel, Pension and Public Grievances, Government of India. It is a hardly kept secret that the Bureau's investigative activity is highly influenced by central government.

91. Shoaib Daniyal, 'Post-election chaos in Bengal underlines the fragile state of Indian democracy', *Scroll.in*, 24 May 2021.

92. 'A week after election results, violence continues in Bengal', *The Hindu*, 8 May 2021.

dends. In other words, the «iron law» of state politics of the last few years,<sup>93</sup> was confirmed by the 2021 round: the BJP, while absolutely dominant at the national level, is much less able to dominate at the state level where local political actors are much better placed to conduct a context-specific – with local leaders – electoral campaigns.

However, it should be remembered that, despite the seatbacks, the BJP's performance at the state level remains remarkable. Since Modi became Prime Minister, the BJP managed to expand its geographical outreach significantly and at one point (end of 2017), his party was ruling in 21 states (about 70% of the population).<sup>94</sup> In the process, it became the largest party in some states where it once was a marginal presence (like Haryana, Assam and Bihar) or replaced contenders as the main opposition party (like West Bengal or Odisha). Furthermore, its ideological plank is increasingly accepted as one of the pillars of Indian politics, as signalled by the adoption of some sort of «soft Hindutva» agenda by opposition leaders such as the chief ministers of Delhi and West Bengal – Arvind Kejriwal and Mamata Banerjee respectively – and Congress's President Rahul Gandhi.<sup>95</sup>

#### 4. Domestic politics

During 2021, in the domestic politics sphere, there have been two particularly notable developments. The first one is the continuation of the process of democratic erosion, which has been widely analysed in previous issues of *Asia Maior*,<sup>96</sup> as well as elsewhere.<sup>97</sup> For this reason, I will just briefly discuss the topic. The second development was the continuation of the farmers' protests against a set of agrarian reforms, which culminated with the capitulation of the government and the withdrawal of the laws.

93. Diego Maiorano, 'The BJP at the Centre and in the States: Divergence, Big Time, *ISAS Briefs*, No. 749, 20 February 2020.

94. Rahul Verma, 'National, state elections: Do voters differentiate?', *Hindustan Times*, 1 January 2022.

95. Suhas Palshikar, 'Understanding the Nature of Party Competition and Politics of Majoritarianism', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 56, No. 10, 6 March 2021.

96. Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2020: The deepening crisis of democracy'; Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2019: Assaulting the world's largest democracy: building a kingdom of cruelty and fear'; Diego Maiorano, 'Democratic Backsliding amid the COVID-19 pandemic in India'.

97. The list of analyses on this topic is huge. Some recent contributions include: Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy*; Rahul Mukherjee, 'Covid vs. Democracy: India's Illiberal Remedy', *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 31, No. 4, 2020; Debasish Roy Chowdhury and John Kean, *To Kill A Democracy: India's Passage to Despotism*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2021.

#### 4.1. *The further erosion of India's democracy*

Regarding the first of these developments, India's democratic backsliding, during 2021 the three major indexes that attempt to measure the quality of democracy across countries downgraded India. The Economist Intelligence Unit degraded India to the 'flawed democracy category';<sup>98</sup> Freedom House downgraded India from 'free' to 'partly free' status;<sup>99</sup> and the V-Dem Institute changed India's classification from 'electoral democracy' to 'electoral autocracy'.<sup>100</sup> While, of course, all three indexes are based on somewhat arbitrary thresholds that determine a country's status, all three agree that India, while formally and constitutionally a democracy, has put in place a set of informal mechanism of control, coercion and repression that make the whole system incompatible with any definition of democracy – except perhaps a very minimalist one centred around the conduction of free elections.

In the course of 2021, evidence emerged about one such mechanism, that well illustrates the functioning of the state institutions under the Modi regime. This is the so-called Pegasus scandal.<sup>101</sup> The Pegasus software was developed by an Israeli firm as a spying tool and is sold exclusively to governments. The software can be installed on a person's phone without their knowledge through a simple missed call. After that, the software gives access to emails, texts, call logs, passwords, browsing history, photos and any other document or media. It can also activate the camera and the microphone without the owner's knowledge.

In July 2021, the news outlet *The Wire*, in collaboration with a global consortium of journalists, revealed that about 1,000 Indian phones had been included in a list of potential targets through the spying software.<sup>102</sup> The selection of a majority of Indian numbers began after Modi's visit to Israel, when deals worth billions of dollars were signed with Israel's defence industry.<sup>103</sup>

The list of potential targets included some very prominent names, such as:

- Congress's President Rahul Gandhi;
- Election Commissioner Ashok Lavasa, who was added to the list short-

98. 'Democracy Index 2020: In sickness and in health?', *Economist Intelligence Unit*, 2021 (<https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2020>).

99. Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2021: India* (<https://freedomhouse.org/country/india/freedom-world/2021>).

100. Nazifa Alizada et al., *Autocratization Turns Viral. Democracy Report 2021*, University of Gothenburg, V-Dem Institute, 2021.

101. Shoaib Daniyal, 'Supreme Court, EC, Opposition: Spyware attack threatens pillars of India's electoral democracy', *Scroll.in*, 20 July 2021.

102. Siddharth Varadarajan, 'Pegasus Project: How Phones of Journalists, Ministers, Activists May Have Been Used to Spy On Them', *The Wire*, 18 July 2021. See also this source for the links to all the other stories published by *The Wire*, on which the following account is based.

103. 'Key Modi rival Rahul Gandhi among potential Indian targets of NSO client', *The Guardian*, 19 July 2021.

ly after he flagged Modi's violation of the code of conduct during the 2019 general elections;

- a staffer of the Supreme Court, whose number (and that of her family members) was added to the list after she had accused Chief Justice Ranjan Gogoi of sexual harassment. In the following months, Justice Ranjan ruled consistently and repeatedly in favour of the government in a number of controversial cases, like the dispute around the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, the alleged corruption in the Rafale jets procurement, human rights violations in Kashmir and the legality of recently introduced so-called 'electoral bonds' to fund political activity. (After his retirement, Gogoi was, controversially, nominated by the ruling party as a member of the Upper House);
- a series of human rights activists involved in the Bhima Koregaon case;<sup>104</sup>
- the Head of the Association for Democratic Reforms, Jagdeep Chokkhar, an NGO that scrutinises political parties' finances;
- the secretary of Karnataka's Chief Minister H.D. Kumaraswamy's, Deputy Chief Minister G. Parameshwara, and the secretary of former Chief Minister and current leader of the opposition in Karnataka Legislative Assembly Siddaramaiah, whose names were added in the run up to the toppling of the state government in 2019 and the subsequent take over by a BJP-led government;
- Union Minister of State, Prahlad Singh Patel and Union Minister for IT and Railways, Ashwini Vaishnav;
- the India Head of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, M. Hari Menon.

While there is no evidence that these phones were actually hacked with the software, forensic analyses on a small subset of the snooping list phones confirmed that some contained traces of the software. Among the infected phones there were that of *The Wire*'s founding editor, Siddharth Varadarajan, those of other journalists, and that of electoral strategist Prashant Kishore, well-known as manager of the electoral campaigns of a number of key parties, including the BJP, the Congress and the Trinamool Congress.

In short, the list of personalities included in the potential targets list reached the heart of India's democratic system, from opposition and ruling

104. In 2018 violence erupted during the celebration of the Bhima Koregaon battle (1818, when Dalit troops of the British Indian army defeated the Maratha Peshwa Baji Rao II (a Brahmin). In the following weeks, a dozen very prominent activists and scholars – well known also for their opposition to the Modi government – were arrested and accused of being part of an urban cell of the Communist Party of India (Maoist). See Apoorva Mandhani, '2 years, 3 charge sheets & 16 arrests — Why Bhima Koregaon accused are still in jail', *The Print*, 31 October 2020; and Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India – Hindu Nationalism and the rise of ethnic democracy*, ch. 10.

party's leaders, to civil society activists and organisations, to electoral watchdogs and the highest court of the land. Potentially, the episode represents a quintessential instance of «21<sup>st</sup> century» autocratic regimes,<sup>105</sup> where the formal democratic architecture is kept in place – like in Russia or Turkey – but the state employs informal mechanism to curb dissent, distort the functioning of institutions and ultimately tilting the playing field in its favour.

#### 4.2. *The repeal of the agrarian laws*

While the whole Pegasus scandal caused little more than a headache to the government, the enduring protests by tens of thousands of farmers at the outskirts of Delhi was of much greater significance for the ruling party.

In September 2020, the government rushed through parliament three bills that were quickly (and without discussion) approved and enacted into law at the end of the month.<sup>106</sup> The agrarian laws were presented as a comprehensive reform of the agricultural sector, which had been scantily touched by the process of liberalisation that started in the early 1990s. The promulgation of the laws – also because of the way in which they were promulgated, without consulting the interested parties – was met with vigorous criticism by farmers' associations, which developed into a wide-spread and long-lasting movement asking the repeal of the laws.<sup>107</sup>

The ravaging of the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the harsh winter followed by the scorching summer, the crackdown of the government – all of which resulted in some 600 farmers dying while protesting<sup>108</sup> – did not dissuade the protesters. They camped at the outskirts of Delhi until the government, in November 2021, announced the repeal of the three laws.<sup>109</sup> The scale of the protests was such that it attracted the attention of foreign celebrities such as Greta Thunberg and Rihanna, causing protests from BJP quarters about foreign interference.

The scale of farmers' protests quickly put the government in a difficult position. In fact, as early as January 2021, just a few months into the protest, Union Minister for Agriculture, Narendra Singh Tomar, offered to suspend the implementation of the law for 18 months – an offer that was

105. Steven Levitsky & Daniel Ziblatt, *How Democracies Die*, New York: Random House, 2019.

106. The three laws were: *The Farmers' Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act*; *The Farmers' (Empowerment and Protection) Agreement of Price Assurance and Farm Services Act*; and *The Essential Commodities (Amendment) Act*. For simplicity, these will be referred to as 'the farm laws'.

107. See Michelguglielmo Torri, 'India 2020: The deepening crisis of democracy', pp. 348-51.

108. 'Most Farmers Who Died at Delhi's Borders Owned Less Than 3 Acres Land: Study', *The Wire*, 7 November 2021.

109. 'Government notifies Farm Laws Repeal Act', *The Economic Times*, 2 December 2021.

rejected by the agitating farmers.<sup>110</sup> This was indeed a tactic that had already been used in the case of the controversial Citizenship Amendment Act, which was effectively suspended after the protests erupted in most cities of the country (particularly in Delhi) at the beginning of 2020.<sup>111</sup> The farmers, however, insisted that the laws had to be repealed, short of which the protests would continue. Modi was left with no alternatives, but capitulate, which he did on 19 November 2021, with the repeal of the contested laws.

The significance of the (victorious) farmers protests is manifold. First, it was a significant defeat for a government that had made the display of strength one of its pillars.

Second, it showed how difficult it remains to reform the agricultural sector, on which the great majority of the population relies for their livelihoods. Not only was the sector hardly reformed by any previous government since the 1960s (when the current policy infrastructure was put in place), but the previous attempt by the Modi government to legislate land issues – the so-called Land Acquisition law, 2015<sup>112</sup> – was also repealed following protests and resistance by the state governments.

Third, the timing of the decision to withdraw the laws clearly shows that the government felt it could not afford to keep the protest going while the states of Uttar Pradesh and Punjab – from where the majority of the protesting farmers came – were preparing for the upcoming state elections in early 2022. Indeed, Modi chose Guru Nanak's birthday – one of the most auspicious days for the Sikhs (who form the majority of Punjab's population and of the leadership of the farmers' movement) to announce the repeal of the laws.<sup>113</sup> This was also a precondition for a possible alliance between the BJP and the former Punjab Chief Minister, Captain Amarinder Singh, who left the Congress party in late 2021 to form its own venture (the Punjab Lok Congress).<sup>114</sup> Having parted ways with its traditional ally in the state, the Akali Dal, the BJP – which remains a marginal presence in the Punjab – was desperate to find new local allies. As far as Uttar Pradesh was concerned, clearly the BJP could not afford to begin the electoral campaign in India's most populous state with an 'anti-farmers' image attached, especially considering that the overwhelming majority of its voters reside in rural areas.

110. 'Govt ready to suspend farm laws for 18 months, farmers to consider proposal tomorrow', *Mint*, 20 January 2021.

111. 'A year ago, the BJP focussed its politics on the CAA. So why hasn't it been implemented yet?', *Scroll.in*, 11 December 2020.

112. The Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement (Second Amendment) Ordinance, 2015, made easier to confiscate land, in particular by exempting five (very broad) categories of projects from the need of assessing their social impact.

113. 'PM Modi Withdraws New Farm Laws On Guru Nanak Jayanti', *Outlook*, 19 November 2021.

114. 'Captain Amarinder Singh resigns from Congress', *The Indian Express*, 2 November 2021.

Finally, the repeal of the farm laws shows two contradictory processes at play.<sup>115</sup> On the one hand, the government, if only for compelling electoral reasons, demonstrated to be willing to listen to a popular movement. In this sense, the outcome of the protests signals that democratic antibodies are still present in Indian society and the fight for India's democracy, despite all its difficulties, is not yet lost. Conversely, the very fact that farmers had to resort to such a long and costing protest shows the limit of other institutional avenues to express dissent or influence the policy process. In fact, the Parliament hardly discussed the laws, its committees were not allowed to examine the bills and other formal mechanisms to receive inputs from interested parties were side-lined in favour of an overcentralised (and hardly democratic) legislative process. Taking it to the street was the only alternative.

### 5. Conclusion

As for much of the world, 2021 was a very difficult year for India, which went through a devastating second wave of infections of COVID-19. This article showed how the Modi-led government, because of over-confidence at first and political opportunism later, underestimated and then actively promoted the spread of the virus. The cost was enormous.

There are signs that, at least temporarily, the tragedy of the second wave might have dented the Prime Minister's aura of invincibility. This is not so much reflected in the results of the state elections – which were largely held before the crisis reached tragic proportions – but in some opinion surveys that were released in the second part of the year. For instance, according to data by Morning Consult's Global Leader Approval Ratings,<sup>116</sup> Modi's popularity declined from 74% on 1 March to 63% on 31 May. (It recovered to 71% on 14 December).

While the drop in Modi's popularity is far from dramatic – and more limited than that of most other leaders in the dataset – it is likely that a section of the urban upper classes was highly disappointed with the management of the pandemic and was hit very hard at a very personal level. While numerically small, this segment of the population writes newspaper reports and editorials; they teach in schools; they post on social media and they are hosted in omnipresent television debates. In other words, they are a key element in the formation of political opinions. It remains to be seen how long lasting the memory of the second wave – and of the government's acts of omission and commission – will be.

In 2021, the BJP-led government showed two other signs of fragil-

115. Ronojoy Sen & Diego Maiorano, 'Why the Farm Laws were Scrapped: Political Compulsions and More', *ISAS Briefs*, No. 881, 29 November 2021.

116. The data are available at: <https://morningconsult.com/global-leader-approval>.

ity. The first one was the disappointing results in the elections, particularly in West Bengal, where Modi's arch-rival, Mamata Banerjee, obtained the greatest electoral victory of her life. However, overall, the BJP's performance should not be dismissed, as it consolidated its dominant position in Assam and effectively decimated all other oppositions in West Bengal.

The second sign of fragility was the decision to repeal the three farm laws, on which the government had invested significant political capital. While the decision is certainly a defeat in terms of Modi's reformist agenda, it might be beneficial politically, especially in the poll-bound states of Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. Modi explained the decision as evidence that he is a leader who is willing to listen to the farmers and was ready to take a step back for the greater good. This is consistent with the public image that Modi built during his political career, that of a humble man who is in tune with the people. In any case, one should not overstate these fragilities. The BJP remain solidly dominant in the national landscape and in most states. The enduring crisis of the opposition parties – and in particular of the Congress party – also means that the BJP is unlikely to face any credible challenger in the years ahead.



## APPENDIX A – STATE ELECTION RESULTS 2019-20

As in previous issues of *Asia Maior* the results of the state elections of 2019 and 2020 were not presented, we append to this year's article summary tables. More detailed data and visualisation can be found at the Lok Dhaba data visualisation tool, hosted by Ashoka University.

Table 1A – Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Andhra Pradesh 2019		
Party	Seats won (difference from 2014)	Vote share (difference from 2014)
INC	0 (0)	1.17 (-1.6)
TDP	23 (-79)	39.17 (-5.44)
YSRCP	151 (49)	49.95 (5.6)
IND	0 (-1)	0.91 (-0.86)

Legend: INC = Indian National Congress; TDP = Telugu Desam Party; YSRCP = YSR Congress Party; IND = Independent; JnP

Table 2A - Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Arunachal Pradesh 2019		
Party	Seats won (difference from 2014)	Vote share (difference from 2014)
BJP	41 (30)	50.86 (19.89)
JD(U)	7 (-)	9.88 (-)
INC	4 (-38)	16.85 (-32.65)
PPA	1 (-4)	1.73 (-7.23)
IND	2 (0)	2.99 (-1.93)
NCP	-	-

Legend: BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party; JD(U) = Janata Dal; INC = Indian National Congress; PPA = People's Party of Arunachal; IND = Independent; NCP = Nationalist Congress Party

Table 3A - Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Odisha 2019		
Party	Seats won (difference from 2014)	Vote share (difference from 2014)
BJD	112 (-5)	44.71 (1.36)
BJP	23 (13)	32.49 (14.5)
INC	9 (-7)	16.12 (-9.59)

Legend: BJD = Biju Janata Dal; BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party; INC = Indian National Congress

Table 4A – Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Sikkim 2019		
Party	Seats won (difference from 2014)	Vote share (difference from 2014)
SKM	17 (7)	47.03 (6.23)
SDF	15 (-7)	47.63 (-7.4)
INC	0 (0)	0.77 (-0.65)

Legend: SKM = Sikkim Krantikari Morcha; SDF = Sikkim Democratic Front; INC = Indian National Congress

Table 5A – Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Haryana 2019			
Alliance	Party	Seats won (difference from 2014)	Vote share (difference from 2014)
NDA	BJP	40 (-7)	36.49 (3.29)
UPA	INC	31 (16)	28.08 (7.5)
-	IND	7 (2)	9.71 (-0.89)
INLD-SAD	INLD	1 (-18)	2.44 (-21.67)
	SAD	-	-

Legend: NDA = National Democratic Alliance; BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party; UPA = United Progressive Alliance; INC = Indian National Congress; IND = Independent; INLD = Indian National Lok Dal; SAD = Shiromani Akali Dal

Table 6A - Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Jharkhand 2019			
Alliance	Party	Seats won (difference from 2014)	Vote share (difference from 2014)
NDA	BJP	25 (-12)	33.37 (2.11)
UPA	INC	16 (10)	13.88
	JMM	30 (11)	18.72 (-1.71)
	RJD	1 (1)	2.75

Legend: NDA = National Democratic Alliance; BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party; UPA = United Progressive Alliance; INC = Indian National Congress; JMM = Jharkhand Mukti Morcha; RJD = Rashtriya Janata Dal

Table 7A – Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Maharashtra 2019			
Alliance	Party	Seats won (difference from 2014)	Vote share (difference from 2014)
NDA	BJP	105 (-17)	25.75 (-2.06)
	SHS	56 (-7)	16.41 (-2.94)
UPA	INC	44 (2)	15.87 (-2.08)
	NCP	54 (13)	16.71 (-0.53)
IND	IND	13 (6)	9.93 (5.22)

Legend: NDA = National Democratic Alliance; BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party; SHS = Shiv Sena; UPA = United Progressive Alliance; INC = Indian National Congress; NCP = Nationalist Congress Party; IND = Independent

Table 8A - Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Bihar 2020			
Alliance	Party	Seats won (difference from 2015)	Vote share (difference from 2015)
NDA	BJP	74 (21)	19.46 (-4.96)
	JD(U)	43 (-28)	15.39 (-1.44)
MGB	RJD	75 (-5)	23.11 (4.76)
	INC	19 (-8)	9.48 (2.82)
	CPI	2 (2)	0.83 (-0.53)

Legend: NDA = National Democratic Alliance; BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party; JD(U) = Janata Dal (United); MGB = Mahagathbandhan; RJD = Rashtriya Janata Dal; INC = Indian National Congress; CPI = Communist Party of India

Table 9A – Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Delhi 2020			
Alliance	Party	Seats won (difference from 2015)	Vote share (difference from 2015)
NDA	BJP	8 (5)	38.51 (6.32)
UPA	INC	0 (0)	4.26 (-5.39)
-	AAP	62 (-5)	53.57 (-0.77)

Legend: NDA = National Democratic Alliance; BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party; UPA = United Progressive Alliance; INC = Indian National Congress; AAP = Aam Aadmi Party

## APPENDIX B – STATE ELECTION RESULTS 2021

Table 1B – Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Assam 2021			
Alliance	Party	Seats won (difference from 2016)	Vote share (difference from 2016)
NDA (incumbent)	BJP	60 (0)	33.21 (3.70)
	AJP	9 (-5)	7.91 (-0.23)
	UPPL	6 (6)	3.39 (3.39)
	Total	75	
Mahajot	INC	29 (3)	29.67 (-1.29)
	AIUDF	16 (3)	9.29 (-3.76)
	BPF	4 (-8)	3.39 (-0.55)
	CPI(M)	1 (1)	0.84 (0.29)
	Total	50	
Others	IND	1	

Legend: NDA = National Democratic Alliance; BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party; AGP = Asom Gana Parishad; UPPL = United People Party Liberal; INC = Indian National Congress; AIUDF = All India United Democratic Front; BPF = Bodoland People's Front; CPI(M) = Communist Party of India (Marxist); IND = Independent. Source: Election Commission of India

Table 2B – Results of the elections to the Legislative Assembly of Kerala 2021			
Alliance	Party	Seats won (difference from 2016)	Vote share (difference from 2016)
LDF (incumbent)	CPI(M)	62 (4)	25.38 (-1.14)
	CPI	17 (2)	7.58 (-0.54)
	KCM	5 (-1)	3.28 (-0.71)
	Others	15	
	Total	99	
UDF	INC	21 (-1)	25.12 (1.43)
	IUML	15 (-3)	8.27 (0.87)
	Others	5	
	Total	41	

Legend: LDF = Left Democratic Front; CPI(M) = Communist Party of India (Marxist); CPI = Communist Party of India; KCM = Kerala Congress (M); UDF = United Democratic Front; INC = Indian National Congress; IUML = Indian Union Muslim League. Source: Election Commission of India

Alliance	Party	Seats won (difference from 2016)	Vote share (difference from 2016)
SPA	DMK	133 (44)	37.7 (6.06)
	INC	18 (10)	4.27 (-2.15)
	VCK	4 (4)	0.99 (0.22)
	Others	4	
	Total	159	
NDA (incumbent)	AIADMK	66 (-70)	33.29 (-7.48)
	PMK	5 (5)	3.8 (-1.52)
	BJP	4 (4)	2.62 (-0.22)
	Total	75	

Legend: SPA = Secular Progressive Alliance; DMK = Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam; INC = Indian National Congress; VCK = Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi; NDA = National Democratic Alliance; AIADMK = All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam; PMK = Pattali Makkal Katchi; BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party. Source: Election Commission of India.

Alliance	Party	Seats won (difference from 2016)	Vote share (difference from 2016)
AITC+ (incumbent)	AITC	215 (4)	47.94 (3.03)
	Others	1	
	Total	216	
BJP+	BJP	77 (74)	38.13 (27.97)
Sanjukta Morcha	INC	0 (-44)	2.93 (-9.32)
	CPI(M)	0 (-26)	4.73 (-15.02)
	Others	1	
	Total	1	

Legend: AITC = All India Trinamool Congress; BJP = Bharatiya Janata Party; INC = Indian National Congress; CPI(M) = Communist Party of India (Marxist). Source: Election Commission of India.

