

# Maharashtra Legislative Assembly Elections 2019

## Changing Social Equations

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Despite the Bharatiya Janata Party's conscious efforts to colour the state election campaign with national-level issues such as Article 370, or invoke the popular welfare schemes throughout the campaign in order to turn the beneficiaries into its loyal vote bank, it did not gain as much traction this time as it did in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. The election results have shown that caste still continues to remain one of the significant factors at the level of local politics. The role of caste and shifting social bases of the political parties in this election can be analysed with specific focus on the consolidation of Maratha votes and shifts in the voting patterns of the Other Backward Classes.

The recent dramatic developments in Maharashtra, leading to the rather disgraceful exit of Devendra Fadnavis in his very brief tenure as the second time chief minister and the establishment of a government by the seemingly unlikely alliance of the Shiv Sena, Congress and Nationalist Congress Party (NCP) in the form of Maha Vikas Aghadi (MVA) provide a gripping background to the present analysis of the reasons behind the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) failure to achieve the expected success in the 2019 assembly elections.

The 2019 assembly elections in Maharashtra are very significant, not only because of a somewhat unexpected mandate that it threw and the resultant political drama in its aftermath, but also because of the intriguing shifts in social bases of the political parties that can be observed through the results. Barring a few exceptions, the analysis of these underlying shifts has largely remained absent from the scholarly discussions of the elections results. The scholarly discussions have, by and large, revolved around factors such as low turnout of the voters, vote share of parties, role of smaller parties such as Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) and All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen, the role of turncoats and rebels, the role of the none of the above option, and importance of local players/local issues such as farm distress rather than national issues, etc (Verniers 2019; Dhaval 2019; Akshay 2019).

Some scholars have made a reference to factors such as the reassertion of the Maratha community and limitations of the BJP's strategy to weave together a social alliance of the non-Maratha community, with a sprinkling of Maratha leaders in Maharashtra in particular, and the BJP's experiments of building a caste block by ignoring the most dominant caste in general (Kumar 2019).

This article focuses on the role of the caste factor and the shifting social bases of the parties as seen in the assembly elections. Despite the BJP's conscious efforts to colour the state election campaign with national-level issues, such as Article 370, or to utilise its cleverly mastered strategy of invoking the popular welfare schemes throughout the campaign in order to turn the beneficiaries into its loyal vote bank, it did not gain as much traction this time as it did in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. On the other hand, the election results have shown that caste still continues to remain one of the significant factors at the level of local politics. The role of caste and the shifting social bases of the political parties in this election can be analysed along the following lines.

The analysis in the present article is based on data collected by the Unique Foundation, Pune.

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### Consolidation of the Maratha Votes

Against the backdrop of its spectacular victory in the Lok Sabha elections, and the atmosphere in the state that there is no viable opposition to the BJP in the wake of hordes of defection to the party, the BJP seemed to be invincible ahead of the assembly elections 2019. There were a number of factors going in its favour. It had skilfully manoeuvred through the legal/constitutional hurdles against securing reservations for the Maratha community and finally managed to satisfy its long-pending demand with 16% reservation, which was upheld even by the high court. Just ahead of the assembly elections, the BJP went on a spree to induct the members of the Maratha elite, including the descendants of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj, from the opposition parties into its ranks, with much ado. But, despite all these efforts, it seems that the party could not secure the expected quantum of support from the Maratha community. In contrast, the BJP–Shiv Sena alliance had secured support from a significant proportion of the Maratha community in both the 2014 legislative assembly and the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. Scholars such as Suhas Palshikar (2014) argued that since the Marathas have drifted away from both the Congress parties, the politics of Maratha elites was on a decline in the state. Palshikar and Deshpande (2014) noted that 53% of the Maratha–Kunbi voters preferred the BJP–Shiv Sena, while the NCP remained on the third position in attracting their votes. However, it appears that the Maratha community has consolidated behind the NCP and the Congress, to a large extent, in the 2019 assembly elections.

The Maratha community, which had warmed up to the BJP in 2014 assembly elections, seems to have drifted away from it this time around, and in many constituencies, it seems to have returned to the fold of the Congress and the NCP to a great extent due to the following factors.

First, the BJP, in a bid to jeopardise the economic basis of both the Congress parties, has been taking conscious steps to bring the cooperative sector under its control. The cooperative sector, especially the sugar cooperative sector, has been in crisis, and due to the decline in sugar prices, farmers could not be paid the fair and remunerative price (FRP). Hence, the sugar cane growing farmers were upset on the one hand, while the policy of importing sugar led to the increasing resentment amongst those who controlled the sugar cooperatives, on the other (Jadhav 2017–18). The issue of the FRP comes to the fore every year during the cane-harvesting season. Previously, during the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) rule, the NCP supremo Sharad Pawar tried to safeguard the interests of the sugar cane farmers as well as the sugar cooperatives. But, during the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government at the centre and the BJP–Shiv Sena government at the state, there has been a widespread feeling among those sections that the issue is being deliberately mishandled. Sending income tax department notices to the sugar cooperatives, pressurising the leaders of the loss-making sugar cooperatives to defect to the BJP, and not assisting the district cooperative banks, which had been badly hit by demonetisation, further fuelled the discontent. Western Maharashtra is considered to be the

sugar bowl of the state. But, since the BJP-led state government took no concrete steps to assist the troubled sugar industry, the affected voters moved closer to the parties, such as the NCP and the Congress, which have traditionally been supportive of this sector. The recommendation of the Sunil Kendrekar Committee that the growing of sugar cane should be prohibited in Marathwada since the region is always short of water, compelled the local sugar lobby to reconsider its previous preference. The elites of the cooperative sector and farmers with large irrigated landholdings seem to have shifted to the Congress and the NCP. The overwhelming majority of them belong to the Maratha community.

Second, the aggravating agrarian crisis and the ensuing aggressive demonstrations and marches by the farmers rocked the state's political spectrum in 2018 and 2019. Recurrent droughts, hailstorms and unequal distribution of water for irrigation have pushed the already distressed farmers to the brinks of a catastrophe. Excessive production of soya bean and cotton, and the consequent steep fall in prices, the problems faced by cotton growers due to the attacks of the pink bollworm, deaths due to exposure to pesticides and the rising debts and increasing suicides by the farmers added to the helplessness and the growing sense of alienation among the farmers. It also strengthened the feeling that the BJP-led government at the central and the state level was primarily working in the interests of the urban population. The electoral campaign promises of the BJP, such as doubling the income of farmers and securing remunerative prices for agricultural produce, remained unfulfilled, and the loan waivers and crop insurance schemes stood poorly implemented, thus further aggravating the discontent, which was finally expressed in an organised fashion through the ballot box. The Maratha community constitutes an overwhelming majority of the farmers in Maharashtra. According to Govind More, a social activist (interview, 1 November 2019), both the large and the middle farmers have moved towards the two Congress parties.

(It can be argued that all these factors were also present during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, but the BJP still managed a remarkable victory. Here, one has to recount the fact that those were national-level elections, where national-level issues played an important role to a large extent. But, in the state assembly elections, local/state-level issues have come to the fore in determining the outcomes of this election.)

However, a difference can be seen in the Maratha voting patterns as regards to urban and rural areas. The urban Maratha voter preferred to support the BJP–Shiv Sena. But, since the Shiv Sena launched agitations against the private insurance companies for poor implementation of the Pradhan Mantri Fasal Bima Yojana, it appears that the discontent among the farmers against the Shiv Sena was much less than that against the BJP. This stance of the Shiv Sena seems to have benefited it, particularly in the Marathwada region. According to Gajanan Ambhore, a farmer of Parbhani (interview, 5 November), the marginal farmers in Marathwada stayed with the Shiv Sena. On the other hand, there was so much discontent among the farmers against the BJP that the incumbent

Agriculture Minister Anil Bonde, known to be sensitive towards agricultural issues, was defeated by an activist of the Swabhimani Shetkari Sanghata, a farmers' organisation.

Third, Maratha reservation was touted to be "the panacea" for multiple issues, such as the agrarian crisis, the lack of employment opportunities as well as the growing economic stratification within the community. The criterion of economic backwardness weighed much more than the principle of social justice and social backwardness in the decision to provide reservations for the Maratha community. This yardstick also secured wide support from the Maratha community, its organisations as well as political parties. Responding to the silent marches organised by the Maratha community, the BJP–Shiv Sena government provided for 16% reservation to the community and tried to tame their discontent. However, this move does not seem to have helped the BJP in winning over the Maratha votes as per their expectations, as the ground reality in terms of education and employment opportunities has been far worse. The number of government jobs is decreasing, and education is being increasingly privatised. The National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) reports that the unemployment rate is 6.5%, the highest in the last 45 years. About 35% of posts in various government departments are currently vacant. According to media reports, about 52,733 posts in various state government departments are vacant (*Loksatta*, 6 December 2019), while about 20,000 posts of teachers are vacant. On the other hand, about two lakh applicants have registered themselves on the state government's recruitment portal. Even though the Fadnavis government announced recruitment to 72,000 posts, due to various reasons, such as stay from the court on the recruitment process and imposition of the code of conduct in the wake of assembly elections, the posts could not be filled. Hence, the glaring fact remains that lakhs of young men and women still remain unemployed. Employment opportunities in the agricultural sector are declining, a policy of reducing the expenditure on Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act (MGNREGA) has been adopted, government recruitment is at a standstill, and private companies are cutting down their workforce. The promise made in 2014 to provide employment to the youth and to fill 72,000 posts once the Maratha reservation has been implemented failed to materialise. As a result, a large section of the youth was alienated from the BJP, despite fulfilment of its promise of providing reservations for the Marathas.

Fourth, there is a feeling among the Maratha community that the BJP leaders who belong to it do not command acceptance from the community at large. Chandrakant Patil, Haribhau Baggde, Raosaheb Danve, Vinod Tawde, Ashish Shelar, Sambhaji Nilangekar, etc, do not seem to have an impact beyond their home districts. Patil was given importance and pushed to the forefront during the Maratha reservation stirs, but the confusion which prevailed, particularly in Marathwada, as to whether he was a Maratha or a Jain, was not cleared. Moreover, there was an increasing feeling that the BJP lacks a rural face who understands the nature of the current agrarian crisis. The Maratha leaders of the BJP–Shiv Sena do not have a strong

base in the agricultural and cooperative sector as well in the rural local self-government institutions and hence are accorded a somewhat secondary social status (Datar and Ghotale 2016). Having fully understood this fact, the BJP inducted Maratha elites having rural background and base in the cooperative movement into its ranks in order to be a cut above the two Congress parties in this regard. It even inducted the descendants of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj into its fold. Still, it has not succeeded in attracting Maratha votes to a large extent, as can be seen from the results.

Fifth, the relentless efforts and the strategies of Pawar, especially after the Lok Sabha election results, proved to be a major factor in wooing back those sections of the Maratha community that had moved closer to the BJP–Shiv Sena. This reflects in the improved performance of the NCP. The main plank of the BJP's campaign was valorising its central government's decision to revoke Jammu and Kashmir's special status under Article 370, on the one hand and criticising Pawar, on the other. The BJP leadership vehemently criticised Pawar during the campaign. To make the matters worse, the Enforcement Directorate added the name of Pawar in the list of accused in the Maharashtra State Cooperative Bank corruption case. Pawar skilfully capitalised on this move of the Enforcement Directorate. The NCP vigorously propagated, especially through social media platforms, that *Delhi takht ke aage na Maratha jhuka tha, na jhuka hai, na jhukega* (the Marathas have never surrendered, are not surrendering and will never surrender to the diktats and threats issued from the power centre in Delhi). This helped in converting the whole issue into one of Maratha pride and identity against the threats from the outside. As a result, the Maratha community consolidated behind the NCP and its ally, the Congress. When the Shiv Sena, the NCP and the Congress finally decided to come together after the election results to form MVA, Nawab Malik, the NCP spokesperson, has again invoked the same reference, *Akhir Delhi takht ke aage nahi jhuka Maharashtra* (finally Maharashtra has not bowed down to power centre in Delhi) (22 November 2019). By projecting the tussle in this way, the NCP has been cleverly trying to consolidate Maratha votes behind the party on the one hand and equate the Maratha identity with that of broader idea of Maharashtra on the other. Moreover, Pawar succeeded in relocating the campaign on issues of vital local concerns, such as agriculture, the recent floods, employment opportunities, and thus successfully punctured the BJP's campaign, which was woven around national issues. This not only helped in the re-establishment of its dominance in its traditional stronghold of western Maharashtra, but also ensured an improved performance in North Maharashtra, Marathwada and Vidarbha.

### **Maratha Dominance: Divided among Four Parties**

Even though a consolidation of Maratha votes behind the NCP and its ally is visible, the Maratha dominance remains divided among all the four major parties, as can be seen from the social profile of the elected candidates in the 2019 assembly elections. Examining the social background of the 288 members

of legislative assembly (MLAs), it becomes clear that the Maratha elites have continued to retain their dominance. The Maratha–Kunbi community, which constitutes 30%–33% of the state’s population, has secured 47% representation in the state assembly. For the last two decades, it seems that some sort of unease has been prevailing among the Maratha community due to the agrarian crisis, unaffordable education, lack of employment opportunities and increasing economic stratification within the community. These factors led to the emergence of the demand for reservations. All four parties responded to the Maratha agitation and set up candidates from the community in higher proportions.

Scholars like Jayant Lele (1982), Rajendra Vora (2004) and Suhas Palshikar (2011) have identified Maratha dominance as a significant feature of the politics of Maharashtra. Despite the division among the Maratha elites in 1978 and 1999 (due to a split in the Congress), the rise of the BJP–Shiv Sena after the 1990s and the emergence of Other Backward Classes (OBCs) politics, the proportion of Maratha MLAs had remained more or less constant.

Vora (2004) studied the social background of the Maharashtra MLAs from 1962 to 2004. He stated that about 50% of the MLAs were Marathas. A community that constitutes 30%–33% of the state’s population, enjoys a 50% share among the assembly members in Maharashtra. There are 234 unreserved constituencies for the state assembly, and Maratha candidates are elected from about half of them. As Vora noted, the Marathas enjoy “reservations” over half of the assembly constituencies in the state.

As per the data collected by the Unique Foundation, Pune, 20 Maratha candidates were elected as members of Parliament (MPs) in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections (Table 2). Out of total 48 seats in the state, if we keep aside the nine seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs), the number of elected Maratha MPs constitute around 50% of the remaining 39 seats (Ghotale and Kulkarni 2019).

In the 2019 assembly elections, 137 Maratha–Kunbi candidates were elected, of which 121 are Marathas while the rest are Maratha–Kunbis. A comparison with the 2014 elections shows that the number of the Maratha–Kunbi candidates has increased by seven this time around. Till 1985, the bulk of the Maratha MLAs had belonged to the Congress. From the 1990s, they were divided among the Congress, the Shiv Sena and the BJP, to which the NCP was added from 1999 onwards. In 2014, the BJP had 48 Maratha–Kunbi MLAs, the largest number as

**Table 1: Party-wise Social Background of MLAs Elected in 2019 Assembly Elections**

Sr No	Caste Group/Party	BJP	Congress	Shiv Sena	NCP	Others	Independents	Total
1	Upper castes	18	–	6	–	–	3	27
2	Middle castes	8	–	4	–	1	1	14
3	Maratha–Kunbi	43	23	31	32	4	4	137
4	OBC	17	6	6	8	4	2	43
5	SC	10	8	5	6	2	–	31
6	ST	9	4	3	6	3	1	26
7	Muslim	0	3	1	2	4	–	10
	Total	105	44	56	54	18	11	288

The middle castes consist of Lingayat, Komati, Rajput, Gurjar and Vani.  
Source: Unique Foundation Data Unit.

compared to all other parties. The BJP has a significant number of Maratha–Kunbi MLAs in 2019 as well. This should be seen in the context that the BJP won a large number of seats this time. The NCP and the Shiv Sena have about the same number of MLAs, with just a minor difference of 1. Considering the fact that the BJP contested more number of seats than the NCP and Shiv Sena, the proportion of Maratha–Kunbi MLAs from both these parties is much higher than the BJP (Table 1). The Maratha elite is now divided among the BJP, the Shiv Sena, the NCP and the Congress. Though the Maratha elites still enjoy their numerical dominance, their division means that they no longer exercise a cohesive influence.

**Representation of the OBCs**

In the 2019 elections, 43 OBC MLAs were elected. In 2014, this number was 55. In 2014, the BJP had 21 OBC MLAs, its number is reduced by four, and now, it has 17 OBC MLAs, which is still the

**Table 2: Party-wise Social Background of MPs Elected in the Lok Sabha Elections, 1998–2019**

Year	Party	Brahmin	Maratha	Maratha–Kunbi	OBC	SC	ST	Muslim	Lingayat	Komti	Other	Total
1998	INC	1	15	–	3	4	4	–	2	1	4	34
	BJP	–	2	–	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	3
	SS	3	1	1	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	6
	RPI	–	–	–	–	4	–	–	–	–	–	4
	PWP	–	–	–	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	1
	Total	4	18	1	6	8	4	–	2	1	4	48
1999	INC	1	3	–	1	1	1	–	1	1	1	10
	NCP	–	6	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	6
	BJP	1	3	–	4	–	2	–	–	–	3	13
	SS	4	4	1	2	3	–	–	1	–	–	15
	Other	–	–	–	1	2	1	–	–	–	–	4
	Total	6	16	1	8	6	4	–	2	1	4	48
2004	INC	3	2	–	–	1	3	1	–	1	2	13
	NCP	–	9	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	9
	BJP	–	5	1	6	–	1	–	–	–	–	13
	SS	2	3	1	2	3	–	–	1	–	–	12
	RPI (A)	–	–	–	–	1	–	–	–	–	–	1
	Total	5	19	2	8	5	4	1	1	1	2	48
2009	INC	3	3	–	2	4	2	–	–	1	2	17
	NCP	–	4	–	3	–	–	–	–	–	1	8
	BJP	–	2	1	4	–	1	–	–	–	1	9
	SS	1	5	–	2	3	–	–	–	–	–	11
	Other	–	1	–	–	–	1	–	–	–	1	3
	Total	4	15	1	11	7	4	–	–	1	5	48
2014	INC	–	1	–	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	2
	NCP	–	4	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	4
	BJP	2	4	1	7	3	4	–	–	–	3	24
	SS	1	10	–	2	4	–	–	–	–	–	17
	Other	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	1	1
	Total	3	19	1	10	7	4	–	–	–	4	48
2019	INC	–	–	–	1	–	–	–	–	–	–	1
	NCP	–	2	–	2	–	–	–	–	–	–	4
	BJP	3	6	1	6	2	3	–	–	–	2	23
	SS	1	12	–	1	3	1	–	–	–	–	18
	Other	–	–	–	–	1	–	1	–	–	–	2
	Total	4	20	1	10	6	4	1	–	–	2	48

SS - Shiv Sena; RPI - Republican Party of India; RPI(A) - Republican Party of India (Athawale); PWP - Peasants and Workers Party of India.  
Source: Unique Foundation Data Unit.

largest number among all parties, while the NCP has eight (Table 3). This is about 18% of the total. Given that the OBCs constitute 29% of the state's population, the community has received a lesser share. There are 272 castes recognised as the OBCs by the Mandal Commission in Maharashtra. Out of these, only 19 OBC castes have got political representation in Maharashtra assembly election 2019.

The OBC elites are elected in large numbers from Vidarbha, Konkan and North Maharashtra. Despite the issue of the Dhangar reservation remaining unresolved, all four parties put up very few Dhangar candidates, and despite their numbers being equal to other OBC communities and the community having pockets of numerical strength, only one Dhangar candidate was elected. The Vanjari and the Mali communities have five each MLAs, the Agris six, the Telis four and the Banjaras three. In 2014, the Malis had 11 MLAs, Agris nine and the Dhangars five. Be it the covert conflict or cooperation with the Marathas, the end result has been the reduction in the number of OBC MLAs by 12.

### Shift in the OBC Voting Patterns

Along with the consolidation of Maratha votes to a large extent, there is another important shift in the social bases of the parties, which can be seen from the OBC's voting patterns.<sup>1</sup> During the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, a shift in the voting patterns of the OBCs, who have consistently supported the BJP since 1990s, has occurred, which has become more prominent during the Maharashtra assembly elections.

Subsequent to the implementation of the Mandal Commission, OBC parties emerged in North India. As a result of rising political consciousness, these communities began to organise themselves politically. According to Christophe Jaffrelot and Giles Verniers (2019) the share of the OBCs in political power rose after the Mandal Commission from 11% to 22%, leading to

**Table 3: Party-wise OBC MLAs Elected in 2019 Assembly Elections**

SrNo	Castes	BJP	INC	ShivSena	NCP	Other	Independent	Total
1	Mali	4	—	—	1	—	—	5
2	Dhangar	—	—	—	1	—	—	1
3	Vanjari	—	—	2	2	1	—	5
4	Banjara	1	—	1	1	—	—	3
5	Teli	2	—	—	2	—	—	4
6	Bhandari	1	—	1	—	—	—	2
7	Agri	4	—	1	—	1	—	6
8	Padmashali	—	1	—	—	—	—	1
9	Powar	1	—	—	—	—	1	2
10	Kalar	—	—	—	—	—	1	1
11	Kunbi	—	3	—	—	—	—	3
12	Leva Patil	1	1	—	—	—	—	2
13	Gandli	—	1	—	—	—	—	1
14	Gavli	—	—	—	1	—	—	1
15	Beldar	1	—	—	—	—	—	1
16	Halba	1	—	—	—	—	—	1
17	Somvanshi	—	—	—	—	2	—	2
18	Sonar	1	—	—	—	—	—	1
19	Panchkalshi	—	—	1	—	—	—	1
	Total	17	6	6	8	4	2	43

Source: Unique Foundation Data Unit.

a decrease in the share of the upper castes. But, no such OBC parties emerged in Maharashtra. The experiment of the Republican Party of India-Bahujan Mahasangh to build a social coalition of the Bahujan castes remained limited to Akola district. The Congress took no visible cognisance of these transformations. The Congress's traditional policy of paying lip-service to Bahujanwad (empowering the subaltern castes) while entrenching the stronghold of dominant castes, compelled the discontented OBC communities to organise themselves politically. This newly awakened political force turned to those parties that were willing to grant them a share in political power. The BJP, which initially opposed Mandal, promoted OBC leaders and gave them opportunities in the local bodies, the legislative assembly and even the party organisation, thus culminating into the party's Mali, Dhangar and Vanjari (MADHAV) experiment in Maharashtra. As a consequence, the OBC vote shifted from the Congress to the BJP-Shiv Sena. Even Shiv Sena was initially not in favour of the implementation of the Mandal report, but since the 1990 assembly elections, it has given tickets to OBCs and got them elected in a larger proportion than the Congress.

But, some of the recent manoeuvres of the BJP in the state have created confusion among the OBC voters. This in turn has led to the emergence of a contradiction, which caused a shift in the OBC voting patterns, which indicate their moving away from the BJP. These factors are as follows.

First, the Maratha marches and the consequent reservation granted to the community led to a feeling of insecurity among the OBCs. The fact that a numerically strong community has been granted reservations led to a covert conflict among the Marathas and the OBCs in many constituencies. As analysis done by the Unique Foundation reveals, this covert conflict emerged in constituencies like Kalamnuri, Mukhed, Gangakhed, and Pathri in Marathwada; Akola, Wardha, Chandrapur, Nagpur, Yavatmal, and Buldhana in Vidarbha; and Muktainagar, Sinnar, Nashik Central and Nashik West in western Maharashtra. This led to the defeat of the Maratha candidate in some constituencies while the OBC candidate was defeated in some others.

The Maratha marches have had an impact on the political fortunes of the OBCs. In order to avoid the ire of the Marathas, the BJP as well as the other parties put up Maratha candidates in constituencies dominated by the OBCs. The OBCs did extend support to Maratha candidates. However, in places where the vBA had put up a strong OBC candidate, it performed rather well. Particularly in Marathwada and Vidarbha, the vBA's performance has been noteworthy.

Second, in contrast to this covert conflict, many constituencies also saw the Marathas and the OBCs cooperating with each other. Some constituencies in Beed, Latur, Ahmednagar, Solapur, Pune, Nashik and Nagpur districts exhibited this pattern of cooperation among the OBCs and Marathas, which has benefited the Congress and the NCP.

The following factors are responsible for the Marathas and the OBCs cooperating with each other as well for the OBCs distancing themselves from the BJP.

The BJP, by cutting down to size its own OBC leaders with mass support like Ekanth Khadse, Pankaja Munde, Chandrashekhar Bawankule, etc, drew the ire of the OBCs. The fact that the BJP, which has engineered the MADHAV category, could elect only three Mali candidates and zero candidates from Dhangar and Vanjari communities is an indication that the OBCs are distancing themselves from the party. A dwindling of political niche of the Mali community is a peculiar case in point. In the 2014 assembly elections, 11 Mali candidates were elected. Their total number has come down to five in the recent elections. In place of the elected Mali candidates in the last assembly elections, this time, three Maratha-Kunbi candidates of the NCP, one each Maratha-Kunbi candidate of the BJP and Shiv Sena and one Vanjari candidate from Shiv Sena have been elected. Thus, it can be clearly seen that the political space of the Malis has been occupied primarily by the Maratha-Kunbis.

Similar is the case with the Dhangar community. In the 2014 elections, five Dhangar candidates were elected to the assembly. In comparison to that, their number has dwindled to just one in 2019 assembly elections. In their place, three Maratha and one Muslim candidates have been elected in the recent assembly elections. The Dhangar community was annoyed with the BJP as it failed to fulfil the 2014 election promise to grant it ST status.

The simmering discontent among the OBC leadership has come out in the open after the BJP has failed to form the government in the state even after emerging as the single largest party in these elections. The recent challenges posed to the party leadership, especially Devendra Fadnavis, by OBC leaders like Khadse and Pankaja Munde indicate diminution of the OBC leadership within the BJP.

On the other hand, the NCP basically considered to be a party of the Marathas, consciously brought its OBC leaders to the forefront. The NCP well understood the fact that relying only on a single community as a support base has imposed limitations on its path towards political expansion. Hence, it promoted its OBC leaders as prominent faces of the party. While giving due recognition to seniors like Chhagan Bhujbal and Sunil Tatkare, it bestowed trust on younger leadership, such as Amol Kolhe, Jitendra Awhad and Dhananjay Munde. In constituencies where the Vanjari community has a strong presence, Munde emphasised the point that while the NCP had put up six candidates from the community, the BJP had put up only one. The Congress drew advantage from the fact that Vijay Wadetiwar and Nana Patole were in the leadership ranks. Surendra Gangan (2019) opined that Pawar deliberately took the decision to name the party's statewide campaign as the Shivswarajya Yatra. Kolhe, who essayed the role of Chhatrapati Sambhaji Maharaj in the eponymous TV series lead the yatra along with Munde.

The fact that the Marathas and the OBCs are mutually dependent as far as the rural economy is concerned was significant in facilitating the cooperation between the two, at least in a few constituencies. Though discontented by the Maratha marches, the agrarian and the artisan OBC communities believed the Marathas to be their natural allies and hence adopted a policy of cooperation. But, this policy has, in a way,

boomeranged on the OBCs, since their share of political representation in the state assembly has reduced.

**Representation of the SCs**

Of the 29 seats reserved for the SCs, the BJP won the largest number (10), and among the SCs, candidates belonging to the Charmakar community won the largest seats, that is, 12.9 Neo-Buddhist candidates are elected while four candidates belonging to the Matang community are elected. The Charmakars are primarily divided between the BJP and Shiv Sena. Out of the 12 Charmakar MLAs, eight belong to the BJP and two are from Shiv Sena. On the other hand, out of the nine Neo-Buddhists, four come from NCP and three from the Congress. This further confirms the ongoing trend from 1980s onwards, whereby attempts have been made to divide the SCs on religious lines by creating a rift between the Hindu Dalits and the Neo-Buddhists, in order to isolate the latter. All parties, particularly the BJP-Shiv Sena, have been putting up non-Neo-Buddhist candidates in reserved constituencies in order to attract the support of the Hindu Dalits. Therefore, one can see that the non-Neo-Buddhists, especially the Charmakars, are enjoying a higher degree of representation in the assembly (Table 4).

**Table 4: Party-wise and Caste-wise Distribution of SC MLAs Elected in 2019 Assembly Elections**

SrNo	Caste	BJP	INC	SHS	NCP	Independent	Total
1	Neo-Buddhist	–	3	1	4	1	9
2	Charmakar	8		2	1	1	12
3	Matang	1	3	–	–	–	4
4	Dhor	–	1	–	–	–	1
5	Khatik	–	1	–	–	–	1
6	Kaikad	–	1	–	–	–	1
7	Jangam	–	–	1	–	–	1
8	Mehtar	1	–	–	–	–	1
9	Sutar (Balai)	–	–	1	–	–	1
	Total	10	8	5	6	2	31

Source: Unique Foundation Data Unit.

Of the 25 seats reserved for the STs, the BJP has won the largest number (9).

**Women to the Margins**

If we look at the women's representation in the assembly, it becomes clear that women still remain pushed to the margins of political representation in Maharashtra. A brief look at women's representation shows that there has never been a significant increase in their number (in proportion to their share in the population) in the assembly since 1962. The number of women representatives was 13 as compared to 251 men in 1962. It was 11 in 1995, while the number of men was 277.

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In 2014, 20 women candidates got elected to the assembly (Pawar 2015). (two more women got elected in the bypolls in 2015). And, in the recent 2019 assembly elections, the number of elected women candidates is 24, while the number of elected men is 264. The stark reality of women's continued marginalisation in the political process becomes all the more glaring in the context of women reservations at the level of local self-government and all the hue and cry about 33% reservation for women at the higher levels of political representation.

A closer look at the social profile of the elected women candidates reveal that the trend that we discussed above regarding the increase in representation to the Maratha-Kunbis and decline in the share of OBCs also gets reflected in women representation. While the number of elected Maratha women candidates has gone up from five in 2014 to 11 in 2019, the number of OBC women MLAs has gone down from seven in 2014 to three in 2019. Moreover, the dynastic nature of women leadership has continued and strengthened in this election.

### In Conclusion

The 2019 assembly elections are remarkable mainly because of the shifting social bases of political parties and especially the consolidation of Maratha voters and shifting nature of OBC support. However, the number of women representatives in the assembly has plateaued, and the fact that there is no significant increase in their number reflects the increasingly masculine and patriarchal character of politics in the state.

The NCP and the Congress could secure a reasonable number of seats and votes because the Maratha community consolidated itself behind these two parties. But, this is not the sole reason for their performance. The OBCs too adopted a policy of cooperation with the Marathas in some constituencies. Time will tell whether the OBCs will receive an appropriate share of power in return or whether they will be merely used as showpieces in electoral campaigns. The cooperation extended by the OBCs cannot be interpreted as, like in previous times, the non-Marathas have granted their consent to Maratha hegemony. This is a response given by the OBCs to the cutting down to size of its OBC leadership by the BJP as well as Pawar's strategy and his policy of giving prominence to OBC leaders. As some leaders of the NCP itself point out, it would be premature to describe this as a shift of the NCP's politics towards Bahujanwad. The affluent Maratha farmers with irrigated landholdings, whose interests have been hurt by the BJP-Shiv Sena government, have closed ranks behind the two Congresses. However, this does not mean that the increasing stratification within the community along economic lines can be masked. Moreover, though the domination of the Maratha elite seems intact, the fact that they are divided among four parties due to the changing nature of party competition, means that their influence is not cohesive and remains fractured. But, if the shift in the voting patterns of the Marathas and the OBCs is not transitory or if these two communities grow even closer to the two Congress parties, then the politics and the nature of the party competition in the state would change too.

### NOTE

1 We have spoken to some activists, scholars and journalists in order to ascertain their opinion regarding the shift in the OBC voting patterns and the reasons thereof. Following are some of opinions expressed during those interviews.

Venkat Khatke, a Dhangan community activist, remarked that the community which has a significant numerical presence in districts like Solapur, Pune, Ahmednagar, Satara, Sangli, etc, was annoyed with the BJP-RSP and hence, it has supported the Congress-NCP in large proportions (interview, 13 November).

Sominath Gholwe, a social science researcher, observed that the community which has a significant numerical presence in districts like Solapur, Pune, Ahmednagar, Satara, Sangli, etc, was annoyed with the BJP-RSP and hence, it has supported the Congress-NCP in large proportions (interview, 13 November).

Bhaskar Waghale noted that the Teli community in Vidarbha, which was annoyed with the BJP, turned to the Congress in some measure (interview, 15 November).

Yogesh Bidwai, a journalist, opined that support for the BJP among the OBCs is decreasing because of prominence given by the NCP to Amol Kolhe and Dhananjay Munde on the one hand, and the BJP downgrading its own OBC leadership on the other (interview, 15 November).

Datta Yedle, a farmer from Latur, stated that the OBC farmers and the Maratha farmers face

the same set of issues, and that the former were discontented since these have not been resolved (interview, 15 November).

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