



EDITORIAL

Elections 2024 and Rural India

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In the 2024 elections to Parliament, the Indian voter refused to give the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) a simple majority. The BJP, which won 303 seats in 2019, won only 239 seats in 2024. A government led by Narendra Modi continues to be in office because the larger National Democratic Alliance (NDA) managed to cross the halfway mark.

Post-poll surveys by CSDS-Lokniti suggest that the BJP/NDA continued to win a majority of rural votes in 2024 vis-à-vis other political parties or alliances. These surveys define a “village” as units represented by gram panchayats. In these villages, 43 per cent of voters voted for the BJP/NDA, while 33 per cent voted for the Congress party or its allies. Yet, what is striking is the large loss of predominantly rural constituencies by the BJP. According to the Reuter’s article titled “Rural Vote Fall Cost India’s Modi a Decisive Election Win,” while the BJP won 201 predominantly rural constituencies in 2019, it won only 126 predominantly rural constituencies in 2024. The reason, as the CSDS-Lokniti surveys show, was that the share of votes in the villages won by the BJP/NDA declined by 2 percentage points between 2019 and 2024, while the share of votes in the villages won by the Congress and its allies increased by 7 percentage points between 2019 and 2024. These changes in vote shares led to major shifts in the number of seats won.

An important factor associated with the losses of the BJP/NDA at the national level was the accumulated anger among people on livelihood issues. Over the past 10 years, demonetisation and GST reform as well as the response of the government to the Covid-19 pandemic led to large losses of employment, particularly among youth. The effect of some of these policies were felt more acutely in rural areas than in urban areas.

Data from the Periodic Labour Force Surveys (PLFS) showed a rise in labour force participation and fall of unemployment in the rural areas during and after the pandemic. But careful analysis revealed that these were largely due to a rise in the share of self-employment among women in agriculture. The reality was that there

was no generation of meaningful or well-paid employment in rural areas over the past decade. The Union Government also failed to raise budgetary allocations under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). There was also a stagnation – if not fall – in real wage rates in rural areas. In short, the crisis in the rural labour market is likely to have been an important reason for voters to turn away from the BJP/NDA.

These changes took place in the context of a longer history of agrarian distress in rural India. To begin with, Indian agriculture grew slowly and haltingly for a large part of the past decade. Secondly, agricultural prices were pulled down by falling global prices. Although the Union Government could have reacted by raising minimum support prices (MSPs) for crops, it decided against doing so. Thirdly, input prices in agriculture rose sharply owing to geopolitical conflicts and globally rising raw material costs. The Union Government could have absorbed these rising costs by raising input subsidies. But it did so only partly, transferring the rest of the burden to the production costs of farmers. Consequently, profits and profitability in farming declined.

The claim of the Union Government that it would double the real incomes of farmers between 2015 and 2022 was thus far removed from reality. Forget doubling, real incomes from cultivation actually fell.

These were some of the long-term factors that drove the farmer's movement – led by the Samyukta Kisan Morcha (SKM) – to launch a historic movement against the three farm laws in 2020 (see the editorial “On the Farmers’ Protests in India,” in *the Review of Agrarian Studies*, vol. 10, no. 1, 2020). For about a year, the farmer's organisations besieged New Delhi. The protests gradually evolved into a pan-India movement of resistance, to which local agrarian demands were continuously added. The victory secured in November 2021, when the Union Government agreed to withdraw the farm laws, led to the growth of a political movement around several more general agrarian demands, including the need for stable markets and remunerative prices.

Today, the demand for a legal MSP is a focal point of the continuing mobilisation by the SKM in rural areas. At the same time, local agrarian demands drive State-level peasant mobilisations. For instance, in rural Maharashtra, where the BJP/NDA suffered significant electoral losses in 2024, farmers' organisations fought for better prices for onion, cotton, soybean, sugarcane, and milk and for the distribution of monetary compensation after losses from recurring drought, unseasonal rainfall, and hailstorms.

The editorial titled “The Success of the Farmers’ Movement,” published in *the Review of Agrarian Studies* after the successful culmination of the farmers' struggle in November 2021, had stated that

the success of the farmer's agitation has undermined the political credibility of the BJP and its allies in rural India ... The agitation built solidarity across religious groups, particularly in western Uttar Pradesh, and defeated attempts to create communal religious divisions among protesting farmers. The results of the present elections will have enormous repercussions not only for the future of the rural economy of the regions in which they are held, but for political India as a whole.

This assessment has been vindicated by the results of the 2024 parliamentary elections.