

Indian Elections 2019: Why the BJP Won Big

Ronojoy Sen

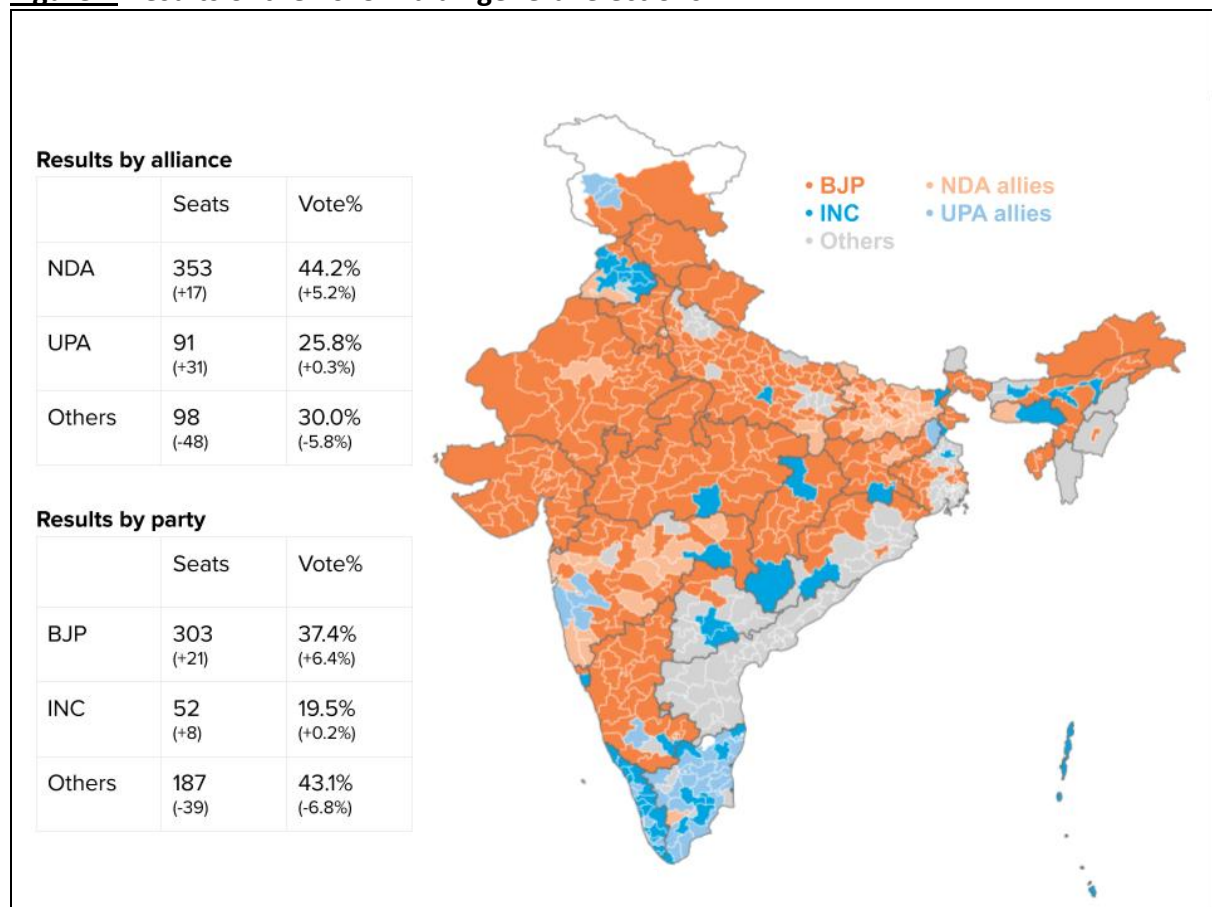


Summary

The Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) landslide victory in the 2019 Indian general elections owed largely to Prime Minister Narendra Modi's charisma and popularity. There were, however, other factors that helped the BJP. These included the organisational skills of the BJP and its president Amit Shah; the ability to stitch together winning caste coalitions; a media campaign that could not be matched by the opposition; targeted welfare schemes; and a nationalist narrative following the Pulwama attack and the Balakot airstrike.

The scale of the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) landslide victory in the 2019 Indian general election – where the party won 303 out of 543 seats in the Lok Sabha (Lower House) – took most analysts by surprise. Though the margin of the BJP's victory in 2019, where it won 37.4 per cent of the vote share, was nearly six per cent higher than in 2014, the fundamentals of the victory were similar to 2014 (Figure 1).

Figure1: Results of the 2019 Indian general elections



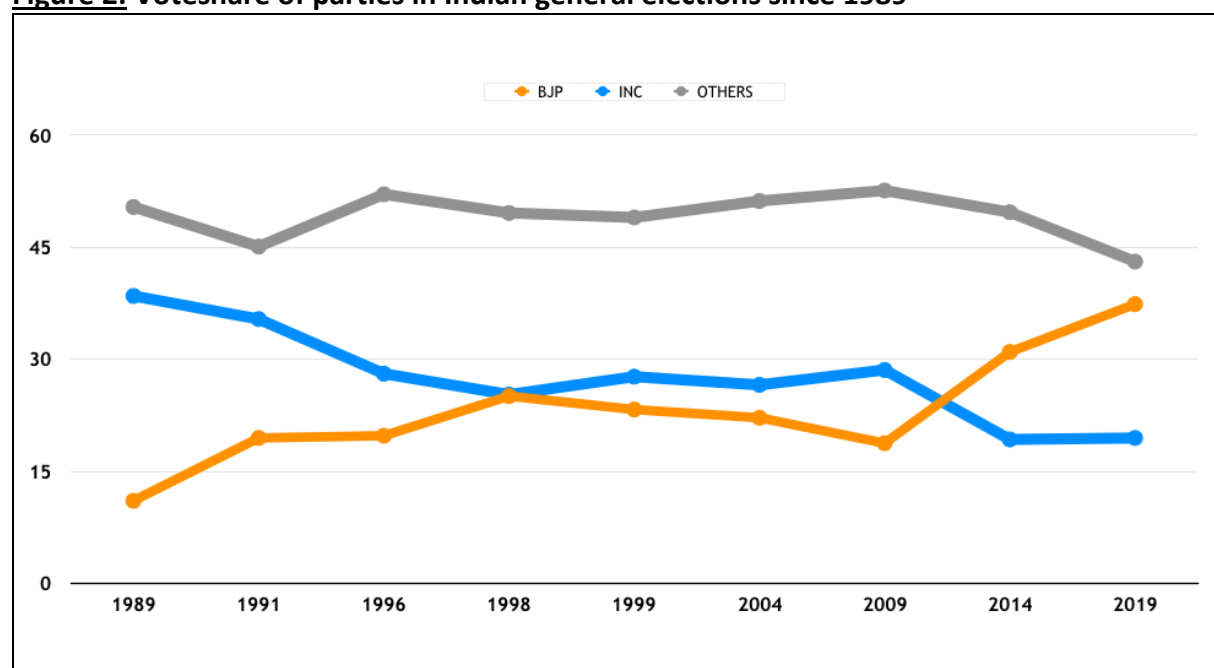
Source: Loki.ai analysis of Election Commission of India data

The BJP's success in 2019 was built on several factors. Some of these mirrored what happened in 2014 – the nationwide appeal of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the BJP's presidential-style campaign; the organisational skills of the BJP and its president Amit Shah as well as the foot soldiers of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh; the ability to stitch together winning caste coalitions; a sweep of the Hindi heartland and western India; and a media campaign that could not be matched by the opposition.

There were other factors that were specific to the 2019 campaign – targeted welfare schemes and quotas in jobs and education for the poor; a nationalist narrative following the Pulwama attack and the Balakot airstrike in February 2019; and inroads into eastern India and the Northeast.

In contrast, the Congress could only marginally increase its seat share to 52 seats while its vote share remained stagnant at 19.5 per cent. The woes of the Congress were underlined by the party drawing a blank in 19 states and Union Territories and winning more than half its seats from only two states – Kerala and Punjab. The regional parties, too, saw a significant decrease in their vote share from around 50 to 43 per cent (Figure 2).

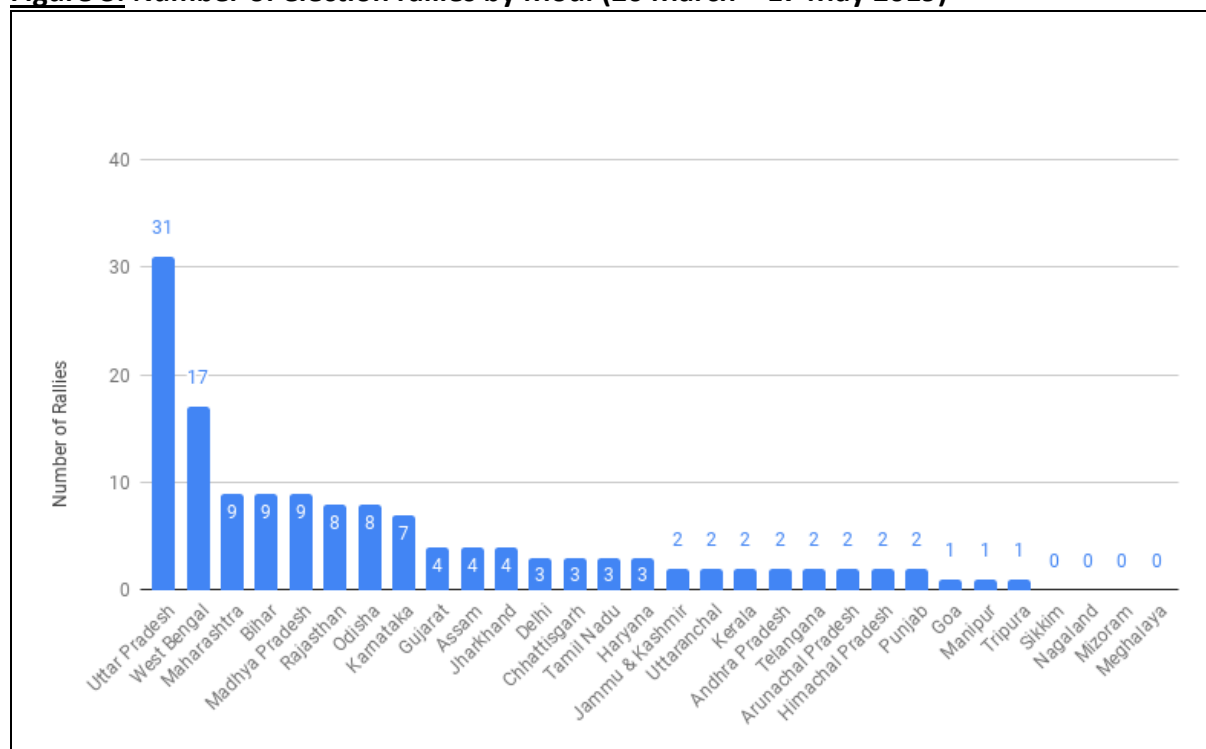
Figure 2: Voteshare of parties in Indian general elections since 1989



Source: Loki.ai analysis of Election Commission of India data

As in 2014, Modi was central to the BJP's victory in 2019. He addressed 142 public meetings during the election campaign, emphasising that a vote for the BJP was a vote for him (Figure 3). More importantly, many who voted for the BJP did so only because of Modi and not the candidate in their constituency. According to the CSDS-Lokniti post-poll survey, a third of those who voted for the BJP said that they would have voted differently if Modi had not been the prime ministerial candidates.

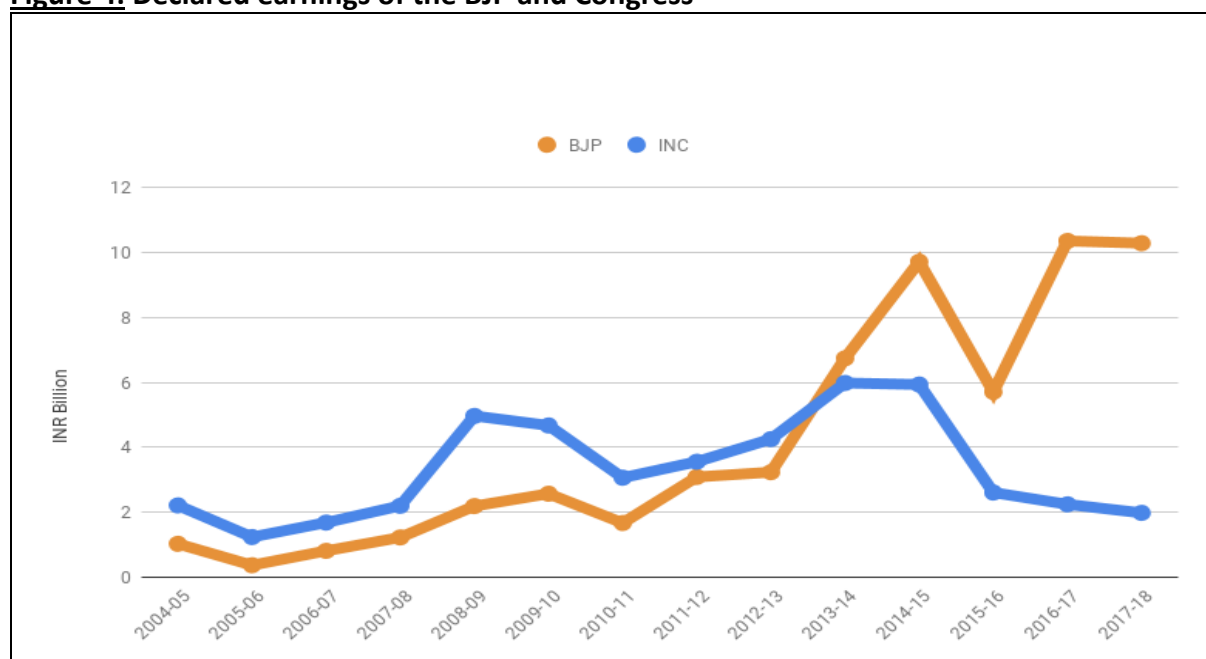
Figure 3: Number of election rallies by Modi (20 March – 17 May 2019)



Source: Times of India Election Campaign Tracker

The organisational skills of Shah had been on display in several Assembly elections since 2014. With a huge amount of funds in its war chest, not only was the BJP able to micro-manage the elections down to the booth level, but it was also able to mount a concerted campaign, both on traditional and digital media (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Declared earnings of the BJP and Congress

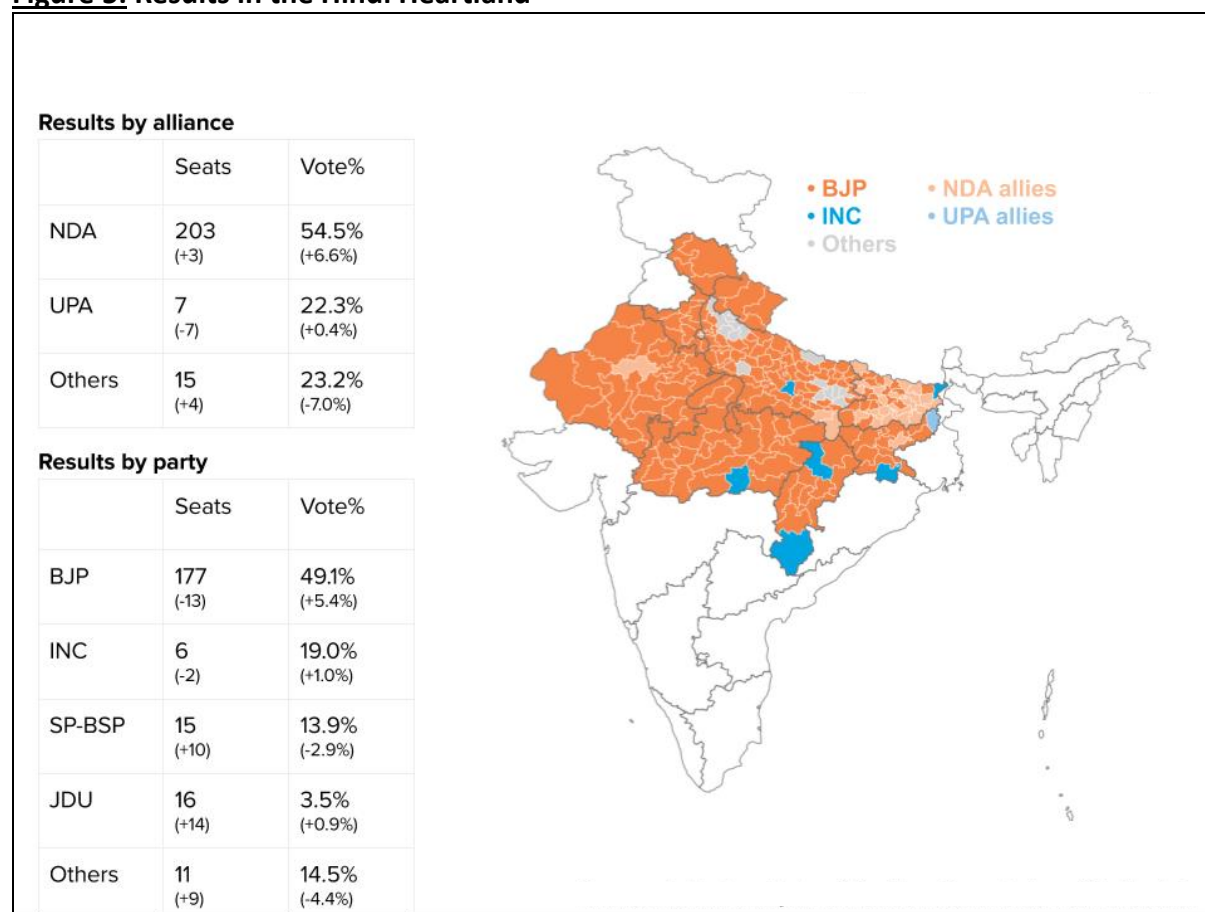


Source: ADR Analysis of Declared Income to ECI

The BJP replicated its ability to stitch together a winning caste alliance, particularly in the Hindi heartland states. In 2014, the BJP has successfully crafted a winning social coalition of upper castes, its traditional supporters, Other Backward Classes (OBCs) and Dalits. In 2019, the coalition remained intact. In Uttar Pradesh (UP), which sends 80 members of parliaments to the Lok Sabha, a large chunk of the upper castes, non-Yadav OBCs and non-Jatav Dalits voted for the BJP. This, along with Modi's popularity, negated the alliance or *mahagathbandhan* (Grand Alliance) of the Samajwadi Party, the Bahujan Samaj Party and the Rashtriya Lok Dal in UP.

Many had expected that the BJP would not be able to repeat its 2014 sweep of the Hindi heartland, namely, the 10 Hindi-speaking states of UP, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Haryana and Delhi (Figure 5). The BJP won 190 of the 225 seats in these states in 2014, which accounted for two-thirds of the BJP's final tally of 282. In light of the Congress forming the government in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh at the end of 2018 and the *mahagathbandhan* in UP, it was expected that the BJP would suffer a significant decrease in seats. While the BJP's seats did decline in UP, it was far less than expected. In fact, in Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh, where the Congress was expected to do well, the BJP swept the polls.

Figure 5: Results in the Hindi Heartland



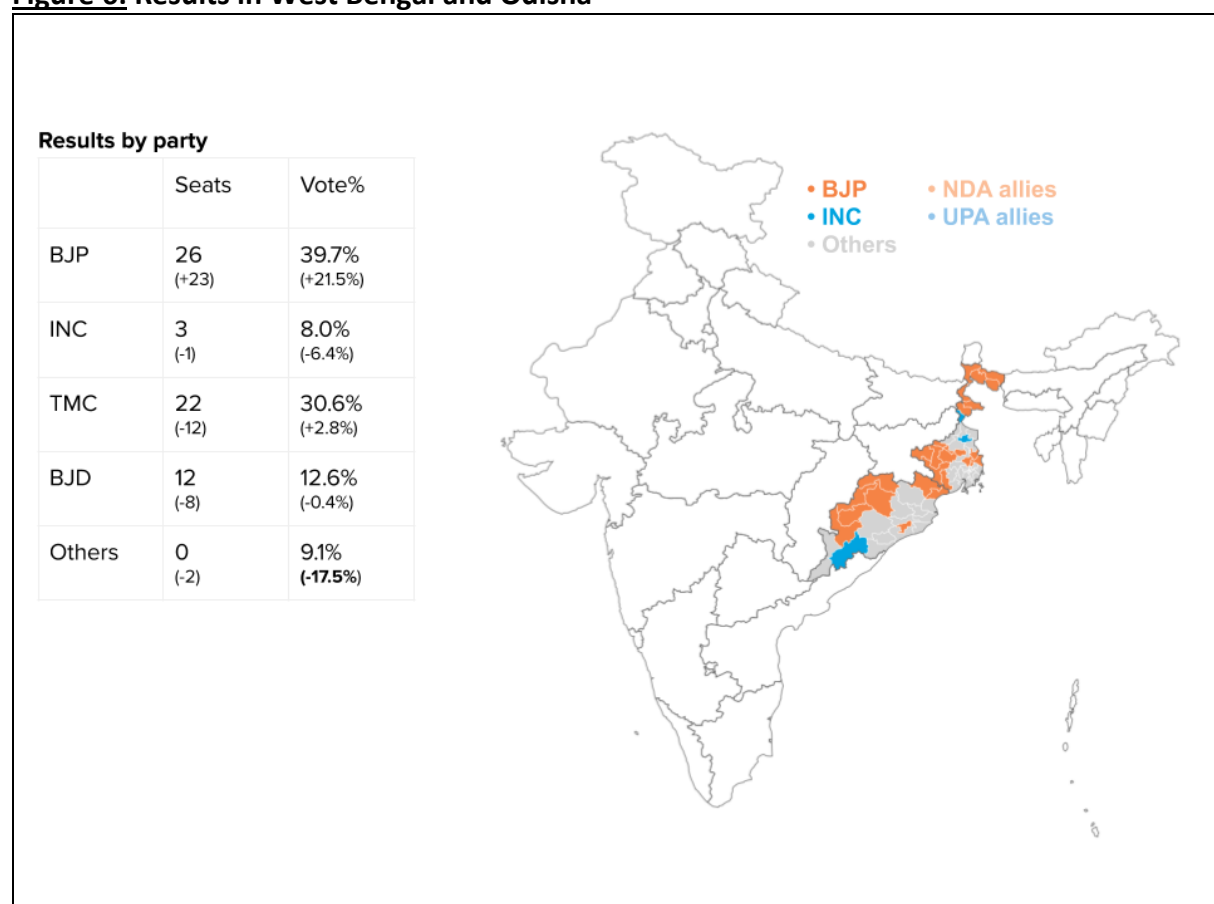
Source: Loki.ai analysis of Election Commission of India data

While unemployment and agrarian distress were factors in the voter's minds, a large section of the electorate still decided to back the BJP and its allies. This can partly be explained by Modi's popularity and the perception that he was the best bet to solve pressing issues.

However, some other factors were also responsible for the BJP's overwhelming success. First, schemes, such as free cooking gas connections, had an impact in rural areas. There is evidence to suggest that these schemes attracted women voters in greater numbers to the BJP. Second, the BJP government in early 2019 announced a payout to poor farmers as well as a 10 per cent quota in government jobs and education for the poor. Third, the Balakot air strike gave the BJP momentum and turned the narrative away from economic issues to national security.

Finally, the BJP was able to compensate for its losses in the Hindi heartland by major gains in the eastern states of West Bengal and Odisha (Figure 6). The BJP's inroads into Bengal were remarkable since its seat share jumped from two to 18 and its vote share from 17 to 40 per cent. In Odisha, the BJP did not perform as spectacularly, but still increased its seat share from one to eight seats.

Figure 6: Results in West Bengal and Odisha



Source: Loki.ai analysis of Election Commission of India data

While Modi's charisma played a big part in the BJP's victory, there were a host of other factors which worked in its favour. A disunited opposition and the inability of the Congress to present a counter narrative, too, helped the BJP. The resounding win for the BJP indicates

two trends. First, India is in for a second dominant party system where the BJP, and not the Congress, is the natural party of government. Second, the overwhelming verdict for the BJP possibly shows that majoritarian impulses have become more mainstream in India. Looking ahead, the question is whether Modi's second term will be a transformative one or more of the same.

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Dr Ronojoy Sen is Senior Research Fellow and Research Lead (Politics, Society and Governance) at the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS). He can be contacted at isasrs@nus.edu.sg. The author bears full responsibility for the facts cited and opinions expressed in this paper.