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# **How Are Lower Castes Persuaded to Advocate for Neoliberal Reforms? An exploration of the strategies and tactics utilized by the BJP and associated organizations in India**

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## **Citation**

Hendriks, H. C. (2024). *How Are Lower Castes Persuaded to Advocate for Neoliberal Reforms?: An exploration of the strategies and tactics utilized by the BJP and associated organizations in India.*

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3762777>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

# **How Are Lower Castes Persuaded to Advocate for Neoliberal Reforms?**

**An exploration of the strategies and tactics utilized by the BJP and associated organizations in India**

Bachelor Thesis as part of BSc International Relations and Organizations

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Seminar: Contentious Political Action in Democracies and Authoritarian States in Asia

Date: 24-5-2024

Word Count: 7312

Embargo Statement: Public

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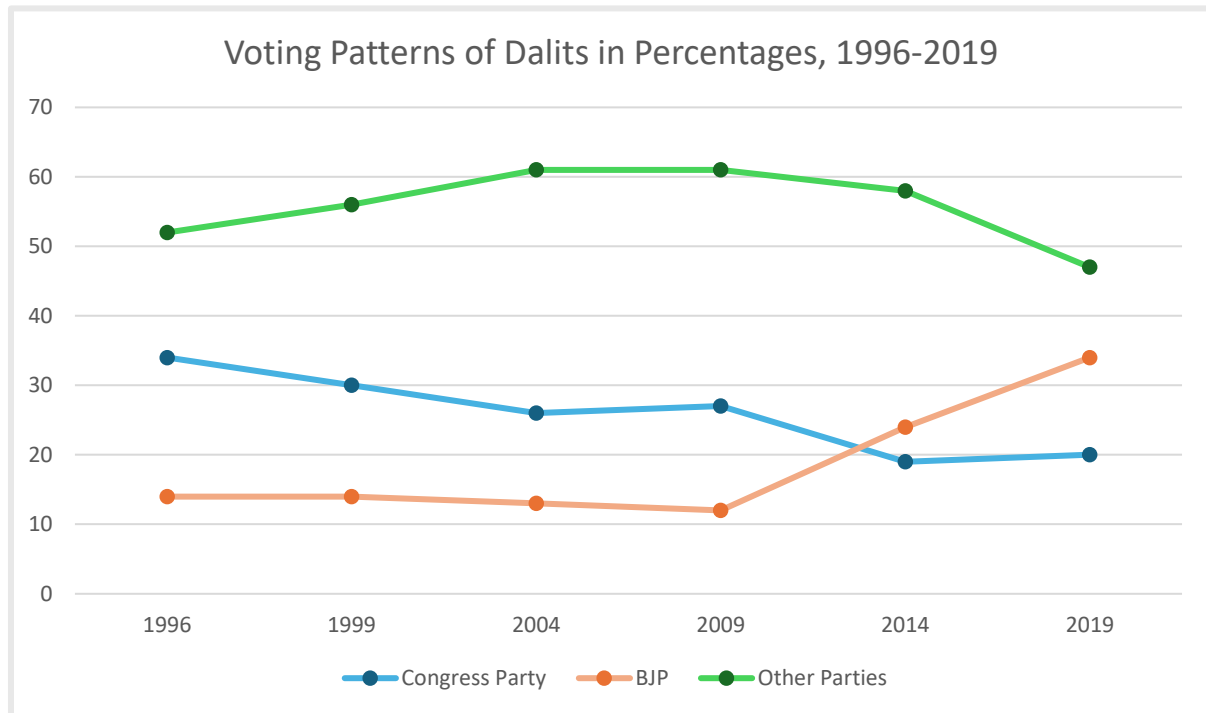
## 1. Introduction

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of May 2014 Narendra Modi was inaugurated as the new prime minister of India after his Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies (dubbed the National Democratic Alliance (NDA)) achieved a stunning victory in the general election held earlier that year. The new administration that followed made quick work of introducing neoliberal economic reforms, which included reduced spending on healthcare, education and social welfare programs. To add on to this the government also made the controversial decision to weaken labour and environmental laws. The first test for the government as to whether these policies would be supported by the public came with the 2019 general election, which in fact cemented the position of the BJP as the dominant party of the current political landscape in India. Following this historic success, the party has managed to keep growing and is expected to continue doing so in the upcoming 2024 general election, which has proved that the party has managed to transcend caste divides and increasingly mobilized lower caste voters.

Historically, Ancient India through to the Mughal empire has known a caste system, although it has been fluid and transformed by various rulers during their respective times in power, the caste system has been defined as a social classification wherein various groups of people are divided into classes. The common framework of Varna (Class) consists of four divisions, along with a fifth categorisation outside of the traditional four and positioned at the bottom of the social stratum known as the Dalits (also called untouchables). Whereas the British Colonial regime strictly reinforced the social divisions, post-independent India has implemented policies to lessen divisions through positive discrimination measures. Nevertheless the caste system is still a widely held belief by many in India and the caste divisions function as a strong determinant for the way people vote.

Yet, the lower caste's have been increasingly voting for the BJP and allies, whom have traditionally been associated with the Hindu elites. Furthermore, the BJP and their non-state allies, who all follow the Hindutva ideology that still adheres to the caste system which discriminates against Dalits, have managed to make inroads into those communities. In the watershed 2014 general election that returned the BJP to power, the strong performance of the party amongst lower caste voters was one of the most important factors to its success. While usually the Congress Party dominated these groups this time around the BJP outperformed the Congress among the lower rungs of the social ladder garnering 24 percent of the Dalit vote as opposed to Congress's 18.5 percent (Varshney, 2014, p. 36). The Dalit support continued to soar in the following 2019 general election, showcasing the broadened appeal of the BJP that

has expanded from an elite party, in contrast to the lower caste Congress Party, into a broader appeal party, which has managed to even outcompete the Congress Party amongst Dalits (see figure 1). Furthermore, with its strategic alliance with the Hindutva paramilitary Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) the BJP has found a network of non-state allies dubbed Sangh Parivar that has allowed it to protrude in every facet of local life (Murphy, 2023, pp. 50-52).



*Figure 1: The trajectory of Dalits voting for political parties in India from 1996 to 2019, based on CSDS Data Unit figures (Palshikar & Mishra, 2023)*

If the Dalits are assumed to be a perfectly rational and utility-maximizing “homo economicus”, the BJP party position on Neoliberal reforms is perfectly clear, and the political space is dominated by a single economic dimension (‘*it’s the economy stupid*’) with no dynamics over time (a static snapshot), then those Dalits should not advocate for the neoliberal reforms of the BJP. The key puzzle that is to be answered in this research paper is why these lower caste voters do in fact advocate for those reforms in an increasing manner, as seen through the increase in votes for the BJP. In other words, how do the BJP and associated Hindutva non-state actors convince Dalits to vote against their economic interests. The resulting research question is: *What strategies and tactics have the BJP and associated civil society organizations employed to mobilize lower castes in advocating for neoliberal reforms in India?* Due to the fact that the growth of Dalit votes for BJP has seen an upturn since the 2014 general elections headed by

Narendra Modi, this timeframe of 2014 to the present serves as the focus of analysis for this paper.

In terms of academic relevance, this paper adds to the literature on framing, specifically how it can be used in contexts of low state capacity, as is the case with the developing country of India. To add on to this, the case of India also highlights the need for cultural considerations when applying framing, as the Hindutva ideology has had a unique effect on the effectiveness of framing, in addition to the local views on forms of patronage as acts of giving and charity as highlighted by Piliavsky (2014). Lastly, the paper exposes a new tactic of framing which is subtle and based upon influence through secondary means such as service provisioning as opposed to explicit messaging. With regards to societal relevance, the paper highlights the precarious nature of social service provision and how it can be coopted by state actors to influence disadvantaged social groups. This can be of use for policymakers, as it points to the need for critical assessment of non-state actors in order to ward against undue political influence, though of course it is likely that those in power are aware and supportive of these actors if they help their political prospects. Thus, it needs to be a broad audience of actors which need to scrutinise the workings of non-state actors, that includes not just national policymakers or political science students, but also the foreign actors who may provide funding to them, and the local population who must remain vigilant.

What follows is an outline of the research paper. First, the theoretical framework is discussed which consists of a conceptualization of the Hindutva ideology and neoliberal reforms, as well as how they are linked together. Furthermore, it includes a review of the literature on how both social service provisioning and framing serve as strategies to coopt lower castes in the Hindutva fold. The prediction is that the service provisioning allows non-state actors to gain good will among lower classes, which in turn grants them the ability to strategically construct perceptions on issues, such as the merit of advocating for neoliberal reforms as proposed by the BJP. Following this section the research method is presented, which includes the focus of the paper, the data, and the method of Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA). Third, the results of the QCA are empirically analysed and discussed, with reference to examples. Lastly, the conclusion will discuss the implications and limitations of the findings, as well as suggest future research topics that build upon this paper.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1 Hindutva Actors and Ideology

The Hindutva movement has a variety of adherents in India, the most prominent of which is the current governing party BJP led by Narendra Modi, which coalesces with other parties under the National Democratic Alliance (NDA), and as described by Murphy (2023, pp. 49-50) forms part of a movement that is conceptualized as the political manifestation of Hindu-nationalism. It is an ideology defined by shared heritage in terms of a common religion, Hinduism, a common language, Hindi, and a common ethnic background, the Aryan lineage. In addition to political parties, contemporary scholars argue that Non-state Hindutva actors also feature prominently in political discourse, and are influential in mobilizing individuals for their cause. The most important of these actors coalesce together under the umbrella term Sangh Parivar, which is unofficially led by the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). The RSS is a nongovernmental paramilitary organization, whose aim is to strengthen and reform Hinduism in India, in order to develop a strong united Hindu state. Under the RSS serve a multitude of smaller associated organizations, which include religious organisations, students unions, religious militias and worker unions (Kalva, 2023, pp. 40-44; Murphy, 2023 pp. 50-56).

Overall, the BJP and the Sangh Parivar form two sides of the same coin, even though the latter often claims to be apolitical and independent from the political party. The Hindutva ideology is the common denominator of all the actors and informs their strategies to mobilize individuals from all social classes to attain their goals of establishing a Hindu-nationalist state. With regards to the focus on Hinduism as the driving force of Indian statehood and nationalism, some scholars argue that the Hindutva movement is fascist by nature due to the linkage between a homogenised concept of Hindus, which are deemed superior, to an excluded homogenous minority (most notably the Indian Muslim minority), which in the past has supposedly unjustly acted towards the group (Kalva, 2023, pp. 40-44). In contrast, other scholars highlight the problematic nature of labelling Hindutva as a fascist or as is more common a right-wing conservative ideology (Murphy, 2023, p. 49). Key limitations are that the Hindutva ideology is often seen as being *Sui Generis* (Latin phrase meaning ‘of its own kind’, therefore unique) with its specific mix of neoliberalism, cultural nationalism and social authoritarianism (Desai, 2011, pp. 356-357). Moreover, in reference to accusations of fascism, the central tendency of mobilizing based on violence against minorities does not hold, as while the superiority of Hinduism is established Hindutva civil society organizations also work with minorities from different religions, and mobilize support from many disadvantaged voters traditionally

disregarded by the Hindu elite, such as the lower caste Dalits, through us of social service provision instead of solely through use of depictions of minorities as enemies to be mobilized against (Murphy, 2023, pp. 53-54).

Scholars also point to the essential role of volunteers in the Hindutva movement (Thachil, 2011, pp. 443-445; Torri, 2015, pp. 63-66). A notable feature of the RSS and associated organizations is the training of Swayamsevak's, which is Sanskrit for 'volunteers' (Murphy, 2023, p. 50-52). The elite body is known as the Pracharaks and they serve as full time organisers. These elite volunteers dedicate their lives to promoting Hindutva and living sober lives. Included in their ranks is the current Indian prime minister Narendra Modi. This harks back to the way that the BJP and the RSS are interwoven, even if not formally so.

Scholars also highlight the neoliberalist thought found within Hindutva, which makes it stand out among nationalist parties whom usually staunchly support protectionism. This focus on neoliberal policies has in large part to do with the traditional support base of the Hindu nationalist movement, which consisted of upper and middle class Hindi speakers in the north of India (Desai, 2011, pp. 358-363). This is a result of the traditional Hindutva belief in the caste system, which places some higher castes in privileged positions, whom simultaneously are also the group of people that profit most from liberalization of the economy and therefore flock to the Hindutva BJP party and the neoliberal reforms it supports. Despite the neoliberal and elite focus, Dalits are increasingly voting for the BJP (Varshney, 2014, p. 36). While the BJP boasts about economic growth, Dalits have not benefited much (Verma, 2024, May 10).

### 2.3 Neoliberal Reform

According to Ganti (2014) Neoliberalism can mean many things depending on your vantage point. Scholars understand it through four main referents: a set of economic reform policies, a prescriptive development model, an ideology which ascertains market exchange is an ethic in itself, and a mode of governance that promotes the self-regulating free market as the ideal (pp. 90-91). It rose to prominence following World War II as previous interventionist economic policies were deemed to cause economic stagnation (pp. 90-93). International organizations helped spread Neoliberal reforms to developing countries which adopted them to gain entry or had to implement them to receive funds (pp. 93-94). The focus of this paper is on the practical aspect, this links back to the referent of Neoliberalism as a set of economic reform policies, as opposed to Neoliberalism as an ideology.



Following this approach, there are some concrete policies deemed by literature as being Neoliberal. This includes the liberalization of industry and trade, deregulation of the economy and privatization of state-owned business (Steger & Roy, 2010, p. 14). Thus, the market is given more freedom. However, scholars also point to the essential role of the state, which is needed to bring the reforms to every aspect of society and intervene to establish free markets (Hickel, 2018, p. 218). Following such reforms, the influence of the state in the economy can be said to be diminished (Boas & Gans-Morse, 2009, p. 143).

India first adopted major neoliberal reforms in 1991 following an economic crisis that caused displeasure with the previous economic protectionist policies such as import substitution industrialization. In response to the economic malaise, and to gain access to funds from international banks the economy was reformed, with it being centred around liberalisation, privatization and globalisation (Rakesh, 2018, pp. 44-49). The BJP governments led by Narendra Modi have intensified the liberalization of the economy, introducing neoliberal reforms such as reduced spending on healthcare, education and social welfare programs, as well as weakening environmental and labour laws (Ruparelia, 2015, pp. 757-758).

What effect have these policies had on lower castes? Due to the expenditure cuts introduced by the BJP in the fields of healthcare and education, these reforms have attributed to a growing divide between Dalits and higher castes, and made for less quality social services for these socially disadvantaged groups (Ruparelia, 2015, pp. 771-772). The BJP has been noted for this neoliberal approach to welfare services and implored individuals critical of this to rely on their own personal resources and market dynamics, as opposed to legal entitlements. Furthermore, the government introduced a reduction in federal financial assistance to states and a new calculation which reduces the importance of population size, which have meant that impoverished states have seen increases in absolute poverty (pp. 772-773). While scholars argue globalizing the economy and making it more competitive has allowed some to flourish, the most marginalized groups such as Dalits have had trouble adapting (Narayan, 2022, pp. 203-204). Traditional occupations such as artisanship have been deprived of livelihood and Dalit communities have often not even acquired the capacity to have small savings (pp. 205-208). Despite such welfare retrenchment the party who has implemented this is not being punished in elections (Ahrens & Bandau, 2023). The economic interests seemingly do not dissuade the socially disadvantaged from voting for elite parties. Neoliberal reforms are thus not simply advocated for by elites. Dalits in India serve as a good reminder of this.

### 2.3 Social Services and Framing

Seeing as the Hindutva ideology supports neoliberalism and the lower castes, in particular the Dalits whom are at the bottom, are not the people who are most likely to profit from or advocate for those economic policies it is interesting to note that they have increasingly voted for them in the form of the political party BJP. A number of scholars have found that despite seemingly contrasting economic interests lower socio-economically positioned individuals do vote for neoliberal reforms, including welfare retrenchment (Ahrens & Bandau, 2023; Levy, 2021; Thachil, 2011). This finding has led many to conclude that one's social standing does not inhibit from voting for policies that particularly favour the wealthy as opposed to one's own social class, as is the case with Dalits voting largely for the elite-oriented party BJP.

Firstly, scholars have argued that social service provision can make it so that trust is earned by those not in the traditional electorate, the so-called out group, and eventually convince them to vote the way those providers deem favourable (Thachil, 2011, p. 448; Cammett & Issar, 2010, pp. 415-417). The strategy of mobilizing poor voters to expand the voter base of elite parties through social service provisioning is most evident in developing democracies, which contain large impoverished populations that are more susceptible to vote in exchange for goods both material and immaterial (Wagner, 2019, p. 71). Furthermore, developing states lack capacity and therefore many people rely on non-state actors to fill the gap regarding social services (Thachil, 2011, pp. 441-443; Batley & Mcloughlin, 2010, pp. 133-134). As a result, service provisioning by ideologically related actors such as the RSS for the political party BJP in India can be an effective way to manage the delicate balancing act of both appeasing the traditional upper caste rich electorate and appealing to the lower caste poor voters (Thachil, 2011, p. 435). The Hindutva organizations can presently be found all over India and likely because of this increasing presence the BJP has kept growing substantially in elections.

Secondly, according to the social identity theory people are inclined to strive for a favourable "social identity", which is described as a component of an individual's self-perception that emanates from their awareness of belonging to a social group, coupled with the value associated with that membership (Bankert, 2020, pp. 2-5). Hindutva actors make use of myths and legends of Dalits and reinterpret it in a Hinduised way to include these lower castes in a grand unified Hindu narrative, wherein the Dalit heroes are portrayed as Indian warriors who protected the Hindu religion from Muslim invaders (Narayan, 2009, pp. 20-21). This historical reinterpretation helps attach Dalits to the greater Hindutva movement and motivates them to seek acceptance from upper caste Hindus (Narayan, 2009, p. 24). Social movements such as

the Hindutva Sangh Parivar strategically construct and maintain meanings to shape the perception of what it means to be Hindu with the aim of mobilizing support for the BJP and the Neoliberal reforms it stands for, this is also known as framing (Benford & Snow, 2000, pp. 613-614). The lack of literacy among the Dalits as well as the specific cultural factors of South Asia wherein personal relationships and acts of giving (*sewa, daan*), which elsewhere would be considered the corrupt practice of patronage, are seen as a unique form of interpersonal relations and preferred above conventional ‘‘dirty’’ politics have helped attribute to the success of the frames utilized (Piliavsky, 2014; Rozenas & Sadanandan, 2018). This all highlights how Dalits in India are particularly vulnerable to being influenced by the frames utilized by the Sangh Parivar and how it forms a social identity that causes them to follow the Hindutva ideology and the related neoliberal reforms that it stands for.

Thirdly, partisan identity, once established, has profound implications as individuals will respond to party cues by engaging in motivated reasoning to devise arguments for their party’s policy correctness (Petersen, Skov, Serritzlew & Ramsøy, 2013, pp. 834-837). This means that the policy preferences of a person are not set in stone, but rather fluid and dependent on the how attached they feel to a certain party or ideology like Hindutva. Even if parties implement policies against a voter’s economic interests, for instance welfare retrenchment, they do not punish those parties in upcoming elections, but rather keep on voting for them (Ahrens & Bandau, 2023, pp. 1649-1652). However, strongly and weakly attached partisans follow their parties to new policy positions at different times. Thus, a weak cue, aka a party starts talking about a new issue, leads to the most dedicated partisans to adopt a new preference, whereas a strong cue, aka a party adopts a policy, leads to the least dedicated partisan to adopt a new preference (Nemčok, Wass & Vesa, 2023, pp. 8-10).

Based on this review of the literature, it can be predicted that Hindutva actors under the umbrella term Sangh Parivar have been able to persuade Dalits to vote against their economic interests, through use of creating a common Hindu social identity, that has in turn resulted in a strong sense of partisanship. Therefore, the strategies and tactics employed by the BJP and associated organizations are to permeate the local Dalit communities through use of social service provision, thereby gaining the good will from the populus, which in turns allows those actors to convince the Dalits off the righteousness of voting for the BJP and the neoliberal reforms it stands for.

### **3. Research Method**

#### **3.1 Focus**

The aim of this paper is to investigate the strategies and tactics that the BJP and the associated organizations (Sangh Parivar) utilize in order to convince lower caste individuals to vote for neoliberal reforms, in turn this should solve the puzzle as to why these people vote against their economic interests. This puzzle can be solved by going through what news articles have said about the strategies of the Hindutva actors, and whether this aligns with the existing theory, thus a qualitative study design is used. To be more specific, a Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) is deemed most appropriate as it allows for careful investigation of the language used to describe the strategies employed to convince Dalits to vote for neoliberal reforms. In particular, India is chosen due to the fact that it is a developing country and democracy which lacks much state capacity in the field of social service provision, which means that non-state actors are often those who fill in this gap. In turn, these actors are very influential, they permeate local communities and hereby are able to shape the minds of those reliant on their services. India is also an appropriate case because there is a huge impoverished population of lower caste communities, whom are the most dependent on the service provisioning of Hindutva actors.

The strategies and tactics of Hindutva actors function as the topic of exploration. Specifically looking at the period from 2014 onwards, which is the period in which the BJP has consistently grown in general elections under the leadership of Narendra Modi.

The presence of lower castes serve as a clearly defined group that allows for the theory to be tested. In particular, the paper looks at the highly marginalized caste of Dalits, also known as untouchables. This caste is numerous and therefore an important electorate for any party. The BJP has noticeably been able to garner much more support in the last elections under the leadership of Narendra Modi. This is despite the neoliberal reforms the party and other Hindutva actors stand for. The Dalit voters are a key factor for this electoral success and the reason for the need to answer the puzzle, namely how such a socially disadvantaged group is convinced to vote for economic reforms that counter their interests

### 3.2 Data and Research Method

To understand whether the Hindutva actors intentionally frame a common Hindu narrative that incentivizes lower caste communities to vote in a partisan way for the Hindutva party BJP and the neoliberal reforms it stands for, it is important to assess the views on their strategies as exposed in the news articles. The method of qualitative content analysis makes it possible to expose the meanings, purposes and motives embedded in the data and to infer hidden meanings of interest, also known as the latent content (Weber, 1990, pp. 72-76). This form of research is also helpful due to its sensitivity to context in which the texts are made and thereby best able to expose meanings, motives, norms and values. In all, this method should help confirm or disprove the theory that social service provision allows non-state actors to frame issues in such a way that diametrically opposed individuals still see the world in a way that aligns with the goals of those actors. In this case the contrast of interests is in the economic field, which has often been touted as a major reason for one's support of a party or ideology. News articles on the work of the Hindutva actors, meaning the BJP and the associated organizations under the umbrella term Sangh Parivar, serve as the primary data. Furthermore, interviews, if provided with a full transcript, serve as secondary data as well. The complete package of data can be found online and due to English being a lingua franca of India there should be ample and accessible data to analyse. In all, the method of qualitative content analysis allows for the systematic and detailed analysis of the strategies of the Hindutva non-state actors. Following the steps outlined in Halperin and Heath (2020, pp. 376-387), the coding frame will be established in an inductive manner.

## 4. Empirical Analysis

### 4.1 Context

As aforementioned, the data used will consist of news articles. It is important to briefly discuss context in terms of press freedom, namely the dualism of a constitutionally protected right to freedom of press, alongside the curbing of said freedom by the Modi government.

The freedom of the press is enshrined in the constitution of India, subject to limitations regarding national security. However, in reality the press in India is subject to many constraints as is reflected in the Press Freedom Index, which categorizes India as ‘‘very serious’’ (in a bad sense) with regards to the situation for journalists (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). The Ministry of Information and Broadcasting that is in charge of guaranteeing press freedom was quick to respond critically to such reports, stating that it present a bad picture of freedom of press in India (‘‘India’’, 2020). However, as the report made by Reporters Without Borders revealed, it is specifically Hindutva actors, including the ruling party BJP, which have been attempting to censor supposed anti-Indian thought. This includes Hindutva followers creating hate campaigns against journalists, as well as the criminal prosecution of journalists critical of the Hindutva government (Reporters Without Borders, 2023). Furthermore, major foreign news outlets have been warned by the Hindu-nationalist government against portraying India in a negative light (Vij-Aurora, 2020). In addition, pressure is also exerted on both the national news outlets, for instance with the Hindustan times sacking a BJP-critic after a meeting with Modi (Srivasa, 2017), and the local news, which has reportedly started to shy away from critical news of the government, including on economic issues (Kumar, 2019). However, the most jarring example is the killing of 40 journalists between 2014 and 2019 (Mantri, 2019).

This context needs to be taken into account when assessing the news articles, especially as descriptions of the tactics used by the BJP and associated organizations might only be stated in covert or positive ways, due to the fear of censorship. The first step of carrying out content analysis is to identify the material to be analysed, otherwise known as the population (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 377). For this research paper, the strategy is to collect the data from a variety of sources that are published online. To be specific, the news articles will come from both international news outlets, such as the BBC, national outlets, like the Hindustan Times, and local outlets to make sure that a full picture can be formed, which takes into account the aforementioned limitations. Finally, the segments of text that will be analysed, also known as the recording unit (Halperin & Heath, 2020, pp. 378-379), will be sentences and paragraphs.

## 4.2 Coding Framework

As this research paper is exploratory by nature, the so called open coding strategy is used whereby presuppositions are set aside to find themes in the data, in turn through reading the data grounded codes emerge (Halperin & Heath, 2020, p. 380). However, due to the themes being found aligning with existing theory, the generated categories are informed by it as well. In all, the coding frame which lists the categories and subcategories, is presented below:

- A. Embedded Mobilization:** This category applies whenever a sentence or paragraph mentions the use of social service provision. It is based on the concept brought up by Thachil (2011, pp. 464-466) that the use of service provision can serve as an electoral strategy to gain access to and merit from lower caste communities, the subcategories of this category are:
  - a. Social Services:** This subcategory applies whenever non-State Hindutva actors provide for social services.
  - b. Apolitical Frame:** This subcategory applies whenever non-state Hindutva actors make mention of their service provisioning being apolitical.
- B. Hindu Identity:** This category applies whenever a sentence or paragraph mentions the use of the strategic construction of a common Hindu-identity. It is understood as the framing of a common vision of Hinduism which unites all castes, including Dalits. The subcategories are:
  - a. Hinduisation:** This subcategory applies whenever Hindutva actors frame Dalit identity around a common Hindu social identity.
  - b. Scapegoating:** This subcategory applies whenever Hindutva actors intentionally blame and discriminate against out-groups in order to unify the in-group.

The category of Embedded mobilization should help verify whether social service provision is used by the Hindutva actors as an active strategy to infiltrate lower caste communities and gain both merit and leverage, which enables them to persuade those communities to vote for the neoliberal reforms proposed by the BJP . It would help confirm the validity of the theory that such social provision can help bridge the gap between elite parties and the lower caste voters whose economic interests contrast. This would be in line with existing literature. With regards to the category of Hindu Identity, it adds another layer to the co-optation of Dalits, but through the use of framing. According to the literature review, Hindutva actors centre their strategic construction of identity around the religion of Hinduism which both them and their target audience share, allowing the creation of a common bond, trust and a partisan identity.

### 4.3 Results

The following excerpts are from the online news articles that serve as data. Due to constraints in terms of space and time only a limited amount of quotes are presented.

#### A. Embedded Mobilization

##### a. Social services

Article	Quote
Ghosh, A. (2021, March 28)	RSS works with mostly invisible and the most marginal Dalits [...]. One through sewa projects such as establishing schools, hospitals and reviving traditional water resources to carve out space in the hearts and mind of the marginal communities.
Outlook Web Desk. (2022, February 5)	[...] the Sangh Parivar began to view service work—such as one-teacher schools and village health workers—as part of a systematic strategy through which to integrate non-Savarna castes. This realisation led to a huge expansion of their service wings, [...].
Roy, M. (2013, January 29)	Over the decades, the RSS has acquired a top-notch profile for doing social service in far-flung areas where even basic services are not-available.
Choudhary, S. (2020, July 15)	[...] the RSS had started commissioning several social-welfare platforms that “penetrated various realms of civil society” [...].

##### b. Apolitical Frame

Article	Quote
Press Trust of India (2020, January 18)	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh chief Mohan Bhagwat on Saturday said his organisation has no connection with politics and it works only to uplift the moral, cultural and human values of the country.
Tewari, R. (2018, October 18)	Much like his painstaking efforts during his lecture series in the capital last month, RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat Thursday re-iterated how the Sangh has stayed away from politics, and yet, made some overtly political statements.
Tripathi, S. (2019, July 19)	The world’s largest NGO, the so-called ‘cultural’ organisation has never had such a stranglehold over politics and governance of the country. And while an exasperated Rajasthan chief minister Ashok Gehlot advised RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat to formally declare the Sangh, [...] a political party, the RSS continues to be, well, an NGO with special privileges.



**B. Hindu identity**  
**a. Hinduisation**

<b>Article</b>	<b>Quote</b>
Puniyani, R. (2023, August 3)	The RSS floated ‘Samajik Samrasta Manch’ (Social Harmony Forum), to work among the Dalits. This [...] gave the message of ‘Hindu unity’ while retaining the caste hierarchy. In contrast to Ambedkar’s ‘caste annihilation’, it worked among the Dalits promoting harmony among different castes.
Ghosh, A. (2021, March 28)	RSS responds to these desires by helping them build local temples of their deities, which become identity markers for them. Also Sangh forms network with [...], all popular among marginal communities in remote areas, to forge linkages with them. Through these popular and religio-folk methods, Sangh evolves a Hindutva cultural common sense among them.
Srivastava, P. (2015, May 11)	Clearly eyeing the Hindu unity, the RSS recently tried to appropriate Dalit icon and chief architect of the Indian Constitution [...] Ambedkar. The move was aimed at bringing the Dalits into the Sangh's fold.
Denvir, D. (2024, March 24)	Hindutva has skilfully appropriated not only Ambedkar but also various local and regional lower-caste figures, portraying them as revered members of a unified Hindu community. This narrative fosters a sense of belonging and unity among diverse caste groups, aligning them with the Hindutva ideology.

**b. Scapegoating**

<b>Article</b>	<b>Quote</b>
Ashraf, S. F. (2018, August 31)	In 2001, the destruction of the World Trade Centre and consequent announcement of war on terror [...], made terror synonymous to Muslims and they became international pariahs. Emboldened in the neo-liberal times, the Hindutva party became aggressive against Muslims to consolidate Hindu votes.
Puniyani, R. (2023, August 3)	[...] this ‘RSS combine’ also picks up campaigns, which present Dalits as Hindus and projects other parties as appeasers of Muslims. This was witnessed in UP elections where house to house propaganda among Dalits was that BJP is the only party not appeasing Muslims and is the upholder of Hindu interests.
Wankhede, H. S. (2018, May 10)	The RSS-BJP combine assumes that the Dalits are an integral part of the communal Hindu identity, especially when it mobilises against the Muslims.

#### 4.4 Discussion

The results of the QCA confirm the expectation that the BJP and associated organizations, make use of the strategies of social service provisioning and the framing of what it means to be Hindu to persuade lower caste Dalits to vote for neoliberal reforms in the form of the political party BJP. While mostly implicitly revealed through reference to the Hindutva ideology which both the BJP and the other actors fall under, Puniyani (2023) and Wankhede (2018) give explicit description of the RSS campaigning for the BJP. Although the discourse of the non-state actors is that they are apolitical, they do become more explicit in supporting the BJP during elections. Even if not publicly acknowledging that they are in fact campaigning for them. The article written by the Press Trust of India (2020) specifically mentions how the RSS chief Mohan Bhagwat states that his organization has no connection with politics, which is further highlighted in the articles of the same categorization. These Hindutva actors frame themselves as cultural organizations, aimed at promoting Hindu unity.

To analyse the results further they will be tested against the arguments laid out in the theoretical framework and accompanying literature review. This includes the theories of embedded mobilization, social identity and subsequent partisan identity. First, scholars have argued that social service provision can make it so that trust is earned by those not in the traditional electorate. Ghosh's (2021) article highlights the strategic use of Sewa (selfless service) projects. The article explicitly states that the provisioning of social services help carve out space in the hearts and minds of the lower caste communities. Furthermore, the social services provided, such as in the areas of education, healthcare and water management, all link back to the idea of filling the gap in basic services. Developing states, like India, lack state capacity and are thus unable to penetrate marginalised communities and provide adequate services for them. Allied non-state actors, like Sangh Parivar, can step in and gain trust of those communities, whom do not belong to the traditional electorate of the BJP, and convince them to still vote for that party, which otherwise they are unlikely to do because of the neoliberal reform policies, this is also called embedded mobilization (Thachil, 2011, pp. 445-454). This is stated in the article by the Outlook Web Desk (2022) as well, in which it is called a systemic strategy through which to integrate the non-Savarna castes or lower castes.

Secondly, scholars point to the social identity theory which posits that individuals strive for a favourable social identity, this emanates from the awareness of belonging to a social group and the associated value of membership. The data reveals that Hindutva actors make use of the notion of Hindu unity to attract Dalits. Furthermore, Dalit heroes and stories are coopted to

foster linkages. An often mentioned example is the figure Ambedkar, a famed lower caste individual whose message is twisted to fit into the Hindutva ideology, as to include Dalits into the fold of that ideology. The aim of this strategy is to consolidate Hindu votes for the Hindutva and neoliberal BJP. This also fits into the literature on framing, which states that strategic construction of meanings, in this case what it means to be Hindu, can be utilized to mobilize individuals to attain certain goals (Rozenas & Sadanandan, 2018, pp. 613-614).

Furthermore, the data reveals that Hindu identity is also formed through use of scapegoating, which is when Hindutva actors intentionally blame and discriminate against out-groups in order to unify the in-group. The target is the Muslim population, which is negatively portrayed as an outside-group in order to foster unity among the inside Hindu group. According to Narayan (2009, pp. 20-24) Hindutva actors strategically portray Dalit heroes as warriors who protected the Hindu religion from Muslim invaders to attach them to Hindutva actors and motivate them to seek acceptance from upper castes, whom are attached to the BJP.

Finally, scholars have argued that social identity shapes partisan identity. The data points to the Hindu identity being associated with BJP support. Puyinani's (2023) article states that the RSS try to convince Dalits that the BJP is the only political party that properly upholds Hindu interests. Through this strategy of framing the BJP as the sole party to choose for Hindus, the partisan identity that is formed for the Hindu Dalits is likely to shape their view on what policies are correct. This follows the literature, namely that once partisan identity is formed individuals will respond to party cues by engaging in motivated reasoning to come up with arguments for their party's policy correctness (Petersen, Skov, Serritzlew & Ramsøy, 2013, pp. 834-837). The creation of a common Hindutva cultural sense, through use of religio-folk methods, has as a result that it creates a perceptual screen wherein individuals see what is favourable to their orientation (Campbell, Converse, Miller & Stokes, 1960, p. 133; Ghosh, 2021). Thus, creating a strong partisan bond using framing leads to perceptual distortion, which can go as far as making Dalits vote for the neoliberal reforms which the Hindutva BJP supports, even if this is against their own economic interests (Campbell, Converse, Miller & Stokes, 1960 pp. 133-134; Nemcok, Wass & Vesa, 2023, pp. 8-10).

The results of the QCA lead to the conclusion that Hindutva actors make use of the strategies of social service provisioning and the framing of Hindu identity to convince lower castes to advocate for the neoliberal reforms of the BJP. These strategies align with the scholarly literature on how people can be convinced to vote against their economic interests. The predictions are verified. This adds to framing theory and how it applies to developing states.

## 5. Conclusion

The aim of this research paper was to determine what strategies the BJP and associated organizations use to convince lower castes to advocate for neoliberal reforms. Firstly, according to the literature on social service provision as an electoral strategy, it was expected that the Hindutva actors under the term Sangh Parivar and led by the RSS would utilize their work to gain merit and influence in Dalit communities. Through the use of Qualitative Content Analysis (QCA) of news articles, it was found that these non-state Hindutva actors do strategically utilize their provisioning of basic services to gain the good will of lower caste Dalit communities. To add on to this, these actors also make sure to frame their services as apolitical to further gain trust. Thus, the theory on social service provision proved to be accurate, though with the added information that the framing of it being apolitical forms a key part of the strategy as well.

Secondly, following the framing theory, the strategic construction of meanings and perceptions was expected to be utilized to convince lower caste votes, which would otherwise seem unlikely to vote for the neoliberal reforms that are contrary to their economic interests. Applying the QCA method to the news articles revealed how Hindutva actors framed traditional Dalit stories and figures in a Hinduised way to create a common sense of Hindu unity. Furthermore, a Hindu social identity and partisanship also followed from discriminating against Muslims, which had the effect of creating cohesion within the group. This use of framing showcased how identity creation can be utilized to convince lower caste voters to vote for the BJP, despite this party catering to elite interests and proposing economic reforms that hurt the Dalits. The theory on how framing can be utilized by social movements, in this case the Hindutva actors, to mobilize individuals proved its merit, but it also showcased that framing in states with low state capacity is especially effective as it is the aforementioned social service provisioning which allowed the message to catch on as well as it did.

To conclude the BJP and associated organisations use social service provisioning and the framing of Hindu identity to convince lower castes to advocate for neoliberal reforms. These strategies specifically aim to persuade the lower castes to vote for the BJP, whose economic interests conflict with one another. Furthermore, it is because of the lack of state capacity in India that the influence of non-state actors is so high, as it makes the lower caste Dalits so reliant on their services. These findings are significant for scholars that study framing. The research paper contributes to existing literature by highlighting the need for an approach that takes into account the context of both the state development, wherein socially disadvantaged individuals

in developing states are more reliant on non-state actors and therefore more susceptible to framing, as well as the cultural factors, such as the social divisions between Hindus and Muslims in India which helped pull the Dalits into the Hindutva fold.

This research paper does however have its limitations. Firstly, the relationship between Dalit voter support for the BJP, whose policies are neoliberal, and the actual support of the Dalits for neoliberalism is not verified, instead this research paper shows an implicit relation between Dalits supporting the political party and thereby the economic policies, even if this is not a conscious decision on their part. This is not a huge issue as the focus was to explore the strategies utilized to convince Dalits to advocate for neoliberal policies, as opposed to whether they consciously vote for or are in favour of them. Secondly, due to the context of India elaborated upon in the research methodology section, the news coverage on practices by the Hindutva actors might be (self)censored, although due to the numerous media outlets reporting on the strategies this is somewhat remediated.

As for the possible avenues for future research, here are some recommendations. Firstly, scholars can explore whether Dalits are aware of the strategies being used by Hindutva actors and their opinions on it, especially through the use of in-depth interviews this can be explored. Secondly, scholars can test the theory on state capacity and how it contributes to the utility of frames utilizing different cases, namely other developing states, this would further test the validity of this theory. Lastly, the upcoming 2024 general elections warrant analysis as the BJP seems to grow even larger according to opinion polls. Thus, the research done in this paper can warrant repetition for future elections and perhaps invite the use of another methodological approach, namely a quantitative one, for example by focussing on measuring the relationship between Hindutva NGO presence among Dalit communities and the support of those Dalits for the BJP.

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