

# Analysis of 2024 Jharkhand Assembly Elections

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## Executive Summary

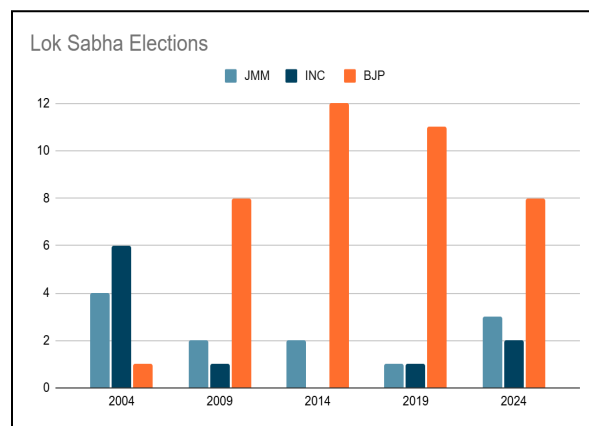
The paper analyses the 2024 Assembly elections in Jharkhand from various perspectives. Jharkhand politics is placed within a broad historical context. Since Jharkhand is a recently formed state based on tribal identity, tribal issues play a major role in the state and process of governance. Three debates are central to tribal politics: development vs displacement, tradition vs organised religion and tribals vs *dikus* (outsiders). It is around these debates that the politics of Jharkhand still revolves. The electoral politics of Jharkhand is marked by two distinct poles: the BJP and JMM. It is the competition between these two parties that shapes the party struggle in the state. The JMM was at the nucleus of the movement demanding statehood for Jharkhand, an erstwhile region in South Bihar. The relationship of tribals with the BJP has been troubled and ambivalent at best. BJP's cultural rhetoric of viewing tribals as part of the Hindu fold is seen as problematic by the tribals. The mainstream society's emphasis on institutionalised religion is antithetical to the tribal concept of fluid religion and nature worship. BJP's open opposition to Christianity's conversion project in Jharkhand has also shaped political discourse in the region.

It is in this context that the 2024 Assembly elections have been analysed. Elections have been viewed from two different perspectives: the discourse that shaped campaign and the demographics of the result. There were three prominent issues that shaped the elections. The first issue picked up by the BJP was the impact of outsiders in changing Jharkhand's demography. Another subject of widespread discussion was the popularity of Hemant Soren's welfare policies. These policies were not just limited to the cash transfers given to women but also involved an overhaul of the pension system. Finally, the release of Hemant Soren was a crucial factor that shaped JMM's campaign. The party blamed the central government for incarcerating him on flimsy grounds to weaken the opposition. These were the issues that shaped the elections. However, the impact of these issues was not uniform on all regions and social groups. This paper highlights the regional disparity in Jharkhand and how diverse social groups have a political impact.

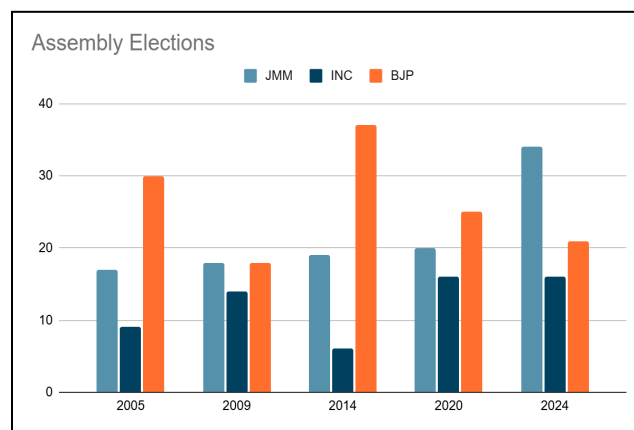
## Introduction

Jharkhand held its sixth assembly elections in 2024, it has a total of 81 seats. The 2024 elections saw a direct contest between the two rival alliances of National Democratic Alliance comprising of BJP, JD(U), AJSU and LJP (RV). The Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance (INDIA) is led by JMM, the Congress, RJD and CPI (ML). In the Lok Sabha elections, the NDA won a total of 9 Lok Sabha seats. INDIA bloc won the remaining 5 seats that are considered to be tribal-dominated seats. The Lok Sabha election was held in the wake of Hemant Soren's arrest in a land scam case. Whereas, his release from jail before the Assembly elections played

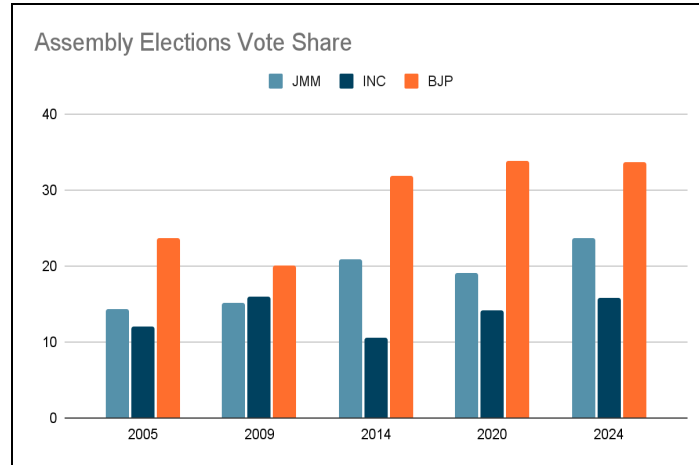
an important role in JMM's return to power. The alliance became the first in Jharkhand's short electoral history to return to power. Looking at trends tell us that since 2009, the BJP has won a minimum of 8 seats in every Lok Sabha election. Even in 2009, when the Congress had registered an electorally impressive performance in the rest of the country, the BJP secured more than 50% of seats in Jharkhand. A study of the trends of Assembly elections reveals that JMM and BJP have maintained a steady vote share. The BJP managed to increase its vote share from 23% in 2005 to 33% in 2024 with its vote share hovering around 30% in the last 3 election cycles. During the same time, JMM has also increased its vote share by 10% to 23%. The Congress's vote share has remained constant at around 15%. The BJP has historically been the single largest party in Jharkhand, but it is the alliance of JMM and Congress that has kept them at bay.



**Figure 1. Number of seats in Jharkhand won by major parties in Lok Sabha elections (2004-24)**



**Figure 2. Number of seats in Jharkhand won by major parties in Assembly elections (2005-24)**



**Figure 3. Vote share of major parties in Assembly elections (2005-24)**

## Broader outline of Jharkhand Politics

### Tribal Demands

The politics of Jharkhand is centred around the issues of 'Adivasiyat'. Despite the constitutional protection provided through the Fifth and Sixth Schedule coupled with the **Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act**, there has been a constant resentment against development projects of the state<sup>1</sup>. The state has been unsuccessful in protecting the tribals' linguistic and religious rights. Categorising them as Hindus is a further attempt to ignore their distinctive religious identity<sup>2</sup>. In the administrative sphere, state policy has been geared towards the absorption of tribals into the mainstream. The detribalization of governance has not gone down well with the tribals. Aspirations of the electorate can be found in the essence of the People's Agenda : (i) The state's Chief Minister, Deputy Chief Minister and all administrators who come into direct contact with the people must belong to the local tribal group. (ii) The control over tribal lands must be taken away from the mining companies and given to the local tribal groups. (iii) Any displacement project on tribal land must not be without the consent of the local tribal groups and should not involve their displacement. The struggle against integrationist policies of the state has taken two contrasting routes: on the one hand, it has resulted into greater participation in elections. On the other hand, resentment has turned into radical movements<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Mishra, A., & Chandra, V. (2024). Mapping the Politics of Adivasiyat in Jharkhand. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 59(13), 57–64.

<sup>2</sup> Virginius Xaxa. (2005). Politics of Language, Religion and Identity: Tribes in India. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 40(13), 1363–1370. JSTOR. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4416402>

<sup>3</sup> Kumar, S. (2018). Adivasis and the State Politics in Jharkhand. *Studies in Indian Politics*, 6(1), 103–116. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2321023018762821>

## Electoral History of Jharkhand

State Assembly elections in Jharkhand were held for the first time in 2005, nearly 5 years after its creation as a new state. Since the elections of the undivided state of Bihar were held merely six months before the formation of Jharkhand, it was decided that the party that won the constituencies falling under nw Jharkhand would be treated as the members of the State Assembly. Bharatiya Janata Party had a majority in this assembly since it had won a majority of the seats that would come under Jharkhand region. It was expected that Jharkhand Mukti Morcha, led by Shibu Soren would maximise electoral gains as evidenced by their performance in the Lok Sabha elections of 2004. The alliance seemed to be a powerful electoral force because of the presence of a strong leader in Shibu Soren. He was seen to be equally popular among Congress supporters apart from the traditional JMM supporters. Additionally, people credited JMM for the formation of the state of Jharkhand<sup>4</sup>.

However, their alliance with the Congress won only 26 seats. There were two major reasons attributed to the poor performance of the JMM-Congress alliance: (i) Intensive participation led to the fragmentation of votes, creating a political space with more political parties (ii) The alliance was not as united and cohesive as the opposition alliance between Janata Dal (United) And BJP. They had suffered electoral reverses in 2004 Lok Sabha elections when they contested individually. Jharkhand has had a tumultuous political history with 11 Chief Ministers in 22 years. Arjun Munda became the first Chief Minister of Jharkhand. In the same year, Babulal Marandi, the sole BJP contestant who won his seat in the 2004 Lok Sabha election, quit the party. He went on to form Jharkhand Vikas Morcha Prajatantrik (JVM-P)<sup>5</sup>.

After more than a year in power, he was replaced by Madhu Koda. Koda was an independent MLA who withdrew support from the BJP coalition. Koda lost power after losing the support of the JMM<sup>6</sup>. Koda was arrested in November 2009 due to corruption charges and was subsequently barred from contesting elections<sup>7</sup>. After a brief period of President's rule, BJP and JMM brokered an alliance with

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<sup>4</sup> Kumar, S. (2005). Jharkhand Assembly Elections 2005: Little Hope for the BJP. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 40(5), 346–349. JSTOR. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4416120>

<sup>5</sup> Kumar, S., & Rai, P. (2009). Shrinking Political Space for the Jharkhand Mukti Morcha.

<sup>6</sup> Yadav, S. (2024, November 19). Jharkhand: An electoral history. *The Indian Express*.

<sup>7</sup> Srivastava, A. (2024, November 2). What Madhu Koda's story of rise, fall and redemption mirrors. *India Today*.

Arjun Munda as Chief Minister and Hemant Soren as his deputy. After BJP's win in 2014, a non-tribal Chief Minister was installed for the first time. In the context of growing tribal consciousness, the installation of Raghubar Das (a non-tribal) as Chief Minister by the BJP was seen as an attempt to subvert tribal identity.

## Hindutva politics

Tribes have been considered to be a part of the Hindu fold by the Hindutva forces, they are often referred to as 'Backward Hindus.' Savarkar argued that the tribals who had been converted to Christianity had been denationalized. The antagonism towards Christianity in tribal-dominated regions was based on a two-pronged approach of depicting Christians as Westerners and restricting outside influences in the era of globalization. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Vishwa Hindu Parishad have strategically shaped their religious discourse to cater to the needs of the local population. Instead of adopting the *Jai Shree Ram* (Hail Lord Ram) slogan that brought them electoral success in the Hindi heartland, they strategically constructed temples of Lord Hanuman. Viewed as a primitive tribal who is subordinate to Ram fits well with the tribal discourse on religion<sup>8</sup>. The dominance of BJP notwithstanding the purported incompatibility between Adivasi identity and Hindu identity is based on multiple factors. The vast organizational capacity of the RSS has been used for the delivery of services such as health and education in the 'backward' Adivasi areas. They have also strategically exploited the rift between the Sarna (ancient Adivasi religion) and the Christian Adivasis<sup>9</sup>

## Centrality of JMM

Shibu Soren gained popularity through his '**Dhan Kato**' movement in the Santhal region to raise a voice against the exploitation of the moneylenders. The movement formally became Jharkhand Mukti Morcha in 1972 following the formation of Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha. This was also the time when Soren, AK Roy and Vinod Mahato (the founder of Shivaji Samaj) addressed a massive crowd in Dumri. Apart from the achievement of statehood for Jharkhand, JMM had two other primary objectives. Firstly, to end the tribal exploitation by non-tribal outsiders. Secondly, to free Jharkhandi society from inequality and poverty. Erstwhile South Bihar region was marred by low levels of education and alarmingly high levels of liquor consumption. These problems identified by JMM prompted the movement to take a leftist turn with the announcement of four programmes: anti-liquor campaign,

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<sup>8</sup> Singh, A. (2021). Saffronisation, Flag War and Hinduisation of Adivasis in Jharkhand. *Journal of Adivasi and Indigenous Studies*, XI(2), 2394–5524.

<sup>9</sup> Kumar, S. (2018). Adivasis and the State Politics in Jharkhand. *Studies in Indian Politics*, 6(1), 103–116. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2321023018762821>

literacy campaigns for children, rural grain banks and land recovery programmes. It was the last of the four programmes that created a bifurcation between the tribes and the dikus. It was in 1980 that Shibu Soren became the party's first elected representative in Lok Sabha<sup>10</sup>. Ideologically, the JMM's ideology has oscillated between the centre and left, occasionally negotiating with the conservative forces. Initially, the role played by Marxist trade unionists gave the party a leftward tilt. Electoral compulsions led to an alliance with the Congress in 1980. It was a mutually beneficial alliance wherein JMM had an opportunity to rise to national recognition. Similarly, the Congress was seen as a party sympathetic to the interests of the tribes. The Congress-JMM alliance has survived the test of time with Shibu Soren serving as Union coal minister for three terms. There were periods of turbulence in 2008 when JMM formed a strategic alliance with the BJP<sup>11</sup>.

## 2024 Assembly Elections

### Exit Poll Analysis

	<b>NDA</b>	<b>INDIA</b>	<b>Others</b>
Axis My India	17-27	49-59	1-6
PMARQ	31-40	37-47	1-6
Matrize	42-47	25-30	1-4
Chanakya Strategies	45-50	35-38	3-5
Times Now	40-44	30-40	0-1
Dainik Bhaskar	37-40	36-39	0-2
Actuals	24	56	1

<sup>10</sup> Bhattacharya, A. (2024, March 29). How JMM Changed Its Ideological Position From Left, Right To Centre. Outlook India.

<sup>11</sup> Raj, V. (2024, January 30). Tracing Jharkhand Mukti Morcha's Ideological Journey From Leftist Alliances To Coalition Dynamics. Outlook India.

#### **Figure 4. Seat Projections of various exit poll agencies**

The success of an exit poll can be measured on two grounds: seat share prediction and vote share prediction. Among the two variables, vote share can be predicted based on the representativeness of the sample. The basic premise of sampling is that the sample must be representative of the universe. In other words, if a polling agency's sample size is representative of the social composition, their accuracy in predicting vote share increases. However, the same cannot be said for seat share. Vote-seat conversion is a complex mathematical operation that takes into account multiple variables like concentration of votes and vote-seat multiplier. Despite the vote share being accurate, it is possible to make errors in the prediction of seats. For instance, if two parties get a similar vote share, but one party's vote share is evenly spread across constituencies. There is a possibility that the particular party might win a lower number of seats compared to the other party whose vote concentration enables it to gather more seats.

Times Now, Matrize and Chankaya Strategies predicted a majority for the NDA. Out of a total of 81 Assembly seats, these three exit polls projected a lower limit of 40 seats for the NDA. This implies that the NDA was projected to be in a position to form the government on its own. Another reliable exit pollster, CVoter projected that NDA will be able to form the government in Jharkhand. The polling agency only released predictions for 61 seats out of which it gave 34 to the NDA and 26 to the INDIA bloc. It called the remaining seats too close to call, but it gave the advantage to NDA in 18 of these seats. The vote share projections were 41.8% and 39.3% for BJP and Congress respectively. The vote share predictions proved to be way off the mark as the Congress managed to get close to 16% votes whereas the BJP stagnated at 33%<sup>12</sup>.

Axis MyIndia poll was the most accurate primarily due to its representative sample. The table below displays a comparison between the demographics of the sample selected and the actual universe. Apart from the representation of STs, the percentage of representation falls within the 2% margin of error. The poll had predicted vote shares of 45% and 37% for the INDIA and NDA respectively. This was extremely accurate as the INDIA and NDA got a vote share of 44.3% and 38.1% respectively. Apart from the statistical accuracy, the exit poll also predicted reasons for the pro-incumbency of the Soren government. Tribal consolidation behind the JMM and Maiya Samman Yojana were the two most important factors that helped the government retain power<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> India Today. (2024, November 20). Advantage NDA in Jharkhand, predicts C-Voter survey, 20 seats too close to call. India Today.

<sup>13</sup> Axis- MyIndia . (2024). ASSEMBLY ELECTION 2024 EXIT POLL -REPORT JHARKHAND 81 ACs.



Social Category	Actual Population (in %)	Sample used (in %)
SC	12.08	12
ST	21	26
Christians	4.03	5
Muslims	14.53	15
Rural	75	76
18-25 age group	17.3	16

**Figure 5. Social Group Representativeness in the Axis MyIndia sample**

### Welfare schemes

Various models of economic voting suggest that voters tend to reward the incumbent government for making positive contributions towards the economy. Multiple welfare policies have resonated with the voters due to their efficient delivery. The Hemant Soren-led government unveiled a comprehensive pension scheme in 2022 called the Sarvajan Pension Yojana. The number of pensioners in the state increased from 6 lakh to 40 lakh. The budget of 2023-24 allocated Rs. 3639 Crore for social security schemes, enabling it to cover 90% of the costs. In order to widen the scope of pension schemes, the government lowered the age limit to 50 years for beneficiaries who are Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes or Other Backward Classes<sup>14</sup>. The groups that face higher marginalisation, employment insecurity are prioritised through this policy. Unlike the Central Pension schemes, the Jharkhand policy does not fix any quota for the number of beneficiaries. This implies that any individual who meets the eligibility criteria can avail the policy’s benefits<sup>15</sup>. The government has increased the pension provided through the National Social Assistance Programme (NSAP) to Rs.1000 compared to Rs. 200 to Rs. 500 provided by the Central government. The government has also loosened the disability criteria in order to include differently abled individuals with disability level of 40% - 80%<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>14</sup> Ray, D. (2023, December 30). Now, SC, ST & OBCs in Jharkhand will get old-age pension at 50. The Times of India; Times Of India.

<sup>15</sup> Gupta, A. (2024, October 21). How Jharkhand’s pension scheme is transforming rural lives. Scroll.in.

<sup>16</sup> Abhishek, A. (2024a, October 25). Decode Politics: Why Congress is showcasing Jharkhand pension scheme as a “game changer.” The Indian Express.

Apart from the improvement in pension schemes, direct cash transfer to women voters played a major role in the incumbent government's impressive performance. The scheme, 'Jharkhand Mukhyamantri Maiya Samman Yojana' was seen as an electoral necessity in a political environment where 14 states have similar policies for women<sup>17</sup>. The reason behind a revival of interest in the 'woman constituency' is their increasing participation in the public sphere. This is not to downplay the socio-institutional factors that hinder their participation. The biggest advantage of Direct Cash Transfers is that they help in establishing a direct relationship between the leader and citizens. Additionally, such clientelist measures have immediate positive impact on the client i.e the voter, unlike the long term impact of infrastructure policies<sup>18</sup>. The scheme offered an enticing sum of Rs. 2500 per month to all women between the ages of 18 and 50. This was not the only factor responsible for pulling women voters towards JMM. The emergence of Kalpana Soren as a leader accessible to women voters played a crucial role in mobilizing them<sup>19</sup>. The enthusiasm among the women voters can be seen through the turnout figures. Election Commission data reveals that the number of women voters increased by 2.5 lakh during the six month gap between Lok Sabha and Assembly elections. This was higher than the absolute increases by 17,777 among male voters. In terms of total number of voters, the women outnumbered men by more than 6 lakh<sup>20</sup>

## Impact of Outsiders rhetoric

BJP's primary poll plank was to safeguard the local electorate from Bangladeshi infiltration. JMM's Adivasi-Muslim vote bank constitutes a solid 41% of the population. The rhetoric against infiltrators was seen as an attempt to turn the 26% tribal population against the Muslims, thereby breaking into JMMs vote bank<sup>21</sup>. The BJP communalised the emotive issue of land rights. It claimed that the infiltrators benefited from selling tribal lands. The rhetoric of 'land jihad' was seen as an attempt to saffronise land rights issues. Chief Minister of Assam, who is known for his divisive rhetoric in his own

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<sup>17</sup> Mishra, A. (2024, November 23). Jharkhand Election Results 2024: JMM-Congress Alliance Wins Two-thirds Majority, BJP's Fear Mongering Politics Fails. *Frontline*.

<sup>18</sup> Nair, A. (2024, December 4). Cash transfer schemes for women as new poll plank. *The Hindu*.

<sup>19</sup> Ghosh, R. (2024, December). Jharkhand election shows how women are shaping politics. But is that enough? *The Indian Express*.

<sup>20</sup> Abhishek, A, & Anand, J. (2024, November 26). Between LS and Assembly polls in Jharkhand, surge in women coming out to vote. *The Indian Express*.

<sup>21</sup> Srivastava, A. (2024, November 19). Why "Bangladeshi influx" resonated in Jharkhand in run-up to November 20 polling. *India Today*.

stead spearheaded the 'Roti, beti aur mati' campaign in Jharkhand. Promises on tribal autonomy were made by BJP MP, Nishank Dubey. He proposed carving a new region comprising Santhal Parganas, Malda and Murshidabad of Bengal and Seemanchal districts of Bihar<sup>22</sup>.

The rhetoric stemmed from a dispute between a Muslim and Adivasi family in Pakur wherein both parties have evidence of land records from 1932. In a radical departure from its traditional rhetoric against Christians, this time it painted Muslims as Dikus<sup>23</sup>. A fact-finding report by Jharkhand Janadhikar instigated into the cases of violence by alleged Bangladeshi infiltrators. The report revealed that the alleged cases of violence by infiltrators were infact local disputes.

Paying little heed to the situation on the ground where people openly discarded the infiltration narrative.

## Incarceration of Hemant Soren

The Enforcement Directorate (ED) had been investigating various cases in Jharkhand before elections: Illegal mining scam, MGNERGA irregularities and the alleged illegal sale & purchase of Army plots. It was in connection with the Army land misappropriation case in which Hemant Soren was arrested. The ED claimed that a revenue sub-inspector, Bhanu Pratap Prasad was involved in falsifying government records. Prasad possessed multiple property registers known as Punji 2 in which land records were falsified. Hemant Soren was allegedly involved in illegally acquiring land. Soren's response stated that the land in question was Bhuinhari land, which was under the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act. The act stated that Bhuinhari land cannot be sold or alienated in any manner<sup>24</sup>. His arrest made him the third Chief Minister of the state to be arrested after Madhu Koda and Shibu Soren. He tendered his resignation before his arrest, passing the baton to his wife, Kalpana Soren. His popularity as a Chief Ministerial candidate was unparalleled. A survey by DALES revealed that nearly half of its respondents wanted Soren to become the state's next Chief Minister. His nearest contender, Babu Lal Marandi was the first choice Chief Ministerial candidate of only 18% of the respondents<sup>25</sup>. There were two competing sympathy appeals in the elections. The BJP rallied around the emotional issue of Champai Soren's removal as Chief Minister. Learning from its mistake of making a non-tribal (Raghubar Das) as

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<sup>22</sup> Kumar, A. (2024, July 30). Jharkhand Elections: Illegal Immigration From Bangladesh Becomes A Key Issue For BJP As INDI Alliance Bets On Anti-Bihari Rhetoric. Swarajya by Kovai Media Private Limited.

<sup>23</sup> Agha, E. (2024, November 22). Amid the rhetoric of land jihad, concerns over land rights persist in Jharkhand. Caravanmagazine.in; The Caravan.

<sup>24</sup> Abhishek, A. (2024, March 10). What is the 8.5-acre land case in which Hemant Soren was arrested, what is he accused of. The Indian Express.

<sup>25</sup> Ranjan, A. (2024, December 10). Jharkhand Assembly Election 2024 Analysis: How Hemant Soren-led JMM Cemented INDIA Bloc's Significant Win. Frontline.

the face of the campaign, the BJP placed its bets on Champai Soren to make inroads for them in tribal dominated Kolhan division<sup>26</sup>.

## Results

### Role of JKLM and other smaller parties

Jairam Mahto-led Jharkhand Loktantrik Krantikari Morcha (JKLM) had an electoral impact in seats dominated by Kudmi Mahto community. Jairam Mahto is popularly referred to as ‘Tiger Jairam’ due to his role in the protests against the inclusion of languages like Bhojpuri, Magahi and Angika in state-level examinations. He was successful in reversing language policy in three districts to favour local residents<sup>27</sup>. Despite winning only one seat, they managed to disrupt the electoral dynamics of Kudmi dominated regions of Dhanbad, Giridih, Ramgarh, Ranchi and Bokaro. Jairam Mahto won JKLM’s only seat, Dumri by defeating JMM’s Bebi Devi. In constituencies like Silli, Ramgarh and Bermo JKLM split the vote bank. This ultimately dented the electoral prospects of the BJP<sup>28</sup>

The All Jharkhand Students Union was born out of the movement that demanded statehood for Jharkhand. The party has not enjoyed electoral fortunes since 2005, winning only 2 seats. Its best performance was in 2009 and 2014 when it won 5 seats<sup>29</sup>. In 2019 Assembly elections, the failure of a seat-sharing agreement handed the National Democratic Alliance a defeat. AJSU reduced BJP’s vote share in at least 5 seats where it emerged as a runner-up and BJP finished third<sup>30</sup>. In the 2024 elections, the party only managed to secure a solitary seat. The left front made their electoral presence felt in the Sindri and Nirsa seats. The left front became a formidable force due to the merger of the Marxist Coordination Committee and the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist). The two parties merged during the Ekta rally in Dhanbad. Despite, Sindri being a BJP bastion for the last two decades, the left front managed to secure the seat in this election along with Nirsa<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>26</sup> Mishra, A. (2024b, December 8). JMM’s Victory in Jharkhand: Tribal Trust, Welfare Schemes, and BJP’s Failed Attempt of Polarisation. Frontline.

<sup>27</sup> Mukherjee, V. (2024, November 22). Who is “tiger” Jairam Mahato? What does his new party mean for Jharkhand? @Bsindia; Business Standard.

<sup>28</sup> Kumar, S. (2024, November 24). How Jairam Mahto’s JKLM emerged as game-changer in Jharkhand Assembly polls. India Today.

<sup>29</sup> Rehman, A. (2024, November 8). Born out of Jharkhand movement, BJP ally AJSU looks to make a splash in polls. The Indian Express.

<sup>30</sup> Tiwari, A. (2024, October 23). Opinion: How BJP-AJSU alliance could be a game-changer in Jharkhand. India Today.

<sup>31</sup> Dasgupta, S. (2024). Ground Report | Can Left Unity in Jharkhand Dent BJP’s Sindri-Nirsa Stronghold? The Wire.

# Demography and vote banks

## Demographic divisions of the state

Historical trends reveal that the BJP has a stronger electoral presence in urban areas. The 2014 and 2019 saw a massive jump in BJP's vote share among rural voters. Despite this jump, its vote share in peri-urban and urban areas remained higher than its vote share in rural areas<sup>32</sup>. In urban areas like East Jamshedpur, Dhanbad, Ranchi and Hazaribagh, BJP is still a dominant force.

There are five electorally significant groups in Jharkhand: Kolhan, Santhal Pargana, North Chotanagpur, South Chotanagpur and Palamu. Out of the 14 seats in the region, 9 are reserved for the Scheduled Tribes.

### Kolhan Region

Kolhan region has given the state four chief ministers including Arjun Munda, Madhu Koda, Champai Soren and Das<sup>33</sup>. BJP could not get a single seat in Kolhan in the 2019 Assembly elections. Champai Soren was inducted by the BJP in 2024 to bolster its chances<sup>34</sup>. The BJP has changed all its 10 candidates in the region compared to previous elections. Those who have been fielded include former union minister for Tribal Affairs Arjun Munda's wife Meera Munda, Purnima Das Sahu who is the daughter-in-law of former Chief Minister CM Raghubar Das and Champai Soren's son<sup>35</sup>. Mr. Modi, realising the importance of the region has flagged off six Vande Bharat trains.

### Santhal Pargana

It is the region that borders West Bengal. Out of 18 seats in the region, 7 are reserved for STs and 1 for SCs. BJP, in the past two election cycles has not managed to make inroads in the region<sup>36</sup>. The Central government told a bench of Jharkhand High Court that there has been demographic changes in the

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<sup>32</sup> Jaffrelot, C., & Kumar, S. (2015). The Impact of Urbanization on the Electoral Results of the 2014 Indian Elections: With Special Reference to the BJP Vote. *Studies in Indian Politics*, 3(1), 39–49. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2321023015575212>

<sup>33</sup> Bhelari, A. (2024, November 3). Kolhan region set to decide the BJP's fate in Jharkhand poll. *The Hindu*.

<sup>34</sup> Mathew, L., & Abhishek, A. (2024, November 10). Facing a tough battle in Kolhan, BJP banks on women, OBCs; JMM rides on tribal base. *The Indian Express*.

<sup>35</sup> Abhishek, A. (2024, October 28). Routed in 2019, how BJP is trying to regain ground in Jharkhand's Kolhan belt. *The Indian Express*.

<sup>36</sup> Ranjan, M. (2024, November 24). Infiltration pitch falls flat, BJP wins 1 seat in Santhal Pargana. *The New Indian Express*.

region due to infiltration<sup>37</sup>. An affidavit was submitted to the High Court that the infiltrators must not be allowed to vote. The National Commission for Scheduled Tribes' report on demographic changes revealed that Bangladeshi migrants caused it. Examples of tribal sacred land i.e **Johar Sthan** are being converted into Muslim cemeteries, for instance, the conversion in Pakur and Sahibganj districts<sup>38</sup>. In the 2024 Assembly elections, the BJP only won a solitary seat in the Santhal Pargana region. More concerningly, their vote share decreased in 6 seats that it contested<sup>39</sup>.

The amendments made to the **Chotangpur Tenancy Act** and the Santhal Parganas Tenancy Act by the Das government in 2017 caused fear among the local inhabitants. The essence of both the laws is to place restrictions on the transfer of Adivasi land to non-Adivasis. The amendment eased the transfer of land for developmental purposes like building canals, railways or highways. The change in purpose of these lands from agricultural to non-agricultural opened the floodgates for violations. This became a central issue because it was in violation of their preliminary demands of autonomy over their land and culture. These amendments caused major electoral setbacks for the BJP among the tribes especially in the Pargana region<sup>40</sup>.

## Important Social Groups

### Sarnas

Sarna identity includes Santhal, Munda, Oraon and Ho tribes. Water, jungle and land are the three core aspects of the Sarna faith<sup>41</sup>. JMM entered the polls demanding a separate religious code for the Sarna tribes. The BJP has echoed the demand, albeit for different reasons. The support for a separate Sarna code is a means to protect the tribes against the Christians<sup>42</sup>. Proponents of the separate code argue that it is key to preserving their distinct tradition of nature worship. The ideological

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<sup>37</sup> Lakshman, A. (2024, September 13). Infiltration has taken place in Santhal Pargana, Jharkhand govt support "less than expected": Centre in HC. *The Hindu*.

<sup>38</sup> Lakshman, A. (2024, October 12). In report on Santhal Pargana, NCST says NGOs should be roped in to deal with "Bangladeshi infiltration." *The Hindu*.

<sup>39</sup> Verma, L. (2024, November 25). No takers for BJP's "infiltration" narrative in Jharkhand's Santhal Pargana, party reduced to 1 seat. *The Indian Express*.

<sup>40</sup> Yadav, A. (2017, February 17). In Jharkhand, Adivasis say changes to tenancy laws dilute their hard-won land rights. *Scroll.in*.

<sup>41</sup> Sinha, N. (2024, June 29). Census code for Sarna faith — why Jharkhand CM Champai Soren is raising tribal demand ahead of polls. *ThePrint*; *theprint*.

<sup>42</sup> Halder, C. (2024, November 29). Sarna to secure tribal ethos? *Deccan Herald*.

inconsistency of the Sarna and BJP's core tenets made tribal voters vary of the party. BJP's longstanding position has been that tribals can be seen as Jains or Buddhists at the most. Their argument is that the 'vanvasis' must be incorporated into the hindu fold and they must visit temples<sup>43</sup>. The Soren-led government had earlier passed the Jharkhand Definition of Local Persons and for Extending the Consequential Social, Cultural and Other Benefits to such Local Persons Bill. It sought to use the 1932 land survey to decide the domicile and employment policy. Despite being passed by the Assembly, it was returned by the Governor's office twice. The bill, widely considered as the central government opposed tribe-centric<sup>44</sup>.

## Kurmis

The Kurmi community makes up around 15% of the population<sup>45</sup>. It has held political sway in Dhanbad, Ranchi, Ramgarh and Bokaro. JKLM and AJSU have Kurmis as their core OBC voter base, causing a fragmentation of Kurmi vote. Ironically, neither of the parties was able to secure a good number of seats. Only JKLM's leader, Jairam Mahto was able to secure his Dumri seat. AJSU's popular leader Sudesh Mahto could not win his constituency. The fragmentation of Kurmi vote benefited established parties like JMM<sup>46</sup>.

## Conclusion

Elections in Jharkhand occur in a unique political context in which the tribal identity and demands are at significant to winning elections in the state. In Assembly elections, the BJP and JMM have alternated positions of power. Despite purported ideological incongruence with the Adivasi demands, the BJP has been a force to reckon with in Jharkhand. However, JMM managed to defeat anti-incumbency to form the government in the 2024 Assembly elections. There were three primary reasons for their victory: (i) Hemant Soren rode the sympathy wave that followed his incarceration by the Enforcement Directorate (ii) The outsider rhetoric of the BJP did not resonate with the tribal voters (iii) Welfare schemes by JMM enjoyed delivery success vis-a-vis different categories of voters. Apart from these reasons, social identity and sub-region also played an important role in deciding the

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<sup>43</sup> Dhingra, S. (2024, November 4). Why Amit Shah's messaging on Sarna code for tribals is a departure from RSS's long-standing position. ThePrint; theprint.

<sup>44</sup> Dasgupta, S. (2024). 1932 Khatiyas, Sarna Dharma Code, Increased Financial Aid to Women in INDIA's Jharkhand Guarantees. The Wire.

<sup>45</sup> Abhishek, A. (2024, November 24). Tale of Jharkhand's two Kudmi leaders: Jairam Mahato's rise dents NDA, BJP ally Sudesh Mahto falters. The Indian Express.

<sup>46</sup> Jharkhand Story. (2024, November 26). Split in Kurmi community weakens its political impact in Jharkhand - The Jharkhand Story. The Jharkhand Story.

verdict. For instance, the BJP showed paltry returns in the Santhal Pargana region dominated by the tribals. Laws like the Chotanagpur Tenancy Act alienated the tribal voters even more.

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