

CASE STUDY

Scheduled Caste Perception Study

A qualitative deep dive into thirteen communities, nine states and one administrative category that does not hold.

320	respondents, focus-group led
13	Scheduled Caste communities
16	locations across nine states
9	modules of enquiry

January – February 2024

Political strategy · Socio-cultural research · Policy input

Foreword & Context

Historically, Indian political strategy, media commentary, and high-level polling have lazily treated the Scheduled Caste (SC) vote as a single, massive, homogenous bloc, analyzed almost exclusively through aggregate national survey data. In the months preceding a major national election, we executed an unprecedented qualitative deep dive to test if this monolithic picture actually held up against the lived reality of these communities.

We traveled to the extreme margins of the country – shanties situated dangerously along railway tracks, isolated wasteland settlements on the absolute edges of villages – across the length and breadth of India. The reality we uncovered was undeniable: 'Scheduled Caste' is merely an administrative category, not a unified political constituency. Each of the thirteen communities we studied was a universe unto itself, possessing its own highly specific grievances, its own local heroes, and its own complex politics. Treating them as a single bloc is not just a simplification; it is a fatal strategic error.

The Mandate

At the time of the study, the client required a granular, empathetic understanding of how these communities actually lived and felt, bypassing high-level polling aggregations. The fieldwork was driven by three core pillars:

01 Economic Reality

Uncovering what these households actually survive on daily and the specific, crushing financial pressures they face.

02 Leadership Perception

Determining how they truly view the major national parties, the people leading them, and the local figures representing them.

03 Issue Alignment

Establishing exactly where they stand on the highly contested, polarizing issues dominating the national campaign.

Methodological Framework

The scale and depth of the qualitative undertaking was massive, designed to capture nuance that surveys miss:

01 Sample

320 deeply engaged respondents via heavily moderated, localized focus groups.

02 Diversity

13 highly distinct SC communities selected explicitly for their regional and political uniqueness rather than sheer population size.

03 Footprint

16 hyper-specific locations spanning 9 states across North, West, Central, and South India.

04 Urbanity Split

Carefully balanced to reflect reality across semi-rural (43.8%), rural (37.5%), and urban (18.8%) environments.

05 Structure

9 exhaustive modules covering political overview, leaders, inflation, unemployment, utilities, welfare schemes, religious identity, caste discrimination, and local caste politics.

Analytical Moves

01 Preserving Absolute Intersectionality

We categorically refused to collapse the data into a single 'SC voter' average. A Jatav respondent in Saharanpur was never treated as standing in for a Madiga respondent in Warangal. Geography, caste, and urbanity were held together throughout the entire analysis, ensuring every insight remained grounded in its specific reality.

02 Analyzing Distribution Curves Over Averages

Headline approval ratings were deemed useless. Two leaders might both poll around 60%, but we looked at the shape of the curves. One leader had highly polarized ratings (extreme love or extreme hate, with no middle ground), while another sat entirely in the moderate middle. A leader driving visceral polarization occupies a completely different place in the mind and requires a vastly different campaign strategy than one generating mild apathy.

03 Tracing the Metaphors of Hostility

We grouped recurring hostile and favorable perceptions into distinct typologies. When voters described a leader vividly as a 'mad elephant loose in the fields,' we didn't just log the negativity; we traced the metaphor back to the specific policy failure or cultural belief that birthed it.

04 Separating Volume from Breadth

We strictly isolated loud, localized grievances driven by committed partisans (often traveling through rumor) from quieter, widespread structural complaints shared even by government supporters. Treating reach and intensity as the same thing leads campaigns to waste massive resources appeasing a tiny, noisy minority.

05 The Lived Reality of Welfare Delivery

We evaluated flagship welfare schemes not by mere eligibility on paper, but by lived experience. We discovered that variables like landlessness entirely dictated whether a massive government scheme felt like a blessing from the state, or just another corrupt system built for other people.

Strategic Architecture & Outcomes

The study directly re-engineered the client's campaign execution, shifting them from broad strokes to surgical precision:

- **Micro-Positioning at the Community Level**

We provided the intelligence required to drop generic national messaging. The study made it visible that a single national message might work perfectly in one community but actively offend the next. Strategy was shifted to highly targeted, community-specific appeals.

- **Media Pipeline Mapping by Job**

We identified exactly which surfaces carried which perceptions. Mass media, closed digital networks (WhatsApp), and on-ground engagement were separated into three distinct tools with different roles, allowing the client to match the exact perception to the surface it travels on.

- **Policy Feedback Loop vs. Communication**

We transformed raw socio-economic complaints into actionable policy briefs. The study emphasized that in many locations, anger was directed squarely at the local village pradhan for delivery breakdowns, not the national leader. This proved that sometimes the answer isn't a better political ad, but an actual fix in grassroots administrative delivery.

- **Filling the Explainer Vacuum**

We identified a critical, structural gap in the information ecosystem across these communities – they lacked a trusted, non-partisan 'explainer' figure to demystify complex issues and counter dark-social rumors. The client could immediately adjust their media strategy to fill this void with calm, authoritative content rather than just campaign rhetoric.