

CANDIDATE PREVAILS OVER PARTY FOR MUSLIMS OF UTTAR PRADESH

In post-Ram Mandir context, Muslims with 19.3% of state population hold the key to Lucknow in 2017. Primarily, there are two parallel electoral arithmetic, namely, their alignment with Dalits (Dalit-Muslim combination) and Yadavs (Muslim-Yadav alliance) that needs to be explored to gauge the potential Muslim voting trend in the ensuing Assembly election in Uttar Pradesh, which in turn, will decide the two main contestants from among the widely perceived triangular contest among BSP, BJP and SP.

A fieldwork among the Muslims of Uttar Pradesh, concluded just before the multi-faceted expulsion drama in ruling SP unfolded, provided some glimpses into and important insight about, the ongoing Muslim electoral articulation for the coming state election.

The combination of three factors, the perceptual fluidity about the dominance of respective parties, the tenuous reasoning about the non-Muslim support base of BSP and SP and the candidate profile of three political parties in respective constituencies, are constituting the layered Muslim mindset vis a vis their political preference, wherein, an overwhelming majority of them are willing to wait till the final declaration of candidates by all the relevant political parties, namely, BSP, BJP and SP.

Objectively, the popular perception of a positive correlation between Muslim vote and Samajwadi Party on account of latter's political articulations and focused policies still hold the ground among majority of Muslims- a factor, compounded by immensely positive image of Akhilesh Yadav. However, as the qualitative and non-statistical electoral wisdom goes, the appreciation of a party and leader must not be treated as a positive vote for the same. If one asks the Muslims about the desirability of a party forming the next state government, incumbent Samajwadi Party, unambiguously emerges as the most preferred option.

However, the moment the Muslim respondents are asked about their subjective preference, multiple factors like assembly constituency level demographic composition, the candidate profile, the knowledge of the shifting social base of core voters of various candidates, the permutations and combinations of perceived floating voters, emerge as the superseding electoral determinant of possible Muslim voting clouding the edge that Samajwadi Party enjoys in their objective perception. This gap between 'subjective' and 'objective' response of the Muslims coming from their desired political choice and context specific actual electoral choice, is something that most of the 'closed questionnaire and quantitative survey based' election surveys tend to miss, leading to projecting the 'objective' response of the Muslim electorates, wherein Samajwadi Party tend to get over-represented at the cost of BSP. On the other hand, a narrative method based field study despite limited sample size has the cognitive advantage to delve deeper into and decipher the fluid, complicated and layered articulations of the respondents as here, besides capturing the socio-political response, the interpretative method is simultaneously employed by the interviewer.

Muslims Preference for Parties in UP Elections

Party	1996	1998	1999	2002	2004	2007	2009	2012	2014
SP	79	75	37	62.5	47	45	30	39	58
BJP	4	8	11	9.6	3	3	6	7	10
BSP	6	6	4	9.0	9	17	18	20	18
Cong	9	10	37	7.1	15	14	25	18	11

Source: National election study, Conducted by CSDS – Lokniti

Thus, the fieldwork revealed that across the state, the Muslims, divided sociologically, along the lines of sects (Devbandi and Barelvi; Shia and Sunni) and castes (Ashraf and Pasmada), are also divided in their politico-electoral preferences and yet united in one way, that is, voting for a non-BJP party- something that differs from region to region and constituency to constituency. Therefore, the crucial question whether Muslims in general would give more weightage to a ‘party’ or a ‘candidate’ in the ensuing Assembly election could be reasonably settled in favour of the latter. It’s the ‘candidate factor’ that would matter the most for the Muslims for the coming election. Further, the candidate has to be from two parties, namely Samajvadi Party and BSP and despite the sympathetic outlook of Muslims towards Congress Party, their candidates, barring rare exceptions, doesn’t fare a chance in their electoral calculations on account of the lack of their ‘winnability factor’.

The essence of this dominant electoral articulation among Muslims was captured in the responses of two respondents, a Yadav and a Muslim at Orai and Breilly when asked about the expected electoral preference of the Muslims wherein the former, using ‘Hinglish’ gave an experiential formulaic remark, “Jiska Danda High Wahi Bada Bhai” (Muslims would vote for a non-BJP party expected to win); while the latter remarked, “ hum BSP aur SP me 10 wale ko support karenge na ki 5 wale ko taki humara vote unko jeeta sake” (In between SP and BSP we’ll support the candidate that enjoys the bigger support so that our vote leads to their victory).

Here, it must be noted that Muslims in general are not only preferring candidate over party between BSP and SP, but also opining for a positive vote to ensure the winnability of a candidate rather than negative vote with the view to make BJP defeated. Hence, it could be inferred that Muslims are voting in strategic manner by opting for non-BJP party but the nature of the same is ‘positive’ rather than ‘negative’.

Besides the traditional refrain of Muslims from BJP, there have been additional factors making Muslims not preferring for BJP for the coming election despite the developmental rhetoric of the latter. Here, besides the colossal rise in the instances of communal issues like ‘cow vigilantism, ‘love-jihad’, ‘low-intensity riots’, the issue of ‘Triple Talaq’ has convinced Muslims about the hostility of BJP towards the community and an overwhelming majority of the Muslims respondents see the raising of the issue as an interference into the internal matter of the community. In fact, an old Muslim respondent at Amethi gave a slippery slope remark, “BJP Aaj Talak pe Faisala Kar Rahi Hia, Kal ye Namaaz pe Faisala Kareng” (Today BJP is deciding upon Talaq issue, tomorrow they will decide upon Namaaz). Similarly, in Poorvanchal region at Gazipur, sitting in a group, a Muslim had a witty take on the issue when he wittily remarked, “Dilli ki Janata ne BJP ko Dilli me pehla Talaq dia, Dusra Talaq BJP ko Bihar ki Janata ne Dia aur Teesra Talaq UP ki Janata degi” (BJP got its first divorce by the voters of Delhi, second divorce by that of Bihar and it will get its final and third divorce by the voters of UP).

In this backdrop, the crucial question as to which party will be the biggest beneficiary of ‘candidate and winnability’ centric Muslim electoral articulation in the coming election could be seen as veering, a significant majority of the community’s vote, towards BSP from SP on account of two factors- a. BSP has fielded more Muslim candidates (about 100) than SP and second, the intense consolidation of Dalits behind party and the knowledge of same among others will give a perceptual advantage to the winability of BSP candidates affecting the Muslim electoral response. Thus, compared to 2012 Assembly election as shown in the table, in absolute terms BSP’s gain of Muslim votes would be direct loss of SP even if latter end up getting relatively more Muslim vote. Hence, the bottom-line of Muslim electoral choice in the coming election would be the primacy of candidate’s winnability in respective constituencies over party placing BSP in an advantageous position.