

WHY SHAHEEN BAGH WON'T HELP BJP IN DELHI ELECTION?

As Delhi with just seventy assembly constituencies would witness its 7th state election on 8th February 2020, entire India would be keenly awaiting the political fate of two prime contenders, AAP and the BJP. Since December 2019, the Shaheen Bagh has emerged as the proverbial epicenter of anti-CAA protests, primarily by the Muslim women, leading to the emergence of a contested and polarized public opinion on the same. The fact, that BJP since 23rd January 2020 launched an intense electoral campaign under the leadership of Amit Shah to decimate incumbent AAP's early campaign advantage by aiming to change the dominant electoral narrative from the local issues pertaining to *electricity, water, education, health and public transportation* to national issues like *NRC-CAA and national-security*, has left everyone speculating about the possible bearing of Shaheen Bagh on voters' choice.

While there is a general consensus that until recently AAP had a smooth ride, the becoming of Shaheen Bagh as the central pitch just two weeks before the election, has generated a perception that BJP is fast gaining the ground at the expense of AAP.

However, our field study suggests that AAP would comfortably make a comeback on account of five interrelated factors, the polarized opinion of Delhi-electorates on Shaheen Bagh protest notwithstanding.

First, it's pertinent to remember that Delhi's electorates have always privileged local-material issues over national-cultural ones in state assembly election starting with BJP losing power in 1998 on the issue of soaring onion prices. Thereafter, Congress under the strong leadership of Sheila Dikshit ruled for 15 years until 2013 on account of two factors: pro-poor posturing for the Poor and big infrastructural development like flyovers, metro, CNG etc. to sway the middle class. On the other hand, as a study of Delhi by one of the author in 2012 in the wake of Anna movement revealed, BJP in that period was perceived to be pro-rich and more concerned with national issues.

Second, augmenting the above trend, last one and a half decade proves the Delhi electorates as the champion of a differential voting for different elections, namely, national (Lok Sabha), regional (State Assembly) and local (MCD). For instance, BJP is out of power in Delhi assembly for the last 22 years, but it has been dominating coveted MCD elections since 2007 with a huge margin. Similarly, after rewarding all the seven seats to BJP in 2014, the party witnessed a shocking defeat in 2015 at the hands of AAP only to relegate the later to humiliating 3rd position in 2019 Lok Sabha election. The main causality for this has been an overarching consensus that national issues are for Lok Sabha elections while state elections would be dominated by regional and local concerns. ***It would do well to remember that 2020 wouldn't be the first state election in Delhi to be dominated by an emotive national issue. Back in 2008, Delhi witnessed state election when India was shocked as 10 terrorists of Pakistan based Lashkar-e-Taiba, carried out 12 coordinated shooting and bombing attacks lasting four days across Mumbai.*** In fact, on the day of Delhi polling, i.e, 29th November 2008, the attack was still going on. Predictably, the national mood was swayed by the security-issues and Congress was perceived being soft on national-security front. BJP had lost no opportunity to put Congress on defensive and yet, Delhi voters rewarded Congress with its third successive victory.

Third, demographic structure of Delhi wherein 76% of the city dwells in informal colonies, around 50% population residing in *Jhuggi Bastis, Unauthorized Colonies* and *Notified Slum Areas (Katras)*, the poor and lower middle class and their everyday struggle with access to basic amenities like water, electricity, sewerage, primary health, public transportation, quality of education in government fee-structure in private schools respectively are bound to be swayed more by local-material issues than national-cultural matters as far as state elections are concerned. At this juncture AAP enjoys a huge perception-advantage on this front, making BJP's attempt to privilege Shaheen Bagh as the central electoral determinant a quite difficult prospect.

Fourth, BJP faces another hurdle w.r.t the crisis of its core voters in Delhi on account of it not only being lagging demographically behind Congress until 2013 and AAP thereafter, but also due to its inability to keep them consolidated in state assembly elections. In the last two decades, it emerged that the core of BJP's social base came from three caste/communities, namely Punjabis, Baniyas and Jats while Congress enjoyed the major support of migrant electorates, slum-dwellers, Muslims and Gujjars. By 2013, not only did AAP succeed in capturing almost entire social base of the Congress but also managed to get a slice of BJP's committed core voters.

Our field study categorically points out that in present election, AAP's support is emanating from three set of voters: one, its own core support base which it captured from Congress in 2013 and 2015, two, the shift of a section of remaining Congress voters' given party's perceived electoral insignificance and three, a section of BJP's core voters who are driven by the logic that '*Modi is good for the country while Kejriwal is good for Delhi*'. It is the shift of this third category that BJP is more concerned about.

However, if media reports are to be believed, BJP's strategy of treating the established practice of Delhi electorates voting for different parties in Lok Sabha, State Assembly and MCD elections since 1998 as a sign of the city having around 25% floating voters, i.e, non-committed ones, based on their calculation of difference between AAP's and it's won vote share in 2015 assembly election and 2019 Lok Sabha election, not only fails to take a much longer history of these voting percent differences, but also doesn't factor-in the primereason behind these shifts as discussed above, besides completely overlooking the MCD election trendsout of their purview. In fact, a historical and issue-based observation would reveal that what BJP strategists may call as floating-cum-undecided voters happen to be the electorates who are well articulate about their differential voting pattern. Hence, an overarching majority of this 25% electorates are the most articulate ones with strong reason to vote for AAP in 2020 after they voted to BJP in 2019.

Last but not the least, why Shaheen Bagh would fail to cut ice for BJP is the state level leadership factor. To appeal to the largest voting bloc of *Poorvanchali migrants* BJP appointed popular Bhojpuri singer Manoj Tiwari as state president in November 2016. While BJP swept North-West, North-East and East Delhi Lok Sabha constituencies having sizeable presence of migrant voters, the reason was Modi's wave than Manoj Tiwari's appeal. He has failed to deliver his supposed constituency for three reasons now: one, more than half of the migrant electorates are poor residing in *Jhuggi Bastis, Unauthorized Colonies* and *Notified Slum Areas*, making them biggest beneficiaries of AAP governments welfare measures. Two, while BJP has a poorvanchali face as its state president, the party is still giving more tickets to local communities and old settlers than AAP. For instance, out of 70 BJP has fielded more 'Jat-Gujjar-Punjabi' and less *poorvanchali* candidates than AAP, thereby neutralizing the desired advantage of state level face at the constituency level. Third, a section of non-poorvanchali BJP voters are not enthused by Manoj Tiwari heading the party. In this backdrop, it's reasonable to infer, that while Shaheen Bagh would make most of the electoral noise, AAP would be getting a bigger support silently.

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