

Mim and the rise of muslim identity politics



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The 2014 Maharashtra Legislative Assembly elections were perhaps one of the most interesting electoral experiments in recent history. The 15 year old Congress-NCP alliance and the 25 year old Shiv Sena-BJP alliance came to an end and the four parties contested elections on their own. While the results of the elections didn't come as a surprise to any of the four parties, the success of one party has attracted massive media attention, albeit alarmist.

Making its debut in Maharashtra, the Hyderabad based All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (MIM) won 2 seats in the 288-member assembly, grabbing a 0.9% share of votes. Waris Pathan won the Byculla assembly seat by a narrow margin of 1,357 votes, beating rivals Madhu Chavan of the Bharatiya Janta Party (BJP) and Geeta Gawli of the Akhil Bharatiya Sena (ABS). However, MIM sprung a major surprise in the Aurangabad Central seat, where its candidate, former NDTV journalist Imtiaz Jaleel defeated sitting Shiv Sena MLA Pradeep Jaiswal by 19,982 votes. It also lost three seats by a narrow margin and finished third in nine constituencies. Overall, MIM polled over 5.13 lakh votes, even though it fielded, in many cases, political novices. The party also cut into the traditional vote banks of the Congress, the NCP and managed to wrest control of some areas where the BJP was believed to be strong.

Buoyed by the victory, MIM president Asaduddin Owasi is planning to expand the party base in the state. The MIM has decided to contest all municipal elections in the state, including the BMC election in 2017 and the Aurangabad municipal election in 2015. It already has 13 corporators in the

Nanded-Waghala Municipal Corporation. Plans are also afoot to expand in Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal and Karnataka.

The MIM's victory can be attributed to two main factors, the division of votes in other parties and the polarization of the Muslim votes. With the BJP led by Narendra Modi sweeping to victory after winning elections across India, the delicate balance between the country's religious and ethnic minorities, and especially its Muslims, and the majority Hindu population is shifting. MIM fed off the growing feeling of political disempowerment among Muslims and the disenchantment with the Congress, a party which traditionally received the bulk of the Muslim vote. The vitriolic speeches of the Owaisi brothers, with fervent appeals to Allah and claims of Muslim victimhood contributed to the polarization. Clips of Akbaruddin Owaisi were widely circulated on WhatsApp, and the Muslim youth who are wary of the hysteria surrounding Narendra Modi were attracted to them (Lokhande, 2014).

Thus the MIM's victory is a combined result of Muslims being fed up of the token secularism of the Congress and the indifference and alienation by the BJP. India's Muslims are at crossroads today. Before delving into the politics of the MIM, it is important to understand the state of India's largest minority community.

India's Muslims

Muslims make up about 14.4 percent of India's total population. However, according to a 2013 report by the Pew Research Center, the country maintains "the world's second-largest Muslim population in raw numbers (roughly 176 million)." Often referred to as "the lost children of India's

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partition" (Gayer & Jaffrelot, 2012), Muslims who chose to stay in India have struggled to keep pace with the majority community. The Sachar Commission report (2006), ordered by the then prime minister Dr. Manmohan Singh showed Muslims to be stuck at the bottom of almost every economic or social indicator. They were poorly represented in public sector jobs, school and university places politics. Low literacy levels and low fertility were other major findings.

India's Muslims tend to be excluded from 3 sites of power within the state machinery: the judiciary, the administration and the police. In 2002, they represented only 6.26% of the 479 High Court judges in India, 2.95% of the 5,018 Indian Administrative Service officers and 4.02% of the 3,236 IPS officers. By contrast, according to a report in the Times of India, nearly 20% of India's prisoners were Muslims. Experts believe that this trend is not because Muslims commit more crimes. Rather, it's a product of economic and social deprivation. With no money for litigation and for getting bail, they end up languishing in jails for years. There have been several instances of false cases slapped against Muslims, especially after terror attacks and riots.

Closer home, the Mahmoodur Rahman Committee appointed in 2008 by the Maharashtra government revealed the shocking social, economic and educational condition of Muslims in the state. Maharashtra has witnessed the highest number of Hindu-Muslim riots post-Independence. This has led to ghettoisation which has further contributed to their neglect. About 45% of Muslim households have a per capita income of less than Rs. 500 a month. About 58% of urban Muslims live in slums. Muslims constitute only 8.1% of the state's farmers, 44.4% of rural Muslims work as agricultural labourers,

compared to 36.1% of Hindus. Only 4.4% of Maharashtra's Muslims work in the government services. In 2012, there was not a single Muslim in the entire cadre of the Indian Administrative Services. The committee also found that in the urban areas, bus stops are located at a 1.3 km distance from Muslim areas. Fearing a backlash from the state's Muslims and the media, the government never tabled the report in the Assembly, though it was submitted in 2013.

The above statistics paint a grim picture. However, this doesn't suggest that Muslims haven't progressed in independent India. In addition to being appointed to a number of top positions, Muslims in India "enjoy complete political and religious liberty, a free legislative environment to undertake economic and educational initiatives, a vibrant television media and cinema that teach liberal coexistence, and access to a vast number of universities and institutes of modern education" (Ahmad, 2014). However, the benefits of a democratic, secular and pluralistic polity haven't trickled to the vast majority of the country's Muslims. One of the main reasons for this has been their poor representation in our elective bodies.

Muslim representation

With every election, the position of Muslims has deteriorated. Muslims representation in the 16th Lok Sabha hit an all-time low of 22. For the first time in the history of Lok Sabha, not a single Muslim got elected from Uttar Pradesh, India's most populated and electorally decisive state.

Maharashtra's Muslims too have been affected by the growing communal schism generated during the 1990's. The number of Muslim MLAs in the

recently elected Maharashtra Legislative Assembly has dropped to an abysmal nine. The state's five main political parties put up only 45 Muslim candidates in the election. Out of the nine MLAs, eight have been elected from Muslim-dominated constituencies. Votes polled by Muslim candidates have been steadily falling since 1990. In 2009, while a non-Muslim candidate polled an average of 13, 766 votes, a Muslim candidate attracted only 4, 453 votes. This is the reason why most parties refuse tickets to Muslim candidates. No political party dares to put up a Muslim candidate unless the constituency has a substantial Muslim population. Even the avowed secular parties continue to succumb to communal consideration in the selection of their candidates.

While it is not necessary that Muslims should be represented only by their co-religionists, electorally ignoring an important group is not good for the health of a nation. Representation gives a community a sense of belonging. Further, representation of multiple identities is the essence of modern democracy.

During the first five decades after independence, the vast majority of Indian Muslims saw in the Congress their natural protector, for its commitment to secularism. However after the demise of Jawaharlal Nehru, the pluralism of the Congress soon started changing. Muslims' faith in the Congress started eroding with the escalation of anti-Muslim violence and the political, social and economic marginalization of the community, sometimes at the hands of the Congress itself (such as during the Emergency). The party started milking the community for electoral gains, by conceding religious and cultural space to the Deobandi Ulemas. Banning Salman Rushdie's novel <https://assignbuster.com/mim-and-the-rise-of-muslim-identity-politics/>

Satanic Verses, overturning the Shah Bano judgment were among several of the party's tropes which contributed to the disenchantment of moderate Muslims from the Congress.

Muslim Identity Politics

Despite the love lost with the Congress and other 'secular' parties, Indian Muslims have generally been reluctant to form their own political parties. However, in the last decade or so, a number of Muslim dominated political parties have emerged in India. The Peace Party was founded in Uttar Pradesh in 2008 by Mohamed Ayub. It won four seats in the 2012 Assembly elections and expanded its base in a number of states. The Kerala-based Indian Union Muslim League enjoys considerable popularity in the state. Maulana Badruddin Ajmal formed the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) in Assam after falling out with Congress leader Tarun Gogoi in Assam. It is now the main opposition party in the state. Other Muslim identity based parties include the Parcham Party, Rashtriya Ulama Council and Welfare Party. However, none of these parties could achieve any substantial success.

The MIM and its history

It is in this context that the rise of MIM in Maharashtra should be seen. The MIM was formally founded in 1927 "for educational and social uplift of Muslims", however it first arose as a proto-Islamist movement to defend the Nizam's autocracy through an armed militia called the Razakars. They unleashed brutal violence against Hindus, the communists and all those wished to merge Hyderabad with independent India. In 1948, the Indian government sent in the army to overpower the Razakars, an operation that

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left several thousands dead. Hyderabad was annexed to India and Kasim Rizvi, the Majlis leader was imprisoned and the organization banned. Rizvi was released about a decade later only on the condition that he would leave for Pakistan in 48 hours. Before leaving, Rizvi handed over the reins to Abdul Wahed Owaisi, the grandfather of Asaduddin Owaisi.

Owaisi re-drafted the Majlis constitution in keeping with the provisions of the Indian Constitution and heralded a new age in the party's history. Though MIM remained on the margins of Hyderabad's politics for about fifteen years, the situation soon started changing in the 1970s. Under the new president Salahuddin Owaisi, the party made great inroads in the city. Votes polled by Majlis in the Hyderabad Lok Sabha seat rose from 58, 000 in 1962 to over four lakhs in 1989. It also set up a number of educational institutions for Muslims in the city. Thus, a party that was a part of the Razakars has found acceptance in the very city that had celebrated its ouster.

The mainstream media has reacted to MIM's victory in Maharashtra with a sense of paranoia. There are fears that the party could accentuate communal differences in the state. Moderate Muslims accuse the MIM of milking the sufferings of Muslims, while not doing anything for the community's development. Party MP Akbaruddin Owaisi is known for his vitriolic hate speeches instigating Muslims to stand up against Hindu violence. MIM's politics represent a reactionary agenda that seeks to counter the violent communal politics of the right-wing Hindu parties.

On the other hand, Muslims are also hopeful about the MIM as they feel it can better represent the community's interests. MIM's rise represents the

failure of all 'secular' parties in checking atrocities against India's minorities and preventing majoritarianism. Muslim youth who fail to see themselves as a part of the youth Narendra Modi keeps gloating about are attracted to the MIM and its aspirational politics which largely involves invoking a false pride of the "glorious history of Muslim rulers".

However, the same youth need to realize that the MIM has done nothing to defend the human rights of young Muslims who are falsely accused of being terrorists and who end up spending years in jails. MIM has never spoken out against radicals within the community; neither has it done anything to empower Muslim women. It wouldn't be long before India's Muslims see through the farce that the MIM represents and the process of disillusionment sets in.

Problems with identity politics

The deeply problematic nature of MIM's politics still doesn't justify the media's sustained and critical coverage of its victory in Maharashtra. Identity politics is not a new phenomenon. India's ruling party BJP has its roots in Hindu nationalism, the Akali Dal was formed to give a political voice to Sikh issues, the RPI and its more than 50 factions claim to represent Dalits. The UP-based Apna Dal enjoys a following among the Kurmi caste. The Shiv Sena and now the MNS have, from time to time, raised the bogie of the Marathi mannos for electoral gains. The media's hypocrisy while reporting about these parties needs to be called out. Muslim identity politics is as dangerous as the identity politics of any other community.

According to Irfan Engineer, director of the Centre for Study of Society and Secularism, “ Identity politics can be oppressive, hegemonic and exclusionary to strengthen hierarchies and hierarchical structures, to defend the privileges of the social, political and economic elite.” It is part of a larger trend of a greater assertiveness of identity in India. To counter this, it is important to strengthen the country’s secular and pluralistic ideals.

Conclusion

So what does that leave India’s Muslims with? They don’t need parties which essentialize their identity. Voting en bloc for hegemonic identity based parties isn’t going to yield any dividends. All they need is democratic representation of their interests. They need parties and candidates that stand for the values of equality, liberty and justice.

MS Sathyu’s iconic film Garm Hava is perhaps the best film made on India’s partition. It shows Balraj Sahni’s family members leave for Pakistan, one after another, because of the increasing discrimination faced by them. In the end, Sahni and his son, Farooq Sheikh too decide to leave the country. On their way to the railway station, they come across a protest march by angry youth demanding jobs. Sheikh and, eventually, Sahni too join the march, thereby deciding to survive and succeed in his own homeland.

An Urdu poem by Kaifi Azmi is heard in a voice-over as we see Sahni joining the protesters:

“ Jo door se toofan ka karte hain nazaara, unke liye toofan vahaan bhi hai yahan bhi, Dhaare mein jo mil jaaoge, ban jaaoge dhara, Ye vaqt ka elaan vahan bhi hai yahan bhi.”

The scene is a poignant reminder for India's Muslims that their future depends on engaging with politics of social justice and security rather than falling prey to leaders stoking their insecurities.

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