

DISCOURSE ON THE POLITICAL REPRESENTATION OF MUSLIMS IN INDIA

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Abstract:

The political discourse on Minorities has taken a different turn and shift over a period of time. Muslims have a distinct socio-economic and political environment and their experiences with regard to the political representation are quite different from that of the other political systems in the world. Muslims have been the integral part of the democratic system and started their political career along with the mainstream political parties aligned with the broader ideological frame work they represent. The political discourse had its roots in the process of making of the constitution and the subsequent debates that had taken place especially on the minority rights. This article tries to focus on the various patterns and trends which shaped Muslim political representation in India. The larger question on political representation for Muslims was largely driven by the demand of equality of citizenship, empowerment and non –discrimination.

This paper throws light on some of the major developments that have shaped the course of electoral politics and the responses from the Muslim community in terms of their political choices and securing comfortable position in the parliament and other legislative assemblies across the country. This article attempts to bring out the different narratives on larger political scenario and the sharp decline of Muslim representation in the Parliament over the last 15 to 20 years. Muslims being a marginalized community face the disadvantage and deprivation without having sufficient political representation to make significant strides in the socio – economic and cultural life as envisaged in the broader premise of the constitutional safeguards to every citizen.

Key words: Minority rights, Representation, Marginalization , Majoritarian

INTRODUCTION

The political discourse largely acknowledges a striking balance between the sense of religious identity and the collective sense of national solidarity, legitimacy and integration in tune with the spirit of multiculturalism. The socio-political reality of the Muslim community needs to be addressed in vivid contexts rather than merely measured through a narrowly democratic lens. The democratic reality in India is not jut confined to voting rights and equality but needs to be addressed with other normative questions. There has been a sustained predicament of structural inequalities caused by discrimination, exclusion and marginalization of minorities at various levels.

Muslims have a distinct political environment and their shared experiences are quite different from that of their counterparts in other parts of the world. This is especially because of democratic, pluralistic, secular nature of Indian state and their pragmatic engagement with the social, political and economic processes. The political discourse in the making of the constitution was driven by the demands of equality of citizenship and

non-discrimination. National unity was given utmost priority in the country of deepening Hindu-Muslim tensions. The new frame work did involve recognition of plurality of religions, languages and cultures, and it logically favored the recognition of minority rights rather than any majoritarian system.

The protection of minority rights in India not only needs a responsive state but also a vigilant civil society. Indian constitution contains several provisions in order to protect the distinct cultural linguistic or religious identity of the minority communities, it also provides for the functioning and sustenance of institutions established. The main principle purpose of the makers of the constitution was to create a secular state which was essentially a response to India's composite and pluralist social fabrics. However, in spite of all these lofty ideals enshrined in the constitution, nearly six and half decades after the inception of constitutional republic, minorities in India have expressed their feeling of alienation. The track record of the Indian State and responsibility to protect the lives of minorities has been a poor show. It is not an exaggeration that the security concern has remained and continued to be at the top of the agenda of the religious minorities in India.

It is quite evident that there exist a wide gap between constitutional theory and its practices. Secularists argue that the Indian State is drifting away from its foundational values including secularism in the Indian polity. The anti-secularist says that secularism which is based on the notion of minority rights has become a highly contested doctrine. Some other scholars suggest looking for another foundation viz., the principle of substantive equality.

Verba defines the political culture being the part and parcel of the expressive symbols and values defining the condition in which political action takes place.¹

Ashish Nandy in his essay on the political culture of the Indian state rightly summarizes the present dilemmas of political culture among the Indians. "Today, the Indian state resides less and less in the minds of men; it is primarily what the Indians confront on the ground. The vagueness, chaos, deliberate obfuscation, and inability to close up definition or mark out conceptual boundaries which so enrage the tough-minded political analysts in India are now giving way to the sharp operational definitions that the modern relish. The range of options once available within the Indian political culture has begun to narrow".²

It is quite apt to locate the history of Indian Muslims in the Indian political setting rather than in the wider location of the 'World of Islam'. Hassan even finds problem with the reification of Islam in the realm of political ideas as it based on the formal ideology of the religion that necessitates both practice and ideas are identical with the political culture propounded by the religious scriptures. It is a myth to perceive that Muslims as a monolithic community but their political participations are largely influenced by their regional cultures and aspirations reflecting in their perceptions, values and behavior.³

Democratic political system and the idea of inclusive nationhood require to ensure a secular, constitutional democratic order as a guarantee of the enjoyment of an equal status for its citizens, and to protect them from all kinds of discrimination and alienation. Williams puts forward one valid assumption in terms of tackling religious identity that religion is not necessarily be a primordial identity, but a transformed and mobilized one depending on the political situation and particularly manifested in electoral politics.⁴

As it is already known fact that Muslim communities spread all over India are influenced by their own regional, cultural and political differences that decides their political choices. Shahabuddin and Wrights

observed that in coastal South India, the relatively prosperous Muslim communities with a history of peaceful conversion by Arab merchants, do not speak Urdu nor send their children to Aligarh, nor align with north Indian Muslim identity but they merge culturally with the majority despite their religious orthodoxy. In West Bengal, the Bengali-speaking Muslims have tended increasingly to support the Marxist parties, primarily because of their relative security from communal riots and minimal restrictions on cow slaughter. Nevertheless they remain a deprived and backward group.⁵

Problem of representation and voting patterns are significant issues to be understood in analyzing the various aspects of Muslim politics in India. there is a widespread disparity between the political representation of Muslims and their percentage of population in the country, Muslims constitute more than 20% of the electorate in 197 out of 545 Parliamentary constituencies but their performance in the legislature remain very bleak.⁶

Table 3.1: Muslims elected since 1952

Lok Sabha Polls	Year	Muslim Candidates Won
1 st	1952	11
2 nd	1957	19
3 rd	1962	20
4 th	1967	25
5 th	1971	28
6 th	1977	34
7 th	1980	49
8 th	1984	42
9 th	1989	27
10 th	1991	25
11 th	1996	29
12 th	1998	28
13 th	1999	31
14 th	2004	34
15 th	2009	30
16 th	2014	23
17 th	2019	26
18 th	2024	24

Source: Iqbal A. Ansari. (2006). *Political Representation of Muslims in India: 1952-2014*. New Delhi: Manak

Muslims now account for only 4.42% of Lok Sabha's total strength , the second lowest share of all time , after a record 49 Muslim MP's (9.04% of the House) were elected in 1980 and 45 Muslim MP's (8.3% of the House) were elected in 1984. The share of Muslim members in parliament never crossed the 10% mark and has sharply reduced in the last 15 years. In the past three Lok Sabha elections, the proportion of Muslim MP,s declined below 5% despite the share of Muslim population in the overall population standing at 14% as per the 2011 census. Muslims being a marginalized minority have been persistently underrepresented in political institutions especially in the Parliament. The issue of granting separate political representation was debated in detail in the Constituent Assembly pouring divergent opinions. The partition of the country and the separate state of Pakistan closed all debate on providing political representation for the Muslims in India.

The political options before the Indian Muslims were multiple even after the independence rather than stick on to a uniform ideological trend. The apolitical Tablighi Jamat, Jamat-I-Islami and the pro-Congress

Jamiyal-al-Ulema-e-Hind were competing each other to take the mantle of Muslim leadership. These groups reflected a trend that had become strong in the three or four decades prior to the independence of India namely, an overemphasis on cultural and identity issues like the maintenance of the Sharia based Muslim Personal Law at the cost of issues of material well-being. The second group did not give much importance to the issues of identity and expressed its loyalty through measures like the observation of anti-Pakistan day, imposition of a voluntary ban on cow slaughter and the acceptance of Hindi as official language. They have been prioritizing assimilation over separation. The Muslim legislators from the Congress usually not concentrating on issues which were exclusively “Muslim” in nature. The electoral process was not usually favorable to those who raise contentious issues and the legislators usually don’t do this for fear of being denied tickets at the next election. Many elected representatives had a constituency other than Muslims and they were supposed to redress the grievances of all segment of the electorate. In the democratic and electoral politics representatives cannot alienate a particular segment of the electorate. There was an inhibition to be branded as communal and they did not like to work exclusively among the Muslims. These leaders and representatives who had an urge for secular nationalism and polity within the Indian National Congress also came to be known as ‘Muslim Nationalists’ tried to project themselves as the true representatives of the Indian Muslims.

There was not a perceived division between the elite and ordinary Muslims as both stood solidly with the Congress in the subsequent general elections. The major reason why the Muslims expressed their undaunted support to the Indian National Congress was the result of the faith reposed by the ordinary Muslims in Nehru’s leadership and his ability to guarantee constitutional safeguards for them. This was happened because the ordinary Muslim was concerned less about Sharia and more concerned about his own survival. They wanted good life with dignity, for which he realized the need to build an enduring relationship with fellow Indians and aligned with main stream political parties. We find a marginal improvement in the socio-economic conditions of some Muslims. For example the weaving community in UP and Bihar began to do well. The urban artisans in and around Delhi remained quite well off. The small section of Muslim middle class in western parts of the country expanded its business without any hindrance. Similar trend was seen in the southern parts of the country where Muslims did relatively well in their traditional professional fields. After Nehru, the Congress failed to address the problem of literacy, education, employment and improvement in the situation of women. The communal riots one after another left behind a major chunk of Muslim victims which made them to seriously feel the issue of security. It became the major concern for the ordinary Muslims. There was a wide perception that after Nehru, the law and order machinery was highly communalized. Rajeeva Bhargava observes that in a new scenario of new identity charged and dominated political contexts, secularism was reduced to be a more an alternative identity of a citizen without any political or socio-economic rights.

The Muslim elite from the erstwhile land lord class was more interested in self perpetuation and did nothing to ameliorate the condition of their own people. Therefore Schism between Muslim elites and ordinary Muslims began to grow and resulted in deviating from the Congress fold and gradually tilted towards other organizations that focused on cultural identity issues. Jamat-I-Islami in North India, the Muslim League in Kerala and the Majlise-Ittehadul Muslimeen in Hyderabad, became the alternative political options for the Muslims in specific regional and local settings. We have to acknowledge the fact that India is comparatively better for its minorities than other countries. Muslims being a distinct cultural and religious group, have many rights for religious and cultural rejuvenation. The mother tongue of Muslims differs from region to region like Kashmiri, Malayali, Tamil, etc. The language of their religious instruction, Arabic and Urdu a unique hybrid of Farsi and local dialects of Hindi in North India is spoken by the non-Muslims.⁷

Muslims are given a right of cultural heritage and separate educational institutions. Another important right that ensures the protection of their places of worship must be taken care of by the fundamental right. But there were lot of instances to see the gross violation of the freedom of religion and the right to protect the places of worship enshrined in the Constitution. There was a breach and failure on the part of the governments in protecting the constitutional obligation and betrayal of the oath of office swear by them. Tragically these developments are used to maneuver people's sentiments and capitalize electoral gains by defying their constitutional duties. Muslims are also given a right to their own personal laws related to family, marriage, divorce, maintenance, inheritance, child custody and adoption. This shows that Muslims are ensured cultural justice by granting various cultural rights in the Constitution. If we look at the public holidays in the country of the seventies approved by the Government of India four are given to the Muslims.

Since Muslims are a marginalized group and are facing sustained disadvantage because of the structural properties in Indian society. The state must take proactive measures to ensure justice to the Muslims by initiating special welfare schemes exclusively meant for them. The demand for Muslim affirmative action in the civil service and education was raised during the Assembly By-election in 1994 in five states of India. In Andhra Pradesh the then Congress Government introduced providing a 5% reservation for Muslims in educational institutions. But the High Court struck the Government decision and the matter was referred to the Supreme Court.

A convention of Indian Muslims held in 1989 and demanded the introduction of the system of proportional representation in election at all levels. The National Convention for the Empowerment of Muslims in India urged the Government to take required measures to ensure a proportionate share of seats for Muslims in legislative bodies.⁸ Political representation is valuable and it gives a legitimate voice to Muslims in the political field as it helps the community to influence decisions that decrease their marginalization.

Indian Muslims a divergent group in terms of language, culture and ethnic variations as in the case of other Indian communities. It is wrong to perceive that Muslims are a monolithic homogeneous community. By virtue of these adversaries they could neither form a strong and viable political party nor did they migrate to neighboring Muslim countries. Therefore the Indian Muslims are left out with three major options.

1. They could join mainstream secular political parties which were more responsive to their interests.
2. They could work as pressure group that could earn political advantage to the community.
3. They could establish their own political party to gain political benefits by holding strong lobby of power in a coalition government. Muslims tried all the three options but they failed to achieve the desired results.

Muslim representation in political bodies like the union level or state assemblies was decreased from 13.1% in 1947 to 4.96% in 1994.⁹ The enactment of joint electorates in 1950 was the main reason behind the poor representation of Muslims in the Lok Sabha and other state assemblies. Only two members namely Mohammed Ismail and B. Pocker Sahib of the Muslim League raised their voice in favour of separate electorate. But other prominent Muslim leaders such as Maulana Azad and Maulana Hafiz-ur-Rehman did not support the proposal for separate electorate in the Constituent Assembly. Therefore, the Indian Muslims were deprived of their fair representation in Independent India.¹⁰

Muslim representation in state assemblies was less as compared to their population proportion. Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Kerala, UP and West Bengal have a sizeable Muslim population but Muslim representation

in these state assemblies was very low. Iqbal Ansari presented the Muslim political representation deprivation in the Lok Sabha since 1952 general election.

Table 3.2: Muslim political representation deprivation in the Lok Sabha since 1952 general election

No.	Year	Total elected members	Muslims elected	Expected representation on population basis	Deprivation (%)
I	1952	489	21	49	57.14
II	1957	494	24	49	51.02
III	1962	494	23	53	56.60
IV	1967	520	29	56	48.21
V	1971	518	30	58	48.28
VI	1977	542	34**	61	44.26
VII	1980	529	49**	59	16.95
VIII	1984	542	46**	62	25.81
IX	1989	529	33	60	45.00
X	1991	534	28	65	56.92
XI	1996	543	28	66	57.56
XII	1998	543	29	66	56.06
XIII	1999	543	32	66	51.52
XIV	2004	543	36	66	45.45
XV	2009	543	30	66	54.54
XVI	2014	543	23	66	65.15
XVII	2019	543	26	66	60.60
XVIII	2024	543	24	66	63.63
Total			517	1100	53

** Including Muslims elected in bye-elections.

Source: Ansari A. Iqbal. (2006). *Political representation of Muslims of India: 1952-2004*. New Delhi: Manak, p. 64.

There has been a drastic change in the Indian politics since the mid 1980s with the rise of majoritarian politics that moved from the margins of popular discourse to the centre stage of political discourse. Ethno-cultural nationalism and Hindu nationalism began to portray itself as an aggressive ideological tool to redraw the basic contours of India's plural, secular nationalism. The main aim behind this project is to enforce the majoritarian idea of Indian history, culture and nationhood. Since the mid 1980s, a powerful under current that pulls various public discourse into: "That may be your history, but this is my/our past".¹¹ The sense of belonging to the present nation includes a replication of a sense of them and us through different icons, stories and narratives. This view and understanding of our history insists not to answer our present needs and realities. But unfortunately it encourages to confront in the name of past. There must be serious attempts to afresh the relationship between memory and history, the oral and written, the transmitted stereotypes and lived history.

Shahid Amin says that true history of communalism is not just what happened between two or three communities in India, but also about how these communities remember, understand, explain and recount pasts and presents to themselves. This how we could well replace the idea of 'nation' with diverse communities to co-exist.¹²

India after 77 years of its democratic journey has been witnessing various trends and responses coupled with remarkable changes to its politics. Sometimes political rhetoric, divisive agenda might have attained upper

hand but the long experience shows that it could not last long for a long period. People's mandate in India often voiced their genuine aspirations and demands to strengthen this country and composite, pluralistic, secular-democratic fabric with the agenda of an inclusive development.

An election verdict or the mandate given to a political party cannot be understood as an absolute consent of the people to carry out any policies and programmes of their choice or to subvert the divergent ethos, culture and value system of people. The ruling party or government has to chalk out strategy to deliver all that has been assured to the people of the country.

Successive Governments came to power emphatically asserted the agenda of good governance and economic growth. But still there is a huge trust deficit with minorities has been continuing and it has to be addressed with a broader framework of multiculturalism. Certain parties and its leaders known for its biased approach towards the minorities widen the credibility gap that persists in terms of its acceptability to govern all people including the minorities. Any government holds the constitutional responsibility must ensure that the idea of India as a pluralist and inclusive landscape in which all citizens have equality before the law as constitutionally promulgated should be upheld transparently.

Voting right being a major instrument of political participation in India has been often associated with the idea of vote banks as far as Muslims are concerned. Contrary to the larger perception on Muslim community being a homogenous monolithic minority. It is often proved wrong that Muslims are generally a distinct and separate political community distanced itself from the main stream political processes. During the UP Assembly elections 2012 Delhi Jamia/Masjid Imam Bukhari's incitement to the UP Muslims to vote for the Samajwadi Party. The same Imam, appealed to vote for BJP during the 2004 Lok Sabha election. His appeal had no response from the Muslims with the defeat of BJP candidate in Chandni Chowk a Muslim majority constituency in New Delhi. In 1996, Bukhari was in favour of supporting BSP but the party got only 20% of Muslim votes shows that majority of Muslims do not follow the appeals of religious leaders. Different Indian states offer different voting patterns depending on the contexts. In Mumbai, Muslims find Congress as the only alternative to BJP and Shiva Sena but the recent assembly election in Maharashtra, Majlis-Ithihadul Muslimeen a Hyderabad based party surprisingly won in two assembly seats namely Baikula and Ourangabad. The party could secure more than 5 lakh votes and was able to secure second position in three assembly segments and third position in 8 seats. A dalit candidate contested from Kurla seat in Mumbai could secure sizeable number of votes even double than Congress/NCP votes put together. Panthers Republic Party an ally of MIM which contested from Ourangabad West constituency showed a good performance by securing more than double the votes Congress got there.¹³ Muslim masses irrespective of their internal cleavages have not blindly followed the fatwas of Imams. Existence of different castes, linguistic and religious diversities in India and voting patterns of different social segments or groups of the society became a reality.

Intellectuals differ with the popular notion of communal consciousness as an element of political participation that is usually associated with the Muslim community in India.¹⁴ Voting en masse is a mechanism employed by the community leaders to prove to be politically vibrant and considered a general trend with the minorities as a tool of bargaining for their interests and advantages. It is quite interesting that the political behavior of Indian Muslims has always been in tune with the general political traditions of the country.¹⁵

Conclusion:

Muslim choice for political parties or their voting pattern is often in consonance with the general national pattern. Muslim candidates usually contest from the Muslim-dominated areas and sometimes all major parties field Muslim candidates from these constituencies resulting in division of votes among the Muslim candidates paving way for the victory of non-Muslim candidate. There are lots of instances that Muslims voted for non-Muslim candidates ignoring a Muslim one if he is not a official candidate of the major political party of their choice or affiliation. There has been a better link between various forms of Muslim backwardness and the discourse of political representation. The Muslim politics in India needs reconceptualizing political representation to go beyond the conventional concerns of the Muslim community especially from the perspective of marginalized Muslim groups.

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