

Electoral Preferences of Muslims in West Bengal: An Analysis of Lok Sabha Elections.

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Abstract

The Muslim Electoral politics has always been a subject of discussion among the scholars. For strange reasons Muslims of India are perceived to be voting as a monolith. The dominant notion about the Muslim voting behavior remains that they are strategic in their voting behavior and are not influenced by their gender, class, or regional location. Their only consideration regardless of the opposition, it is believed while they cast their votes, is to defeat Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP). Amidst this gross generalization, the role of the nature of party competition in determining the voting behavior of Muslims is often down played. The paper attempts to probe whether the availability of political choice has any role to play in determining their voting behaviour or not. Therefore, the effort is to figure out how the dynamics of Muslim vote plays out in a context characterized by multi-party competition. It does so by looking in to the Electoral Preferences of Muslims of West Bengal in different Lok Sabha Elections. The paper further attempts to enquire whether the Muslims of the State, as is generally believed, constitute a traditional vote bank of a particular party or have changed their political preferences with the changing time when they have got the opportunity to do so.

Key Words: Electoral Preferences, Muslims, West Bengal, Bhartiya Janta Party and Vote Bank.

Muslim Electoral Politics in India: An Overview

The Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947 reduced Indian Muslims from a pre-eminent religious group with a majority in two large regions to a status of a dispersed minority. Despite their sizeable concentration in three Indian states of Uttar Pradesh (UP), Bihar, and West Bengal (WB), Muslims in India are substantially outnumbered in comparison to other social groups in a majority of Indian states. As a result the First Past the Post System (FPTP henceforth) system makes it difficult for a dispersed group to form a political platform exclusively representing their interests, as the exclusive pursuit of community interest might alienate others, and prevent their preferred party from reaching a plurality at the constituency level. This is especially the case in a political context characterized by social and political mobilization along ethnic lines and capable of adversely impacting the electability of their preferred candidate.ⁱ

The failure of Muslim-led parties to register an electoral success coupled with the thin distribution of Muslims under FPTP electoral system has made it politically expedient for the Muslims to support mainstream political parties. It however, does not mean that Muslim-led parties have not at all succeeded in any region. They have in fact succeeded in regions but with a large concentration of Muslims. The success of the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML) in Kerala, All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) in Telangana, and All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF) in Assam are the cases in point here.

Historically, the Congress party has been the most preferred party of Indian Muslims. The vast majority of Indian Muslims saw in the Congress their natural protector, for its commitment to secularism. Attracted to the party by its ideology as much as by the promises of assembly seats or ministerial portfolios, Muslim politicians joined the congress enmasse. However, the subsequent decline in Congress party fortunes, followed by the rise of backward caste and regional parties, and the ascendance of Hindu right under the BJP have shaped the Muslim political preferences in contemporary India differently.ⁱⁱ

The dominant notion about the Muslim voting behavior remains that they vote as a monolith, are strategic in their voting behavior and vote as a bloc and are not influenced by their gender, class, or regional location. Rai and Verma also think that it is still a dominant belief in public imagination that Muslims act as vote bank for different parties. Their argument rests on the assumption that the India Muslims are perceived to have only one consideration while casting their vote i.e., to defeat Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP). Thus, they argue Muslims support any party that is capable of keeping the BJP out of electoral race.ⁱⁱⁱ This supposedly tactical voting of Muslims against BJP is justified by invoking the “minority insecurity thesis” which enables mobilization of Muslims as political community. It is believed that due to the rise of BJP, a party committed to ideology of Hindutva, security has become a dominant concern for Muslims in Indian political milieu and hence group voting should be seen as community’s endeavour for survival in a hostile environment. Therefore, according to this belief, Muslims indulge in en bloc voting for any party that is best placed to defeat BJP.^{iv} There is no denying the fact that since the late 1980s, Muslim voting behaviour has largely been shaped in a political context defined by the rise of Hindu nationalist BJP, but this too is context specific and varies from state to state.

There exists a large variation in terms of whom the Muslim community votes for. Muslims voting preferences have mostly depended on the nature of electoral competition, spatial distribution of the community, and available political choices. In order to understand whether this nationwide trend of Muslim vote spread uniformly across the country, performance of different parties for Muslim vote need to be seen in relation to State-specific data. This state centric approach for analyzing the Muslim electoral preferences is important because of the fact that states not only have emerged as the effective arena of political competition but also more political choice is available to the people at state level. The nature of political competition now varies from state to state and India has moved a long way from the old Congress vs. Opposition scenario that was the dominant feature of polity all over the country. The Lok Sabha may present the picture of an intensely fragmented multi-party system, but at the state level we can find all kinds of contests: bipolar, triangular, four cornered or even more fragmented.^v Therefore, given the demographic diversity of the Muslim community and spatially (regionally) entrenched politics, a better understanding of voting behaviour or political preference among Muslims is possible only when it is examined at the state level. At the state level, it is possible to argue that voting behaviour of Muslims is influenced primarily by two factors – nature of political competition as well

as choices available in states. In order to understand the nature of Muslim voting behavior at the state level this paper attempts to examine the empirical evidences available in the state of West Bengal.

General Elections in West Bengal: Contest for Muslim Vote Between Congress, AITC and Left Parties

Table 2.4

Muslim Vote Share for Different Parties in Lok Sabha Elections of West Bengal

Party	2004	2009	2014
Congress	24	38	24
AITC	21	20	37
Left	47	37	31
Others	08	05	05

Source: CSDS (All figures are in percent)

In 1947, due to the partition 19.85 per cent Muslims turned into a religious minority community in West Bengal, and the same was the fate of some 22.03 per cent Hindus in the then East Pakistan. The bloody partition dramatically changed the demographic profile of Muslim Population of West Bengal; it did the same to the Hindus in East Pakistan. Massive displacement of population partly explains this. In West Bengal rehabilitation and resettlement brought about a relative peace and stability between the two communities. However, it was short lived and didn't last long, as the two communities again engaged in to communal conflicts therefore, marring the harmonious relation between the two communities in the two parts of Bengal. For instance, in 1965, at the time of the war between India and Pakistan, the two communities experienced the worst crisis, which eventually led to loss of life and displacement. In 1971, during the liberation war for an independent state of Bangladesh, large-scale violence took place once again which resulted in to the displacement of nearly 10 million Bengalis.^{vi} Despite all this, there still existed some forces which were committed to the idea of syncretic culture of India which helped the minority Muslim community to live in peace and harmony. They remained an integral part of the Bengali society. This mainstreaming of the Muslim community at political level becomes evident with the fact that during the first phase of politics in state in which the Congress dominated the political scene for almost three decades after partition, the Muslims accepted the secular policies of the Congress party. Some of the Muslim stalwarts in the state were active members of the Indian National Congress. During this time, they followed a policy of distancing from the communal parties like the Muslim League and similar political outfits. Mainstreaming helped the minority community in protecting its political and economic interests, and at the same time opened up an opportunity for the mainstream political parties like the Congress to reach out to the Muslim electorates. Election results of 1952 show that a large number of Bengali Muslims did support the Congress. Candidates with Congress ticket won in most constituencies having large number of Muslims. In 1952, as Chatterji noted, 80 Muslims contested in the elections out of which 21 were in the fray

with Congress ticket, 14 were opposition candidates, and 45 were independents. Out of 21 Congress supported Muslims, 17 made it to the assembly, 2 won as independent, but not a single Muslim with opposition ticket won in that election.^{vii}

Distancing from the Congress party began when some Muslim leaders encouraged new groupings before the elections in 1957. The leaders of various organizations, for example, the Rezai Mustafa, the Jamaat-e-Islami, the Muslim Jamaat (Bashir group), the Anjuman Tanjimul, Momenin, the Itafaquia Committee, and the Fiayan-i-Millar decided to form a united front to contest against the Congress, but it had very little success in the electoral politics. The assembly elections in 1967 were a turning point as far as Muslim support to non-Congress opposition parties were concerned. In this election, opposition parties fielded 30 Muslim candidates out of which 14 won. The newly formed United Front government in the state with its new economic and political agenda appeared as an alternative to two-decade long Congress rule in the state.^{viii} From the late 1970s, a reconfiguration in state politics began to take place with the victory of the Left Front in the state assembly. The political victory of the Left Front in 1977 and 1982, and various programmes undertaken by them for the minorities made it a suitable alternative to the Congress. With this began the second phase in mainstreaming when the Muslims consistently followed the policy of distancing from the Congress (not an outright rejection though, as the Congress maintained its stronghold in some Muslim-dominated areas). It was difficult to dislodge the Congress from some of the constituencies in the districts of Malda and Murshidabad. In 1982 assembly elections, the Left Front candidates won from most of the areas having high concentration of Muslim population, areas where previously the Congress had a power base. This clearly shows an acceptance of the new policies of the Left. Land reforms programmes of the Left Front, especially redistribution of surplus land among the landless and protection of rights of the sharecroppers benefited the poorer sections of both the Muslim and Hindu communities.^{ix}

The point to note here is that Left with its pro-poor policies has succeeded in strengthening its social base more particularly in rural areas and under the leadership of Jyoti Basu remained electorally unassailable since 1977 in state. With Basu resigning from office in 2000, the leadership of the Left Front government in West Bengal was bestowed on his younger colleague, Buddhadeb Bhattacharya, who became the chief minister. By decimating the opposition in the 2006 state assembly election under the stewardship of Bhattacharya, the West Bengal Left created another record by establishing its hegemony in urban areas as well. This remarkable poll outcome was attributed to the decision of the left government for rapid industrialization through neoliberal economic policies. As soon as the government took steps to acquire land to form Special Economic Zones (SEZ) for rapid industrialization; it became clear that the situation was not exactly in its favour. The forcible acquisition of land by the state created circumstances that brought the previously fragmented opposition together. With a clear mandate in its favour, the parliamentary left did not seem to read the popular signals correctly and dismissed the voicing of opposition to the land acquisition policy as a mere ripple. What began as a seismic vibration became a tsunami in the course of time, and the Left Front regime that was considered unassailable collapsed like a

house of cards. The popular grievances were articulated in the 2009 Lok Sabha poll in which the Left Front received a severe blow: in comparison with its 2004 tally of thirty-six Lok Sabha seats, the Front constituents won only fifteen seats. The trend that was evident in 2009 continued in the 2011 assembly election with the defeat of the Left Front candidates in more than two thirds of assembly constituencies.^x

To this overall decline of the Left in state, Muslims as a social group has also contributed. It is evident from the table that in three Lok Sabha elections of 2004, 2009 and 2014 Muslim vote got fragmented between congress, All India Trinamool Congress and the Left. In 2014 Lok Sabha elections while the Muslim vote share of the left still remains higher than the congress both have suffered shrinkage as compared to the 2009 general elections. It is AITC that seems to have successfully widened its base among Muslims at the cost of left's declining popularity over the period of time. There has been almost 20% increase in Muslim voting percentage for AITC between 2004 and 2014 general elections. The reason for this erosion of Left fronts support base among Muslims is generally attributed to its failure in sustaining a Pro-Muslim image in West Bengal. Banerjee argues that traditionally the Left has sustained pro-Muslim image in Bengal and most of its candidates emerged victorious in constituencies where Muslims constitute a large share of population. However, this began to change after the Sachar Committee report on the socio-economic and educational conditions of the community.^{xi} The 2006 Sachar Committee Report showed that in comparison with their Hindu counterparts Muslim minority had not received equitable social and political support from the state. The committee observes "the most glaring cases of Muslim deprivation in government jobs is found in the Left-ruled [West Bengal, where] only 4.2% of government staff was Muslim, as against their population share of 25%."^{xii} In addition to this, it was also the forcible acquisition of land, accompanied by killing of poor people, for quick industrialization in Nandigram that helps explain the dip in the Left Front's popularity among Muslims in state. In a strange coincidence, most of those dispossessed in Nandigram were Muslims and Dalits. Muslims also felt betrayed when Chief Minister Bhattacharjee exhorted people to launch a campaign against madrasahs (Islamic religious seminaries) in 2007, characterizing them as being "dens of terrorism."^{xiii} Thus, it is not surprising that the Left Front candidates lost miserably both in 2009 Lok Sabha and 2011 state assembly elections in districts like North and South 24 Parganas, Nadia, Murshidabad, Malda, and Birbhum, which have a high proportion of Muslims.

From the foregoing discussion, it becomes evident that Muslims in state no longer identify themselves with a single party, in fact the emergence of AITC as a strong political force in state has broadened the political choice of Muslims. However, in the 16th Lok Sabha Election 2014, West Bengal has witnessed some interesting trends. Apart from the debacle of the Left and the ascendance of the Trinamool Congress, the other somewhat spectacular highlight was moving up of the BJP at the political centre stage in the State. It has not only won two parliamentary seats convincingly, but also has ensured 16.8 per cent of the total votes, a figure, almost four times greater than its tally in the last assembly election, 2011.^{xiv} Clearly this was a turnaround in the electoral fortunes of the BJP in West Bengal, an erstwhile left citadel and at present AITC's stronghold. The Congress

amidst its nationally dismal performance has put up a moderate show during the elections in state by winning only four out of the six seats it had won in the 2009 Lok Sabha election. The performance of the AITC in the recently held Lok Sabha election is so far the best in its electoral history. On the other side, its arch rival the Left front fared poorly. The Left vote share has significantly declined among the marginalised sections of the society, especially among the Dalits and Adivasis. These two communities along with the poor have voted in large numbers for the Trinamool Congress. As far as the Muslim vote is concerned the AITC has been a major gainer, while both the Left and the Congress have lost support as compared to 2009. The aggressive manner in which Mamta Banerjee countered Narendra Modi in her electoral speeches is believed to be one of the key factors behind AITC's success among the minority community. Overall, from the survey it can be asserted that Muslims and the marginal sections have to a large extent lost their confidence in the left.^{xv}

No doubt Muslims in West Bengal seem to be inclined more towards AITC but figures reveal that it doesn't tantamount to the image of Vote bank for party in state. In fact, the Muslim vote in state with the broadening of political choice due to emergence of strong political force in the form of AITC opposite to the Left, has witnessed more fragmentation compared to the past.

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^v Yadav, Yogendra, and Suhas Palshikar, "Ten theses on State Politics in India." in *Seminar*, vol. 591, no. 10, (2008). pp. 14-22.

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^{vii} Chatterjee Joya, *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2007). pp. 195-96.

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