

Muslims and Jatavs Return to Political Relevance in UP

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There are rapid and significant shifts taking place on the ground in Uttar Pradesh, a state that is exceptionally crucial in the general elections. This article looks at the grass-roots impact of the Mahagathbandhan as opposed to the incumbent Bharatiya Janata Party government on the prospects of all the parties and the expectations of the castes and communities involved in the elections.

If one were watching the electronic and print media over the recent past, one would be led to believe that a Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) wave is sweeping across Uttar Pradesh (UP) at the expense of the Samajwadi Party (SP), the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Rashtriya Lok Dal (RLD) alliance or Mahagathbandhan (grand alliance), as it is known in the local parlance. This seems like an effort to generate a perception or *hawa* (wind) for the undecided voter in central and eastern UP. The contrarian reality that hits one, while touring the wheat fields of western UP, is that the Mahagathbandhan is smoothly harvesting votes. Even as the national picture remains unclear, it is increasingly certain that the western half of the state has slipped away from the BJP. Out of the 26 constituencies polled in the first three phases, the BJP had claimed 23 in 2014. However, this time around, even reaching a quarter of that might be an achievement. This is happening due to two broad trends: the power of the tactical social coalition that the SP-BSP-RLD alliance has created and the anti-incumbency that the BJP is facing due to the state and central governments.

Why the Mahagathbandhan Works

When the Mahagathbandhan was first announced there was scepticism about whether it would hold at all, or work on the ground by transferring the SP and BSP votes to each other's candidates. So far it has worked smoothly because of a number of reasons. The BSP leader Mayawati (especially with zero seats in 2014 despite a 20% vote share), and Akhilesh Yadav (SP chief) know that it is a matter of survival and have shown commitment by coming to an agreement early and holding

joint press conferences and rallies for each other's candidates. Public displays of commitment, even in their individual rallies, sent the signal downward to party workers and voters. This can be evidenced in the enthusiastic sea of blue (BSP) and red (SP) at their rallies and the spirit with which their cadres are working for each other's candidates. Even when the joint rallies are held in the SP constituencies they have an equal if not greater number of blue caps. The cadres are charged up, not only because of the needs of survival, but because they can finally smell victory after a long time.

Jatavs and Muslims

The more important reason for this alliance to work is that the two communities at the core of this Mahagathbandhan in western UP—the Muslims especially, but also the Jatavs—have felt the heat during the BJP's reign, with little recourse. The Muslims feel that their employment, physical security and identity is under attack and so want to avoid a division of votes. The BJP is continuing to fuel their anxiety with hate-laced speeches by the Prime Minister, chief minister and party president wherein “Muslim” equals “Pakistan” equals secular parties while “Hindu” equals the BJP and further, India.

The Jatavs too feel that their security, reservations and legal protection are under threat. They want to prevent the obliteration of the party and the leader who first brought them dignity, safety and patronage, and who is still their best bet. So in constituency after constituency the Jatavs have not only voted for the BSP but have transferred votes to the SP and RLD when there was no BSP candidate in order to neutralise the BJP as well as achieve the desire implicit in the question asked by a young Jatav e-rickshaw driver in Rampur: “Kya is baar behenji pradhan mantri ban jaingi?” (Will Mayawati become the Prime Minister this time?)

Most Muslims would anyway vote for the Mahagathbandhan but the effect of Jatavs agglomerating around it is such that



even when the Congress has put up a Muslim candidate—as in Saharanpur, Bijnor, Budaun and Moradabad—Muslims have largely decided to vote for the alliance. The crystallisation of this decision usually takes place a day or two before voting, even when there is initial vacillation. The leaders and elders of the community assist in this firming up process. The Congress has on the whole not been too disruptive in western UP by not putting up strong candidates—except in Fatehpur Sikri and Saharanpur—and holding just a couple of rallies and roadshows of Priyanka and/or Rahul Gandhi in the same two constituencies.

This does not mean that the Congress is a spent force. On the contrary, wherever I went in the Muslim areas I met a Congress worker in the village, ward or town, for each village or locality. It has several factions and one will usually gravitate towards the SP while the other to the Congress. Among the poorer Muslims the party still has a positive image, old loyalties exist and they see it as a counter to the BJP at the national level. They will not vote for it this time because they do not see it as capable of winning in UP. “Winnability” is generally crucial in Indian elections but becomes more so when you want to defeat another party. Some older Muslims are wary of the Congress because they remember the riots of the 1970s and 1980s and the Babri Masjid debacle. They express their desire, in Kanshi Ram’s words, to see a *majboor sarkar* (weak government) rather than a *mazboot sarkar* (strong government) which will not heed them.

The other important community in this alliance—the Yadavs—are also out of favour for the government, from government recruitment and contracts to the police, and are feeling the absence of their patron, the SP. So they are solidly behind the Mahagathbandhan and are willing to vote for a BSP candidate to remove the BJP. A section of Jats too, feeling let down by the agrarian policies of the BJP, have gone back to the third member of the grand alliance and their old party, the RLD.

Western UP

The extraordinary performance of the BJP in 2014 had been possible because some Yadavs, Jatavs and most Jats had

voted for it whereas the Muslim vote had split between the SP and BSP. Thus, the BJP had crept through even in seats where Muslim votes are to the tune of 40% to 51% such as Rampur, Moradabad, Saharanpur, Muzaffarnagar, Bijnor, Amroha, Nagina, and Sambhal. This is now an impossibility because not only has the vote not dispersed but, crucially, Jatavs have been added to this. This has happened even in seats where Muslims are above 30% of the vote as in Meerut, Kairana, Bareilly and Aonla.

In other seats, Muslims and Jatavs are combining with a section of Jats as in Baghpat, Mathura, Hathras and Fatehpur Sikri (also in Kairana, Meerut and Muzaffarnagar) or with Yadavs as in Etah, Mainpuri, Budaun and Firozabad. The BJP’s prospects appear positive only in the five seats of Gautam Buddha Nagar, Ghaziabad, Agra, Pilibhit, and Bulandshahr; even seats such as Aligarh are up in the air.

Anti-incumbency

The other factor working against the BJP is the double anti-incumbency of the centre and, especially, the unpopular state government. This can be gauged from the absence of any discernible wave, unlike in 2014 when Modi was viewed as a change agent. In fact, there will be a small swing away from the BJP even among its own voters. Unemployment, possibly caused due to demonetisation, is an issue. As an underemployed labourer said: “jhatka to dena padega” (will have to deliver a jolt) since the BJP, in his view, is complacent with big election victories at the centre and the state.

Though the Jats and Yadavs openly talk about it, the other Other Backward Classes (OBC) farmers, such as the Lodhs, Mauryas, Sainis and Kurmis, who will anyway vote for the BJP because of patronage, are also distressed because of the government’s stagnant procurement price of crops, rising input costs and non-payment of sugar cane dues. The BJP’s cow politics has also led to the destruction of their crops, time and sleep by herds of abandoned cows and has hit the cattle market. This along with the closure of tanneries and slaughter houses has also led to the eagerness of the Muslim and Jatav turnout this time.

Certain export industries, such as the brass industry, are unhappy with the disappearance of export income tax offsets with the arrival of the goods and services tax (GST) and may see some BJP supporters sit at home or press the NOTA (None of the Above) button. Some lower OBCs such as the Sainis and Kurmis, who are unable to compete with the Jats and Yadavs in the general OBC category, are upset that whereas the 10% savarna quota was delivered in two days by the BJP, a separate Most Backward Classes (MBC) quota within the OBC category was not delivered to them in five years despite Amit Shah’s promise in 2014.

Central and Eastern UP

In the 54 seats of central and eastern UP the BJP is likely to do a little better because of the larger numbers of non-Yadav OBCs and non-Jatav Dalits in this region. However, the Mahagathbandhan will still be dominant because the Muslim–Jatav–Yadav combine still constitutes a plurality in the majority of these seats. Ultimately, the elections here too will be determined by caste and community patronage. On the basis of the vote shares of the SP–BSP combine versus the BJP in 2014 the BJP plus its ally Apna Dal’s share in these 54 seats, without any adverse away swing, will likely see a reduction from 50 seats to 21 or 23. Thus, the BJP’s reduction from 73 to 26 or 28 seats overall in UP will constitute a loss of at least 45 seats. Nowhere else in India can it make up for such a large loss and hence the BJP will not be able to form a government solely on its own. The Mahagathbandhan looks set to capture 50 seats and this could go up to 56 based on the 2017 assembly results when combined with a 2% swing away from the BJP (Sharma 2019). In this scenario, the BJP could go down to 20 and even with

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the support of the Apna Dal secure only around 22.

Discussion

A few important conclusions emerge from what has been seen in western UP. First, electoral coalitions can be built and votes do transfer on the ground if communities feel pressured and leaders show commitment. This is a lesson for the rest of India. Second, the predicted demise of the BSP and Mayawati was a premature conclusion. She continues to retain a committed Jatav vote and cadre which casts their lot where she tells them to. Moreover, the certainty of her Jatav vote has an outsized impact because others know where to agglomerate. Third, the Congress continues to have grass-roots workers, in at least the Muslim constituencies. So if it can combine them with a Hindu caste, build local leadership and commit itself, it can still get a slice of UP's pie.

Fourth, Akhilesh and Mayawati will have to accommodate non-Yadav OBCs

and non-Jatav Dalits if they want a bigger share of central and eastern UP. Fifth, a few Muslim pradhans and their kin do vote for the BJP because of patronage relationships that they have with BJP members of the legislative assembly and members of Parliament (MPs) who promise them a ration shop or contracts in exchange for some votes from their village. So even though the BJP is doubling down on Hindutva, it would have made sense for it to replace Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath or tone down its anti-Muslim agenda and give some seats to Muslims in order to make a pitch for their votes, even if these would be transactional. Out of the 80 candidates in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections and 400 in the 2017 assembly polls the BJP had fielded not a single Muslim.

Last, if the strength of grass-roots politics and the promise of citizenship are integral to democracy then these elections are partially restorative. It was heartening to see the importance of village pradhans

and city *parshads* in mobilising the party vote. Within the SP, BSP and Congress, it was equally heartening to see Hindu and Muslim leaders and party cadre working together, putting up Muslim candidates, appealing for and valuing their votes and voices. These elections are a return to at least partial citizenship for the Muslims of UP when they are marginalised in almost every other sphere of socio-economic and civic life. There will at least be some Muslim MPs from UP in Parliament this time where there were none in the last five years. Even though their representation remains well below their percentage of the population (4.25% in the last Lok Sabha versus 14% of the population all India and 19% in UP), democracy in India is better off with their inclusion.

REFERENCE

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