

Electoral Equations and Secular Values

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The up assembly elections results (Feb 2012) gave a clear mandate to the Samajvadi Party of Mulayam Singh. Congress was claiming that the results of UP will be a shocker, meaning a surprisingly better performance of Congress. As results came through Congress was nowhere close the claims it made or the results it expected were nowhere close to the expectation. Prior to the elections the main leaders of UP Congress with Rahul Gandhi in the lead, campaigned vigorously. The carrot of reservations for Muslims was dangled and the Congress President Sonia Gandhi's tears on Batla house encounter were on display, but it seems the Muslim voters in particular were not impressed. So far Congress had a very safe equation with the Muslim voters, also called 'Muslim vote bank' by its critics. The understanding was that since Muslims know that communal BJP is not the option where will they go except voting for the 'secular' Congress.

Where do matters stand? It is true that large sections of Muslims realize the BJP can never be the option for Muslims as BJP is the epitome of Communal politics, it is the political child of RSS, which is working for the agenda of Hindu Rashtra through its multiple progeny like VHP, Bajrang Dal, Vanvasis Kalyan Ashram and myriad other organizations. In communal violence while the Congress has played despicable role in anti-Sikh riots of 1984, it has also been the mute witness to the series of anti-Muslim riots and pogrom against Muslims. The justice to the victims of violence has not been actively pursued by the Congress, wherever it has been the ruling formation, Mumbai violence of 1992-93 being the worst example of ignoring and marginalizing the victims of carnage. The Muslims have also suffered at the hands of Congress ruled Governments in the aftermath of acts of terror, particularly those of Mecca Masjid, Malegaon, Ajmer and Samjhauta express blasts. In the aftermath of the blasts Muslim youth were arrested, tortured, their carriers as young men crushed and later they released for the lack of any credible evidence whatsoever.

Still despite all these lapses Muslim community has realized that Congress is a lesser evil, more particularly after the Gujarat anti-Muslim pogrom under the leadership of Narendra Modi, where the transformation of a democratic set up to a semi-fascist Hindu rashtra is more than visible. They have also seen that the real culprits of bomb blasts mentioned above belonged to the RSS pantheon, for which BJP made all the efforts to shield them.

This distinction between Congress and BJP seems to be more or less clear and when one reflects on the acts of commission and omission of NDA Government at the centre between 1998 and 2004. Having kept aside the BJP as an electoral option what happens to Congress claim to be a secular party or the one committed to interests of minorities. There is a mixed bag here. On one side Congress has instituted Sachar Committee and Rangnath Misra Commission, which have given the true picture of the plight of Muslims. At the same time the implementation

of the recommendations of these reports is too slow, if at all. The intimidated Muslim minority is looking for policies which can lift it up from the stifling atmosphere of ghettos in which they have been forced to live due to the massive communal violence and the preceding and accompanying demonization of the community in the social space. A large section of community wants quotas, but putting it as an electoral promise cannot fool the community, which is seeing the dismal fate of Sachar Committee and Rangnath Misra Commission.

The Batla House encounter, the refusal of the UPA II Government to institute a proper inquiry into it and the accompanying demonization of Muslim youth was a big blow to the community which is struggling against odds to come out of ghettoization and wishes to embrace modern education and take advantage of opportunities to the best of its capabilities, which at present are not adequate to pull it out of the morass in which it is trapped. This Batla House encounter and the negative attitude of the Congress for a proper inquiry committee showed that Congress does not have courage to take up the issue of security of Muslims in the right earnest. Mere tears don't protect you. The event in the neighboring Rajasthan, where the police entered the mosque and opened fire to kill those inside was also something which cannot be pardoned at all.

Congress seems to be a mixed platform and a pragmatic party as far as the principles of secularism are concerned. It will go this far and refuse to take the decisive steps for principled democratic-secular values. One knows that the state apparatus has also been heavily communalized and it takes a strong will power to take up principled secular stand and to live up to that. In UP it seems the Muslim voters had the choice between Mulayam Singh and Congress. Mulayam had also temporarily allied with Kalyan Singh, who had presided over the demolition of Babri mosque, but that was a brief alliance. Riots in Mau and other places had erupted during the Mulayam regime. Here surely Mulayam must have sounded like the lesser evil vis a vis BJP or Congress.

Is this the same Congress, which had the glorious tradition of Mahatma Gandhi and Pundit Nehru, who staked their all for preservation of secular values? With the present dithering attitude of the Congress leadership such claims are nowhere close to acceptable. Many a Congress youth are also much communalized. One does not know whether this grand old party, is making its workers know about what secularism is, what is the truth behind the prevalent biases against minorities; how Gandhi (Mohandas) had ensured the Hindu-Muslim unity by staking his life and how Jawaharlal stood like a rock supporting the edifice of plural values. A party is made by the workers and their mindset. While leadership dithers on such issues the workers, by and large have no clue as to how to take up the issues of Muslim minorities, battered by the onslaught of communal violence and communal politics. UP Assembly election results apart from other things are a pointer for the party to take up the legacy of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, if it wants to make a positive contribution to Indian democracy. □□□