

# The Minority Factor

Everybody is somebody's voter. And minority community people are treated as non-committed voters by almost all parties, mainstream or regional. So all are in a rat race of wooing them promising paradise after the poll. With the 15th general election just a few weeks away the parties in power enjoyed the luxury of public relations bonanza through government advertisements till the model code of conduct came into force with the announcement of five-phase poll from 16 April. Also, the sudden spurt in foundation-stone laying ceremony by central and state ministers and dignitaries marked the beginning of spring festival or election season. Minority card apart caste question gets redefined and rearranged particularly in north India where nothing but politics based on caste and religion works.

But minority vote has acquired the dubious distinction of being viewed as 'bank' for some parties. Muslims constitute 15 percent of Indian population and play deciding role in the victory or defeat of different political parties in north India. They matter in no minor way in the outcome of poll in eastern India as well.

The hard reality is that no political party, 'national' or otherwise, can win elections without muslim support in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh—the states that decide the fate of Delhi sultanate. Congress used to rule Delhi without much difficulty so long as muslim voters of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar were its 'vote banks'. With the late Rajiv Gandhi laying the foundation stone of Ram Temple in Ayodhya and opening the lock of Babri mosque for Ram worshippers, the scenario changed radically. Sonia Gandhi's Congress is yet to recover from the minority shock it received immediately after the Ayodhya tragedy.

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the sole gainer from communal back-lash after the Babri episode initially ignored minority vote hoping, not without reasons, that it could manage to reach Delhi by polarising hindu votes only while forcing others to scramble for minority vote. But they too have realised the bitter truth that their hindu phobia cannot work. They too need minority support to posit themselves as an alternative to Congress. As a result they are, of late, promoting a number of muslim leaders to bat for them with a view to acquiring a little bit of secular credibility without much success, of course. Besides Muslims, Christian minority community people too see BJP as a threat to their religious identity, particularly after the recent attacks on tribal Christians in Orissa and Chattisgarh. The real contenders for minority vote in Uttar Pradesh are Mulayam Singh Yadav's Samajwadi Party and Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party but their very approach to minority voters is no less communal than BJP's.

Incidentally, communists in India, like their anti-communist counterparts, are equally worried about the minority syndrome. The ruling Marxists of Bengal are now doubly apprehensive about whether their secular credentials will at all sell in vote market, particularly after recent reversals in two or three bypolls. They have lost both Nandigram and Bishnupur West by-elections with huge margins to Trinamul Congress. Both these assembly segments have a sizeable muslim voters. Ironically CPM pitted a muslim candidate in Bishnupur West with a 22 percent muslim electorate, with a little bit of subtle communal overtone, only to discover at the end with utter dismay that their tricks did not work. Minority community voters have virtually rejected CPM's ploy to peddle minority communalism in the form of announcing a number of projects for their development on the eve of poll. In 2006 CPM won this constituency with a margin of 4000 votes, only to lose it by a whopping 30095 votes, within a span of just three years. So the minority factor matters.

Many regional parties are now desperately trying to project themselves as pro-minority while virulently criticising the communal BJP, for the sake of criticism. True, in

many areas muslim votes, like other non-muslim votes, are now determined by regional politics. No doubt it is a healthy development that minority community people are less swayed by emotive issues these days.

The politics of vote bank is crumbling. Soft communalism, rather disguised communalism advocated by the so-called progressive forces, including communists, is getting exposed.

In India election is being seen as hard bargaining. And no political party can ignore the minority factor in this bargaining. □□□