How to (Not) Study Muslim Electoral Responses?

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The aim of this short note is to engage with a few issues raised by Manindra Nath Thakur in his article, ‘How do Muslims Vote?: Case of Seemanchal Parliamentary Elections’ (Studies in Indian Politics, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 81–93). More specifically, I would like to address two central themes: (a) what is Muslim community, politically? This question is related to the ‘conceptual’ imagination of Indian Muslim community (not communities, as the author tends to use Hindu and Muslim as perceptible conceptual categories) and its engagement with electoral politics; (b) how to theorize Muslim electoral behaviour? This issue is concerned with the explanatory capacity of an argument. The note does not intentionally use election data produced by Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS)-Lokniti simply to avoid an unnecessary debate on survey research versus ethnography. Instead, the note is based on a rereading of the ethnographic details given in the article as evidences.

The author agrees with the fact that Muslim community is divided on caste and class lines. However, he does not wish to overstretch Muslim diversity argument. He notes:

it does not mean that there is any guarantee they are voting according to…sociological categories…the fact that the Muslim community is constituted of many castes and multiple social or economic aspirations does not give sufficient reasons to believe that the idea of vote bank is also a myth. (p. 83)

In order to justify this contention, the author evokes the famous ‘security’ argument. According to him:

The minority community in many cases suffers from insecurity, and therefore, en bloc voting should be seen as a form of collective action towards ensuring political presence…In a liberal democracy such collective action is not uncommon…the choices are made on the consideration of many factors and there are regional variations too. However, the minority insecurity seems to be the most important factor at the moment when the rise of BJP, a party based on the ideology of Hindutva, seems to be inevitable…the minority insecurity may always remain a factor, which may every now and then play a role in going for en bloc voting. (p. 84)
It would certainly be inappropriate to think that the sociological plurality determines the electoral behaviour of any identifiable social–cultural group. However, there is a need to revisit the ‘Muslim security argument’, particularly because the author seems to sketch it out as an explanatory template.

There are three problems with this formulation. First of all, we must ask: is ‘Muslim security’ an ahistorical, inflexible political phenomenon? This question is important because Muslim security has always been a reference point for post-colonial Muslim political discourse. It is true that the Partition riots and subsequent violence against Muslims in the country made the security of Muslim a major electoral issue in the 1950s. The idea of ‘security’ continued to be translated in various ways. For instance, protection of life and property during communal riots, protection of Muslim Personal Law and the protection of Urdu and *wakf* were defined primarily as concerns of Muslim security.

The narrative of Muslim security was transformed in the 1970s, when a rather radical Muslim politics emerged in north India. The formation of the All India Muslim Personal Law Board in 1972 and the rise of the Imam of Jama Masjid as a major Muslim political figure contributed to a new political language of rights and dignity. In this case, the ‘Muslim security’ was broadly defined in terms of an assertion to uphold the validity of minority rights given by the Constitution. The political role played by the Babri Masjid Movement Coordination Committee (1986–1988) is a revealing example in this regard (Ahmed, 2014c).

The emergence of Pasmanda Muslim politics in the recent years has a different effect on the meanings of Muslim security. Pasmanda politics has raised the question of internal configuration of power in Muslim societies for making a case for egalitarian secular affirmative action (Ahmed, 2014a). ‘Muslim security’, in this sense, is conceptualized as a constitutional assurance to get the benefits of affirmative action. This was the reason why the Sachar Commission Report in 2006 focuses on three main ideas: identity, security and equity!

These trajectories of ‘Muslim security’ thesis, we must note, have also been interpreted in various forms at regional and local levels. Mohammad Sajjad (2014), in his recent book, *Muslim Politics in Bihar*, demonstrates how Urdu politics was played in the 1960s Bihar in the name of Muslim security. Similarly, the edited volume by Laurent Gayer and Christophe Jaffrelot (2012), *Muslims in Indian Cities: Trajectories of Marginalization*, maps out various forms of Muslim insecurities at the local level. Thakur, on the other hand, uses the term ‘Muslim security’ rather liberally and does not tell us the specific meaning of security/insecurity that emerges out from his focus group discussions with Muslim respondents at local level. Although he refers to Gujarat violence of 2002, Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) then prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi’s anti-Muslim image, a dispute relating to a *qabristan* (graveyard) in Purnea and even a CD that was distributed during the time of election, these perceptible security themes at local level are not followed up.

The direct relationship between Muslim security and en bloc voting is the second problematic issue. On the basis of his ethnographic fieldwork, Thakur tells us that: (a) Muslims of the region decided to defeat the BJP; and (b) eventually, unlike the Hindus of the region, the Muslims voted en bloc and the BJP lost all four seats! To substantiate these broad generalizations, Thakur offers two evidences: a brief
description of his group discussion, where he came to know that a meeting held in a mosque of ‘Purnea and a number of Maulavis and Madrasa teachers volunteered to carry the message to the remote areas. Within no time the message was spread and it became clear that the Congress candidate was out of the fray and the contest was now between the BJP and the JDU candidates’ (p. 91). The ‘vote margin’ is the second evidence. Thakur says:

the evidence of the en bloc voting of the Muslim voters can also be adduced from data about the vote margin in the 2009 and 2014 elections...One can easily note the huge margin by which BJP was defeated in the 2014 elections and conclude that such a defeat would not have been possible without the en bloc Muslim voting against the BJP and probably it was more against the so-called Modi wave. (p. 91)

It is true that the political choices are always made at the constituency level. It is also true that social groups, including Muslims, do constitute various electoral coalitions at this level that often play a decisive role in the election process. However, unlike Thakur’s generalization, such electoral coalitions are not necessarily guided by certain discernable ‘identity-oriented’ group interests. Let us take an example to elaborate this point. In Purnea, we are told, there was a discussion on three terms indicating three phases of the election process: *charcha* (debate), *parcha* (handbills) and *kharcha* (expenses). Elaborating these terms, Thakur says,

…it is only in the third phase, that is the *kharcha* phase, which came two days before the elections, a slogan became popular: Amarnath Tiwari (the Congress candidate) band *kiwadi* (door is closed), which means that Mr. Amarnath Tiwari has closed his door and stopped giving money for ‘election expenditure’. This ‘election expenditure’ is not the usual documented expenditure, but the money that is spent in the name of booth *kharcha*. This money is given to the perceived community leaders to ensure voters turn out in favor of the candidate and it is given in the name of booth expenses. (p. 91)

Can we identify *kharcha* as an identifiable collective Muslim issue of security at the local level, which eventually forced ‘them’ to vote en bloc?

The fieldwork details given in the article seem to suggest that a momentary and fragile Muslim coalition emerged at the constituency level. It was *momentary* because the slogans like ‘defeat Modi/BJP’ did not inevitably provoke Muslim sub-groups to act like a political community. For instance, as Thakur tells us, the Angika Muslims, a sub-community in this region, were expecting BJP ticket for a couple of Angika Muslim candidates for the legislative assembly (p. 89). Since the BJP did not fulfil this demand, Angika Muslims also went against the BJP in the elections. In other words, the amalgamation of specific group (sub-group!) interests forces local Muslim political elite to come together and form a short-lived electoral alliance.

Nevertheless, the Muslims voters, like other social groups, participated in the election process primarily at the constituency level. There is no evidence that suggests that Muslim voters actually vote strategically or en bloc at the regional level in favour of any one particular party. BJP’s defeat in these consistencies, in this sense, cannot entirely be attributed to Muslim political response. Since the author is only concerned with Hindu–Muslim binary, he fails to notice the other local political configurations that could have played more decisive role. In fact, the vote margin (Table 3) evidence that Thakur uses to show en bloc voting by Muslims, actually underline this constituency-specific political attitude. (By the way, it is technically impossible to deduct voting patterns of a particular religious group from the data collected by the Election Commission of India. The article does not tell us any methodological justification in this case!)
This brings us to the third problem. The author ignores the crucial distinction between the ‘community’ and the ‘community elites’. The term ‘Muslims’ appears as an identifiable closed conceptual construct—as if all Muslims of the region (despite being socially as well as linguistically diversified) are fully aware of their political interests and the task of the community elite is simply to represent the common will of the group. Interestingly, however, the description given in the article clearly goes against this assumption. We are told that *kharcha* is always given to Muslim community leaders in Purnea and there were a few Muslim individuals among the Angika Muslims who were hoping to get BJP ticket! Is it appropriate to think that these ‘Muslim’ individuals represent Muslim security concerns? And/or local Muslim communities are not governed by any power structure!

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The author, it seems, is more interested in offering a general theory for national-level Muslim voting pattern. In fact, the ‘case study’ of Seemanchal, which according to the author cannot be studied through any sample survey method, is presented as a ‘representative sample’ of specific kind. The intention, in this sense, is to discover a few ‘fundamental conceptual traces’ that can help in developing a grand explanatory framework. The author, for example, talks of an interesting Indian technique of group discussion, *purvpaksha* and *uttarpaksha*, that is drawn from Indian intellectual tradition. He says:

During my discussion with the politically active members of the community and the candidates, I used the argumentative technique of Indian intellectual tradition. In this technique, we need to formulate a ‘purvapaksha’, a viewpoint which could be projected as one’s own and use it to provoke the interviewee who is supposedly of the counter viewpoint, which is called ‘uttarpaksha’. One can use purvapaksha and uttarpaksha interchangeably in order to generate a debate. Through this debate it was possible to capture the arguments being used to convince the voters from either of the sides. One can then evaluate these arguments and go beyond the question of what happened in these elections and address the question of why it happened that way. In this case it was possible not only to find out how the Muslim community voted, but also to capture the reasons they considered for voting the way they did. I think this method allows us to capture the dynamics of the micropolitics and its processes. (p. 86)

The outcomes of this interesting and overtly ‘Indian’ technique of argumentation are equally fascinating. The author discovers the working of ‘Muslim mind’ without even doing any systematic analysis. He says, ‘while doing the focus group meeting, I could sense the mind of the Muslim voters, which was influenced by the feeling of insecurity as the memory of Gujarat violence was invoked in a big way’ (p. 91).

Methodologically speaking, ethnographic research is not merely about collecting exhaustive life stories of groups and individuals; nor is it just an account of researcher’s observations and feelings. Instead, political ethnography aims at extracting the locally constituted meanings of political events and processes. Mukulika Banerjee’s fascinating account of election process at local level is a revealing example in this regard. Banerjee (2007), while answering the big question, ‘why do people vote?’, tells us how electoral politics eventually turns out to be a ‘sacred event’ in a village. Thakur’s ‘Indian’ technique of argumentation, however, works in a different way. He does not go to the field to discover something unexpected or new; rather, as it appears, his aim is to confirm an already established hypothetical observation. It could be the reason why the article begins with the old story of Muslim under-representation!
The discovery of this ‘ultimate reality’ of Muslim mind is further used to deconstruct the ways in which the Muslim voting patterns are intellectually understood. Thakur tells us that there are two extreme positions on this subject: a few intellectuals argue that Muslim vote bank is a myth; while others believe that Muslims vote strategically. To underline these extreme positions, Thakur uses one blog post and one newspaper article (though in the footnote, a 48 years old *Economic and Political Weekly* article is also mentioned!).

Three important points need to be underlined here. First, the electoral behaviour of Muslims of India is a highly debatable subject. Scholars like Gopal Krishna and Imtiaz Ahmad in the 1970s; Mushirul Hasan, Zoya Hasan, Omar Khalidi and Asghar Ali Engineer in the 1980 and 1990s; and Yogendra Yadav, Ashutosh Varshney, Steven Wilkinson, A.K. Verma, Christophe Jaffrelot, Sanjeev Alam and the author of this note have written extensively on Muslim electoral behaviour in recent years. These scholars have approached this issue in a variety of ways and come out with a number of distinctive arguments about Muslim political behaviour. To club them into a few ‘extreme’ categories is intellectually unfair.

Second and perhaps more importantly, the argument that Muslim voting behaviour is highly diversified is primarily based on various all-India-level studies. The CSDS-Lokniti election studies have shown that there is no all-India-level pattern of Muslim voting. The argument does not rule out the fact that specific Muslim group(s) might vote for a particular candidate/party at the constituency level. However, such voting patterns do not reflect any ‘national Muslim aspiration’. Precisely for this reason, the Muslim vote share of the BJP becomes very significant—because even the BJP is not always considered as anti-Muslim political party at local level.

Finally, Thakur uses his ethnographic findings to underline the defensive attitude of a few middle-class ‘Muslim scholars’. According to him, ‘there is tendency among Muslim scholars to suggest...en bloc or strategic voting is a myth’ (p. 84). Who are these middle-class ‘Muslim’ scholars? Those who work on Islam and Muslim societies in India; or those who are Muslims (by name) and also work on Islam/Muslims? This difference is not entirely clear in this article. However, such sweeping generalizations might provoke us to ask a very similar and overtly essentialist question: is it reasonable to describe those intellectuals who work on Hindu religion/Hindutva as ‘Hindu scholars’?

Writing in the 1970s, Imtiaz Ahmad highlights two limitations of sociological–political research on Indian Muslim communities: historicism—the tendency to employ historical facts/categories available in the historical literature to understand contemporary Muslim societies; and, the macro generalizations—the conscious endeavour to identify a fixed ‘model’ for analyzing diverse Muslim social groups (Ahmad, 1972). Although Thakur’s article does not evoke any historical category for studying Muslim communities of Seemanchal, he certainly goes for a macro generalization without paying adequate attention to his case study. It seems Imtiaz Ahmad’s concerns are still relevant!

**References**


For an excellent discussion, see Susewind and Dhattiwala (2014).

For an elaboration of this point, see Ahmed (2014b).


