



Political representation of a minority: Muslim representation in contemporary India

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ABSTRACT

Set against the political ascendance of the Hindu Nationalist BJP, this paper engages with the issue of political representation of Indian Muslims in the legislative arena. It gives an overview of broad trends and patterns in Muslim representation and seeks to draw out conclusions by focusing exclusively on the last two parliamentary elections. The paper argues while the Muslims have remained underrepresented in the legislative arena since Independence, the rise of BJP on a decidedly majoritarian political and social agenda makes it distinct from the earlier period. The attempt here is to flag out systemic shifts in Indian politics and what they mean for Indian Muslims. How different these shifts are for the Muslims compared to their past experience? And what are its possible implications?

Introduction

Fair representation is a desirable goal in a democracy. However, in a society characterized by extreme plurality substantive representation on its own may not always be sufficient to ensure that the representative claims of numerically vulnerable minorities are equally met.¹ Therefore, the descriptive representativeness of a polity becomes a necessary condition, although by no means sufficient one, to ensure that marginal voices are not only seen but also heard.² Against this backdrop, it will be instructive to look at the representative claims of Indian democracy by focusing on persistent underrepresentation of Indian Muslims in the political realm.

Muslims in India, as per the 2011 census, comprise 14 percent of the country's population. However, there are only 5 percent Muslim representatives in the 17th Lok Sabha after the 2019 parliamentary election, same as the average Muslim representation in the Lok Sabha since Independence. In 2019 there were 25 Muslim representatives elected to the Lok Sabha compared to 22 in the previous one. Hence, political underrepresentation of Indian Muslims is hardly a recent development, and historically the community representation has remained far below its share in the population. The community also lags behind on almost all socio-economic indicators.³

Therefore, the socio-economic and political marginalization of Indian Muslims has remained a longstanding feature of Indian democracy.

However, the spatial expansion of Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), a party with a majoritarian political worldview, and greater resonance of its political and cultural agenda makes it pertinent to look at the present position of Indian Muslims, and to see how different it is from the past? And whether the electoral and ideological dominance of the BJP has affected the ability of the traditional claimant of Muslim votes to articulate the representational claims of the Muslim community?

Thus, it becomes important to engage with the question of Muslim representation in contemporary India in the light of the BJP in power, and what it means for Indian Muslims. The paper is an attempt to analyze Muslim representation against the backdrop of 2019 parliamentary elections, and how it is the culmination of long-term shifts in Indian politics resulting in a decisively majoritarian turn of democracy in India.

Patterns of Muslim political representation since independence

The 1947 Partition of the Indian subcontinent and the creation of East and West Pakistan reduced Indian Muslims from a preeminent religious group with a majority in two large regions to a status of a dispersed minority.⁴ The largest concentration of Indian Muslims is in the three Indian states of Uttar Pradesh (UP), Bihar, and West Bengal (WB). Muslims are a majority only in the Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir (J&K) and Lakshadweep. The three other states with a sizable Muslim population are Assam, Telangana, and Kerala. Therefore, Muslims are not only a dispersed minority but are also substantially outnumbered in comparison to other social groups in a majority of Indian states. Muslims are a minority in 97 percent of the parliamentary constituencies (Table 1) and a majority only in 15 seats. As per the 2011 census data, 40 percent of the Muslims in India reside in urban areas.⁵ This is much higher than any other religious group in India and makes the community most urbanized in India.⁶ However, majority of parliamentary constituencies in India are predominantly rural and a substantial number of Muslims reside in 38 percent parliamentary constituencies which are semi-urban or urban in character. There are only seven seats in this cluster where Muslims are present in substantial numbers.

Table 1. Lok Sabha constituencies by Muslim population.

Constituency Profile	Muslim Population				Total Seats
	Less than 10%	10–19.9%	20–39.9%	40% and above	
Rural Seats	184	95	36	22	337
Semi-Rural Seats	77	47	21	6	151
Urban Seats	21	23	10	1	55
Total Seats	282	165	67	29	543

Source: Datanet India & Lokniti-CSDS Data Unit

The spatial distribution of Muslims, along with the continuation of first-past-the-post (FPTP) system in Independent India, has been detrimental for Muslim representation. Their spatial distribution has ensured that Muslims are a minority everywhere and therefore much more dependent upon the support of other groups for their political representation. The incentive to reach out and forge cross-cutting social alliances in order to reach a plurality is an important integrative function performed by the FPTP system. However, under the circumstances where the political system veers toward ethnic majoritarianism, the FPTP system is often detrimental toward minority interests, as ethnic consolidation would prevent political parties from nominating candidates from an ethnic minority group due to the fear of alienating majority community voters. Hence, the ethnic minority candidates are more likely to be elected from constituencies with a large concentration of the said group.

Democracies frequently try to address the issue of underrepresentation through compensatory constitutional mechanisms, such as quotas in legislative arena, to ensure adequate political representation of groups that may otherwise remain underrepresented. The Indian Constitution too provides for political reservation for dispersed minorities. However, unlike other dispersed minority groups, the Scheduled Castes for instance, compensatory mechanisms such as reserved seats do not exist for Muslims.⁷ Therefore, the political representation of Indian Muslims becomes conditional upon the support of other social groups. Hence, the reasons for Muslim underrepresentation in the political sphere are both institutional and spatial. This is further compounded by the legacy of the partition of the Indian subcontinent on religious grounds making the political class apprehensive of any attempt at political assertion by the Muslim community lest it may alienate the majority community.

The geographical spread of the community has been a principal factor detrimental to the formation of viable Muslim-led parties and its continuous preference of mainstream parties both at the national and regional level. The FPTP 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.⁸ Therefore, Muslim-led parties have either not met with electoral success or they have mostly succeeded in regions 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 bears testimony to this. Even in the Union Territory of Jammu & Kashmir, Muslim representatives have mostly been elected from the Muslim majority Kashmir valley.

The average Muslim representation in Lok Sabha, at 5 percent, has been significantly less than their population share. There have been only two parliamentary elections – in 1980 and 1984 – where the community representation has been closest to its population share (Table 2). This was partly the result of concerted effort by the Congress party and the other parties to galvanize support amongst the newly mobilized and politicized social groups. The era of democratic transformation and outreach also benefited the Muslim community politically. This was also facilitated by the political marginalization of the Hindu right, during this period, represented earlier by the Bhartiya Jana Sangh, and later by the BJP.

In the past, a majority of Muslim representatives were elected on the Congress party platform and this phase coincided with the period of Congress party dominance in Indian polity.⁹ The decline in the party's political fortunes overlapped with the ascendance of caste and region-based parties along with the BJP. During this phase, Muslim representatives increasingly came from non-Congress political alternatives other than the BJP.¹⁰

One of the reasons behind fewer Muslim representatives in the political arena has been the reluctance of the political parties to nominate Muslim candidates for fear of alienating other voters in the constituency.¹¹ In the period after Independence, it was the long shadow of the Partition that continued to influence the political choices of the political elites.¹² By some estimates, in the parliamentary elections held between 1955 and 1977, only 4 percent of the candidates from the major parties were Muslims.¹³ In subsequent years the percentage of Muslim candidates has nearly doubled as the number of major parties nominating Muslim candidates has

Table 2. Muslim representation in the Lok Sabha, 1952–2019.

Year	Percentage of Muslims in the Lok Sabha	Muslim Percentage in Population
1st Lok Sabha 1952–1957	4	10
2nd Lok Sabha 1957–1962	4	10
3rd Lok Sabha 1962–1967	4	11
4th Lok Sabha 1967–1971	5	10
5th Lok Sabha 1971–1977	5	11
6th Lok Sabha 1977–1980	6	11
7th Lok Sabha 1980–1984	9	11
8th Lok Sabha 1984–1989	8	11
9th Lok Sabha 1989–1991	6	11
10th Lok Sabha 1991–1996	5	12
11th Lok Sabha 1996–1998	5	12
12th Lok Sabha 1998–1999	5	12
13th Lok Sabha 1999–2004	5	12
14th Lok Sabha 2004–2009	6	12
15th Lok Sabha 2009–2014	5	13
16th Lok Sabha 2014–2019	4	14
17th Lok Sabha 2019-	5	14
Total	6	11

The figures in the table have been rounded off to the nearest whole number.

Source: Statistical Reports of Election Commission of India

increased.¹⁴ However, while the number of Muslim candidates has increased, they are still far less likely to get elected.

The decline in Congress party's political fortunes in northern India in the 1980s coincided with the rise of Janata Dal (JD) and later by parties such as Samajwadi Party (SP) and Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in UP, and Rashtriya Janta Dal (RJD) in Bihar. In order to fill in the space vacated by the Congress party, these parties tried to reach out to Muslims as well, nominating Muslim candidates was part of this outreach.¹⁵ Therefore, since the 1990s Muslim candidates have been primarily nominated from these parties in northern India or by Congress party offshoots such as the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) in the east. The Muslim-led parties such as the AIMIM, IUML, and AIUDF in recent years have continued to maintain their influence over their respective strongholds. Though the Congress party nominates fewer candidates than in the past, the success rate of its candidates remains far better than that of the other non-BJP parties nominating Muslim candidates.¹⁶ The Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM) too has historically nominated fewer Muslim candidates but has had a respectable success rate.

A majority of Muslim representatives in the Lok Sabha since 1952 have come from just four states – UP, WB, Bihar, and Kerala – and the Union Territory of J&K (Table 3). This is not surprising because as per the 2011 census, 46 percent of Muslims in India reside in just three states – UP, WB, and Bihar. Though both J&K and Kerala account for just 5 percent of the Muslim population in the country, they are heavily concentrated in these regions.

The pattern of Muslim representation as per the constituency profile further underscores the importance of spatial distribution of the community along with wider systemic changes in the party system and the nature of political competition. In each successive election till the 14th Lok Sabha, a majority of Muslim representatives were elected from the constituencies where the community was in a minority.¹⁷ However, in the last three parliamentary elections, Muslim representatives have mainly been elected from constituencies where the community comprised at least 40 percent of the population.¹⁸

One way of interpreting this is to focus on the nature of electoral system and its impact on Muslim political representation. The imperative to reach out to other social groups in order to shore up a plurality ensured that Muslims remained vital to the electoral calculation of not only the Congress party in its heydays but subsequently also of the caste-based and regional parties too.¹⁹ In the past, Muslims were nominated by these parties from the constituencies where they were a minority on the strength of their organizational capability to ensure voting along party lines.

The subsequent decline in Muslim representation in the Lok Sabha has coincided with the ideological consolidation of the Hindu right under the BJP.²⁰ The rise of the BJP and the conservative ideology and the issues it

Table 3. State-wise distribution of Muslim members in the Lok Sabha, 1952–2019.

State	Percentage
UP	24
West Bengal	17
Bihar	12
Kerala	8
Jammu and Kashmir	8
Andhra Pradesh	5
Assam	5
Mysore/Karnataka	5
Tamil Nadu	4
Maharashtra	3
Lakshadweep	3
Madhya Pradesh	2
Haryana	1
Puducherry	1
Gujarat	1
Rajasthan	.4
Telangana	.4
Punjab	.2
Jharkhand	.2
Delhi	.2

The figures in the table have been rounded off to the nearest whole number.

Source: Statistical Reports of Election Commission of India

came to represent further shrunk even the little political space available to the Indian Muslims. However, the party's reliance on allies, many of which had Muslims as an important support base, to expand its footprints beyond its traditional strongholds in the north and the west had an offsetting influence on the more exclusionary political agenda of the BJP.²¹ The political mobilization along religious lines was further neutralized by the rise of caste mobilization.²² Numerically at least, Muslim representation since 1989 remained flat till 2014 parliamentary elections.

Parliamentary election an inflection point for Muslim representation

The 2014 parliamentary election constituted a landmark election. For the first time in three decades, a single party was able to win a majority on its own. The verdict also heralded the replacement of the Congress party by the BJP as the central point of Indian politics.²³ The massive consolidation of Hindu voters behind the BJP and its Hindu nationalist agenda played a crucial role in its performance.²⁴ This support for BJP's agenda may not always have been anti-religious minorities but it was decidedly majoritarian and expressively religious. The political success of the Hindu nationalist therefore lay in its ability to weave a pan-India Hindu identity and a gradual transformation of India into an "ethno-democracy."²⁵

The performance of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) decimated the incumbent Congress party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA). The state-based parties and the regional parties too were unable to withstand the electoral and the ideological challenge posed by the BJP. Some of these parties such as the BSP and SP in UP, RJD in Bihar, and the Congress party have been the traditional claimants of Muslim votes in the past and nominated substantial number of Muslim candidates. **Therefore, ,** a large proportion of Muslim representatives have come from these parties .²⁶ The poor electoral performance by these parties adversely impacted the Muslim representation.

The performance of Muslim candidates in the 2014 parliamentary elections was abysmal. There were only 22 Muslim candidates elected to the Lok Sabha, the lowest representation of the community since 1952.²⁷ This was also the first instance in the history of Independent India where the ruling party at the Center did not have any representation from the community in the Lok Sabha.²⁸ All the seven Muslim candidates fielded by the party lost the election. Most significantly the party did not give a ticket to any Muslim from UP, the state with the largest population of Muslims in India. Prior to the 2014 parliamentary election, the largest number of Muslim candidates elected to the Lok Sabha had come from UP. The poor electoral performance by both SP and BSP therefore affected the electoral prospects of their Muslim candidates as well.

The BJP, on its own or as part of an alliance, is in power in 15 states. The onward march of the BJP since the 2014 Lok Sabha election has adversely affected Muslim representation in the state legislatures as well. There are only three Muslim legislators from the BJP among the 1282 party legislators in the 28 state assemblies.²⁹ Muslim representatives constituted only 8 percent of total legislative members in the state assemblies prior to the 2014 Lok Sabha election. The community representation in the state legislatures after the last round of state assembly election in 2018 had reduced to 7 percent.

The success of the BJP and its ideology lies in effectively weaving a political narrative that has pitched a monolith minority community against a united majority thereby rendering Muslim votes dispensable. Historically, the BJP has given fewer tickets to Muslims, and the party has rarely made a concerted effort to reach out to the community, lest it may alienate its traditional supporters. By the time of the 2019 parliamentary election approached the BJP had succeeded in consolidating its hold over the majority community by successfully outbidding other claimants of Hindu votes. The fear of losing the Hindu votes made even the traditional claimants of Muslim votes skeptical of articulating the community interests lest it may alienate their support among the Hindu voters.

Muslim representation and the 2019 parliamentary election

In the 2019 parliamentary election, the BJP-led NDA once again won an emphatic victory by improving upon its 2014 performance. The increase in the NDA's tally came largely on the back of BJP's improved performance. The BJP for the first time contested more seats than the Congress party and managed to add 21 seats to its 2014 tally of 282 seats, a sign not only of Congress party's precarious position but also indicative of BJP's stronger position vis-à-vis party allies.

The BJP campaign once again revolved around the larger-than-life persona of the incumbent Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The campaign was high on nationalist tropes, in the aftermath of the *Pulwama* attack and retaliatory counter-attack in *Balakot*, and helped the BJP both consolidate its hold and improve its position, and placed the party in a position to set the agenda for the election by pushing the opposition on a backfoot.

The campaign itself was preceded over time by incidents of lynching's over cow slaughter, sustained drive against offering Friday prayers publicly, renaming of cities and streets with Muslim sounding names, canvassing for the abolition of Triple *Talaq*, opposition to inter-faith marriages, branding of activists speaking on behalf of religious minorities as "terrorist sympathizers," and a strident stand toward the Kashmir issue. Together these contributed toward strengthening the majoritarian sentiments in the country. Therefore, it is useful to engage with the issue of Muslim political representation set against the rising tide of majoritarianism.

Nomination pattern

In the 2019 parliamentary election, there was an increase in the total number of Muslim candidates in the electoral fray. However, nearly one-fourth of them contested as an independent, and another 63 percent belonged to smaller parties with negligible presence on the ground. Historically, very few candidates contesting either as independents or on the platform of small parties have won.³⁰ This has been a general trend and holds true for Muslims as well.

Therefore, a massive 88 percent of Muslim candidates were not serious contestants to begin with. In 2019, only 12 percent candidates were nominated by political parties who either on their own or in an alliance had some standing on the ground. The number of candidates nominated from such parties declined by 168 candidates compared to the 2014 parliamentary election (Table 4).

An analysis of the pattern of Muslim candidate nomination and representation in the Lok Sabha is revealing.³¹ The 25 Muslim legislators in the 17th Lok Sabha are from 11 different parties and come from 8 different states and

Table 4. Muslim candidates in the Lok Sabha elections 2014–2019.

Party	2014		Party	2019	
	Muslim Candidates	Percentage		Muslim Candidates	Percentage
Viable Parties	315	35	Viable Parties	147	12
Others	264	30	Others	781	63
Independents	314	35	Independents	320	26
Total	893		Total	1248	
Total Number of Candidates	8794	10	Total Number of Candidates		15

The figures in the table have been rounded off to the nearest whole number.
Source: Statistical Reports of Election Commission of India

2 Union Territories (Table 5). There were 119 Muslim candidates fielded by these parties and the success rate of these candidates was a modest 21 percent. In 2019, the maximum number of Muslim candidates in the Lok Sabha belonged to AITC. The other parties from which Muslim candidates were nominated and elected are BSP, INC, Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), SP, AIUDF, IUML, CPM, Jammu Kashmir National Conference (JKNC), AIMIM, and Lok Janshakti Party (LJP). The current Lok Sabha has four Muslim representatives from AITC, and three each from JKNC, BSP, IUML, SP, and INC, two from AIMIM, and one each from CPM, NCP, AIUDF, and LJP.

A large majority of Muslim candidates were nominated from the constituencies where Muslims are in a minority. However, this is because both the BSP and the Congress nominated a majority of their Muslim candidates from such constituencies. The remaining nine parties on the other hand gave tickets to Muslim candidates mostly from the constituencies where Muslim constituted at least 40 percent of the population. In 2019, 72 percent of the total Muslim representatives in the 17th Lok Sabha came from these 29 constituencies. The

Table 5. Pattern of nomination and representation by Muslim percentage in the Lok Sabha constituencies in 2019.

Party	Less than 10%		10%–19.9%		20%–39.9%		40% & above	
	Nominated	Winner	Nominated	Winner	Nominated	Winner	Nominated	Winner
AIMIM	-	-	-	-	1	1	2	1
AITC	2	-	1	-	1	1	7	3
AIUDF	-	-	-	-	-	-	2	1
BSP	8	1	15		10	1	5	2
CPM	-	-	1	1	2	-	5	0
INC	0	0	13	0	7	0	14	3
IND	96	0	94	0	65	0	65	0
IUML	2	-	4	1	0	-	2	2
JKN	-	-	-	-	-	-	3	3
LJP	-	-	1	1	-	-	-	-
NCP	-	-	1	0	-	-	2	1
SP	-	-	4	0	1	0	3	3

Source: Statistical Reports of Election Commission

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Table 6. Patterns of Muslim representation in the Lok Sabha by constituency profile (2009–2019).

2009	Muslim Population				Total Seats
	Less than 10%	10–19.9%	20–39.9%	40% and above	
Rural Seats	1	3	4	13	21
Semi-Urban Seats	1	2	1	3	7
Urban Seats	0	0	0	1	1
Total Seats	2	5	5	17	29
2014					
Rural Seats	1	2	1	14	18
Semi-Urban Seats	0	1	0	2	3
Urban Seats	0	0	0	1	1
Total Seats	1	3	1	17	22
2019					
Rural Seats	1	2	2	12	17
Semi-Urban Seats	0	1	1	5	7
Urban Seats	0	0	0	1	1
Total Seats	1	3	3	18	25

Source: Lokniti-CSDS Data Unit

lone NDA Muslim representative in the Lok Sabha was elected on LJP ticket. None of the six Muslim candidates from the BJP were able to win though they were nominated from constituencies with substantial Muslim population.

The decline of the Congress party and reversal in political fortunes of parties such as the SP and BSP, and the political ascendance of the BJP have adversely impacted the Muslim candidature from the parties which have traditionally given tickets to Muslims. The rise of the BJP, and its aggressively pursued Majoritarian agenda in recent years, has resulted in a more pronounced Hindu–Muslim binary. The fear of losing out to the BJP has made even the parties which have traditionally nominated Muslims to vary in nominating Muslim candidates from seats other than the ones where they are in substantial numbers.

Therefore, even though there has been no dramatic change in Muslim representation, with the exception of the 2014 election, Muslim representatives have increasingly been elected from the constituencies with substantial number of Muslims.

Though the Indian Muslims are severely underrepresented in the lower house, the political underrepresentation of Muslims residing in semi-urban and urban constituencies is much higher compared with the community representation from rural constituencies (Table 6). The Indian Muslims are the most urbanized religious group in the country; however, the Muslim representation in the lower house from the semi-urban and urban constituencies in the last two general elections has been 1 percent in 2014 and 2 percent in 2019. The Muslim representation from the 337 predominantly rural constituencies has been 3 percent both in 2014 and 2019 parliamentary elections. There too a majority of representatives were elected from the 22 constituencies where the Muslim population was above 40 percent.

In 2009 there were 4 percent Muslim representatives in the lower house elected from the rural constituencies. Though the percentage of Muslims elected from the semi-urban and urban constituencies in 2019 has remained the same when compared with 2009 results, the Muslim representation from the rural constituencies has declined by 1 percent.

This could partly be attributed to the changed dynamics of Hindu–Muslim relationship in urban and rural India and its impact on electoral politics. The rural India for long had remained insulated from the polarization along religious axis as the main conflict was along the caste axis. For instance, an influential explanation for the Hindu–Muslim riots by Ashutosh Varshney describes riots as primarily an urban phenomenon principally due to the presence of weak civic or associational life in the urban areas.³² While Varshney’s account was mostly about urban riots, the framework proposed by Steven Wilkinson can be extended to rural setting as well as it traces the roots of Hindu–Muslim riots to the nature of political competition, and how intense political competition could deteriorate into a communal riot.³³ However, both the explanations fall short in explaining the increased religious polarization even in a rural setting which has coincided with the electoral rise of the BJP. The political ascendance of the BJP has followed what has been described as “institutionalized everyday communalism.”³⁴ An increased polarization at the local level which may not always transform into a full-fledged riot. However, this can lead to increased polarization along religious axis even in the rural areas. The changed social dynamic in the rural areas has clearly impacted the nature of political competition, whereby the salience of religious cleavage brought together the upper caste, the backward castes, and the Dalits as a bloc. This perhaps explains why there has been a decline in the number of Muslim candidates getting elected from the rural constituencies where Muslims are a minority. A marked increase in the number of Muslims getting elected only from the constituencies where Muslims are in substantial numbers is due to the increased convergence between the nature of political competition both in the rural and urban constituencies.

The winnability of a candidate has been the prime consideration while deciding the party candidature generally. The reluctance of more established parties to accommodate Muslim candidates stemmed from their assessment that most of them had bleak electoral prospects against the BJP-led NDA.³⁵ In an election fought on a hyper-nationalist platform, the fear of losing support amongst the majority community made the political parties cautious when it came to nominating Muslims. To counter this, political parties have followed a strategy of nominating Muslim candidates from the constituencies with substantial Muslim population.

Majoritarian mobilization and its impact on voting behavior

The shrill campaign rhetoric, accompanied very often by a direct appeal to majority community, by the ruling party leadership helped underline BJP's Hindu nationalist credentials successfully beat anti-incumbency sentiments.³⁶ This played a crucial role in rallying majority of Hindus behind the party.

There has been a substantial increase in voter turnout since 2009. The increased voter turnout in 2014 had been the result of both sustained efforts made by the Election Commission of India (ECI) over the years and social and political mobilization against the then Congress-led UPA government. The BJP-led NDA was the principal beneficiary of the increased voter turnout in 2014.³⁷

The success of BJP's mobilization strategy in 2019 lay in turning the incumbency toward its advantage by retaining its hold over those who had voted for the party in the previous election and simultaneously reaching out to the newer set of voters. In fact, the 67 percent voter turnout in the 2019 election was the highest ever voter turnout in any parliamentary election. As deduced from the *Lokniti-CSDS* survey even though there was an increased voter turnout across socio-religious communities, with the exception of Sikhs, the 70 percent voter turnout among the Hindu voters was significantly higher than other social groups (Table 7). Most importantly, for our case, there was only a marginal increase in voter turnout among the Muslim voters in 2019. The turnout among the Muslim voters in the last two parliamentary elections has been less than the national average, while on the other hand the turnout among the Hindu voters exceeded the national average.³⁸

The electoral success of the BJP was particularly due to its ability to galvanize the majority of Hindus as a voting bloc and also ensuring that a significant number of them voted for the party. In 2019, the BJP-led NDA had the support of 51 percent of all Hindus.³⁹ Most importantly the BJP was supported by 44 percent of the combined Hindu electorate. The party succeeded in not only consolidating its hold over its traditional support

Table 7. Likely voter turnout of socio-religious communities 2014–2019.

	2014	2019
Hindus	68	70
<i>Upper Caste</i>	68	69
<i>OBC</i>	69	71
<i>SC</i>	67	70
<i>ST</i>	72	74
Muslims	59	61
Christian	55	60
Sikh	69	61

Note: NES question on 'Did you vote' weighted by actual turnout.

Source: Lokniti-CSDS Post-Poll Survey Data

base among the caste Hindus, more significantly it further improved its performance among Dalits and Hindu tribals.⁴⁰ The massive consolidation of Hindu votes behind the BJP decimated the divided opposition and rendered the Muslim votes ineffective.

As per the *Lokniti-CSDS* post-poll election survey, the polarization of voters along Hindu–Muslim lines was acute in states with a higher percentage of Muslims.⁴¹ The survey findings show an overwhelming consolidation of Hindu votes behind the NDA in 47 percent of the total parliamentary constituencies. This is further buttressed by the fact that in 2019 the voter turnout in the 29 constituencies where Muslims are above 40 percent was significantly more than the national average.⁴² Though this was due to the increased voter turnout both among Hindus and Muslims, the Hindu voter turnout far exceeded the Muslim voter turnout.⁴³ An overwhelming 55 percent of Hindu voters voted for the BJP-led NDA in these constituencies (Table 8). This helped the BJP win on five such seats, and was runners-up in another 11. In fact, the party won on four seats previously held by Muslim candidates.

The heavy consolidation of Hindu votes behind the NDA has made Muslim votes largely ineffectual in majority of the constituencies. The heavy concentration of Muslims, and voter consolidation behind a single candidate, were the two important reasons behind the victory of 19 Muslim candidates from the 29 Muslim dominated constituencies. The electoral verdict underlined an important facet of Indian democracy in contemporary India, where not only have Muslim voters become expendable in the political arena, their representation too was relegated to only the constituencies dominated by them.

Voting preferences

Historically, the Congress party has been the most preferred party of Indian Muslims. 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 come to shape the Muslim political preferences in contemporary India.

Table 8. Vote for alliances among Hindus and Muslims by Muslim population in constituencies.

Sampled Constituencies where Muslims are:	Hindus			Muslims		
	Voted UPA	Voted NDA	Voted Others	Voted UPA	Voted NDA	Voted Others
Less than 10% population	29	47	24	56	16	28
10–19.9% population	19	56	25	50	13	37
20–39.9% population	7	59	34	42	3	55
Over 40% or more	6	55	39	27	3	70

The analysis above is only for those constituencies that fell in the NES 2019 sample.

Source: Lokniti-CSDS Post-Poll Survey Data

The received wisdom with regard to Muslim voting preferences has been that they vote as a monolith, are strategic in their voting behavior and vote as a bloc and not influenced and shaped by their gender, class, or regional location. However, in reality, the Muslim voting preferences are shaped both by the political context and the spatial concentration of the party.

As explained above, the thin distribution of Muslims under FPTP electoral system makes it politically expedient for the Muslims to support mainstream parties. Since the late 1980s, Muslim voting behavior has largely been shaped in a political context defined by the rise of Hindu nationalist BJP.

The BJP core agenda is essentially majoritarian which makes the Muslim community skeptical toward the BJP. Therefore, an important factor determining the voting preference of the Muslim community has been the ability of their chosen party to defeat the BJP. However, this too is entirely context-specific and varies from state to state. The *Lokniti-CSDS* survey data show a decline in Muslim support for the Congress party and an increased support for other non-BJP parties. The Muslim support for the BJP in 2019 remained the same as in the previous election. The community support for the non-NDA parties was also the same as the 2014 Lok Sabha election. In fact, the Muslim community has evenly supported all the non-NDA political formations since 2009 (Table 9). The near-equal support for the non-NDA political formation is the display of strategic voting behavior by the Muslim community.

There exists a large variation in terms of whom the Muslim community votes for. Even historically, Muslims voting preferences have mostly depended on the nature of electoral competition, spatial distribution of the community, and available political choices.⁴⁴ Presently, the electoral contest in the states can broadly be classified in three ways – the states where there is a direct contest between the BJP-led NDA and the Congress-led UPA, the states with a bipolar contest between the Congress-led UPA and non-BJP parties, and lastly, those characterized by a multipolar contest.

An analysis of the electoral contests in the 2019 parliamentary election reveals that states where there is a direct contest between the Congress-led UPA and the BJP-led NDA, Muslim voters tend to favor the Congress and its allies (Table 9). However, here too, the support depends upon the electoral

Table 9. Trends in voting patterns of Muslims in Lok Sabha elections 2009–2019.

Party/Alliance	2009 (%)	2014 (%)	2019 (%)
BJP	4	8	8
INC	38	38	33
OTHERS	58	54	59
NDA	6	9	9
UPA	47	45	45
NON-NDA, NON-UPA	47	46	46

Source: Lokniti-CSDS Post-Poll Survey Data

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Table 10. Survey-based estimates of nature of electoral contest and voting pattern among Muslims in key states for parliamentary elections 2019.

States by Nature of Electoral Contests	BJP+	INC+	Other Major Parties	
			Party	Votes
Bipolar Contest between BJP/allies and Congress/Allies				
Assam	NDA-7% BJP- 4%	UPA-70%	AUDF	23
Bihar	NDA-6% BJP- 4% JDU/LJP- 2%	UPA -77% INC- 33% RJD+ 44%	Others	13%
Gujarat	BJP- 25%	INC- 70%	Others	5%
Jharkhand	BJP- 11%	UPA- 78% INC – 36% JMM+42%	Others	11%
Karnataka	BJP-19%	UPA-73% INC- 33% JDS- 40%	Others	8%
Madhya Pradesh	BJP-33%	INC-67%		
Maharashtra	NDA-13% BJP - 9% Shiv Sena- 4%	UPA-86% INC-56% NCP-30%	Others	1%
Rajasthan	BJP- 19%	INC- 79%	Others	2%
Tamil Nadu	NDA-13% AIADMK+ 12% BJP -1%	UPA- 73% INC- 26% DMK+47%	Others	14%
Bipolar Contest between Congress/allies and non-BJP parties/allies				
Kerala	BJP- 2%	UPA- 65% INC – 48% IUML-15%	LDF Others	28% 5%
Multipolar Contests				
Delhi	BJP-7%	INC- 66%	Others	28%
Jammu & Kashmir	BJP- 5%	INC- 50%	JKNC JKPDP Others	14% 4% 27%
Telengana	BJP- 2%	INC- 42%	TRS Others	56% 13%
Uttar Pradesh	BJP- 8%	INC- 15%	SP BSP RLD Others	30% 30% 13% 4%
West Bengal	BJP- 12%	INC- 4%	AITC Left Front Others	70% 10% 4%

Source: NES Post-Poll Survey Data 2019

prospect of the candidates. In states like Madhya Pradesh, Assam, Gujarat, Maharashtra, and Rajasthan, Muslims have supported the Congress party more than its allies. On the other hand, in states like Tamil Nadu, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Karnataka, Congress allies have been their preferred electoral choice. Here, Tamil Nadu is an outlier since both Congress and the BJP are marginal players in the state. Therefore, we do see a sizable number of Muslims voting for the BJP alliance partner AIADMK.

In a state like Kerala, where BJP-led NDA is a marginal player, and there is essentially a bipolar contest between two large non-NDA alliances, Muslims mostly preferred the UPA this time around. However, the CPM-led Left Democratic Front (LDF) also continued to maintain a respectable support base among the Muslims.

Muslim vote fragments when there are either more viable political choices or BJP is absent from political competition. In states like UP, West Bengal, and the Union Territory of Delhi Muslims have preferred the parties which they believed stood the best chance against the BJP. However, in Telangana, where the BJP is a marginal player, the Muslim vote gets divided among several parties.

Though it is true that BJP is not the most preferred political choice for a large majority of Muslims, there is survey evidence that at least some have voted for the party both in 2014 and 2019. As per the *CSDS-Lokniti* survey findings, in the last two parliamentary elections, 8 percent Muslim voters did prefer BJP. However, the national-level aggregate hides the diversity that exists when it comes to supporting the BJP. There was some support for the BJP in the states where there was a direct contest between the BJP-led NDA and the Congress-led UPA. This support ebbs in states with multipolar contests. The absence of viable political alternatives in the first category of states makes at least some look up to the BJP as a vehicle to articulate their interests. The support for BJP though counterintuitive is not surprising and underscores the diversity among Indian Muslims. Some Muslims do prefer BJP over other parties highlights the significance of political choices made at the constituency level, where the specificity of the local societal context is significant in influencing political choices and perhaps explains Muslim support for the BJP. The rapid expansion of the BJP especially since 2014 has partially been achieved by accommodating leaders from other parties and these leaders have very often been able to hold on to their support among the Muslims.⁴⁵ The dependence on their elected representatives for quotidian work has made a section among the Muslims to reach out to the local BJP leadership. The impetus to reach a plurality at the constituency level has been a catalyst in the BJP's outreach to Muslims at the local level and also provided the community space in the local social and political coalitions.⁴⁶ Therefore, the argument about strategic behavior of Muslims needs to be qualified.

That they do not always vote as a bloc, not even for their coreligionist, is also underlined by the fact that there were nine constituencies each in 2009 and 2014, and 18 in 2019 where a Muslim candidate was a runner-up and the victory margin was less than the combined vote share of all the Muslim candidates in the constituency. Most of these were constituencies with substantial Muslim population, and where the winner was a non-Muslim candidate. A higher number of such seats even in 2019 highlight the various axis along which Muslim political choices are exercised.

Though Muslim-led parties such as the AIMIM, IUML, and AIUDF have been successful mainly in Muslim dominated constituencies, these parties too do not claim to exclusively represent Muslim interests. The nature of electoral competition at the constituency level makes them reach out to other social groups even in their respective strongholds.⁴⁷ Muslims support them not because these parties exclusively represent their interest, but because of factors such as political agenda of these parties and in some cases at least, the absence of viable political alternatives.⁴⁸

Though the skepticism toward BJP and its political agenda continues to determine Muslim voting behavior, their political choices also remain influenced by the nature of political competition and the availability of political choices at the state-level. Therefore, the community votes for a large number of parties, including the BJP, depending upon the political context. However, the parties other than the BJP remain their most preferred political choice.

The underrepresentation of Muslims in the legislative arena is certainly not a new phenomenon. Hindu nationalism too has always had its adherents. The friction between Hindus and Muslims has also been a persistent feature. However, the scale of BJP's victory in the 2014 parliamentary election, followed by its success in capturing power in majority of the states, had put the RSS and its affiliate organizations including the BJP in a position to recalibrate the ideological moorings of Indian state and society. Therefore, there is a need to acknowledge the 2014 victory as a validation of Hindu nationalist agenda and cementing of a new ideological consensus vary of making concessions toward minorities. Therefore, against this backdrop, it becomes important to look at the social and political implications of BJP's victory on Indian Muslims.

2019 verdict and its implications

The reasons for Muslim underrepresentation are complex. The dispersed geographical distribution of Muslims in India, the adoption of the FPTP system, and the absence of ameliorative mechanisms such as quotas have all worked toward the disadvantage of the Muslim community. Democracies frequently tend to adopt various compensatory mechanisms to be more accommodative of groups that might otherwise remain politically underrepresented in the absence of such measures. These measures could be both formal and informal.

The Indian Constitutional schema denies any claim of religious identity as a marker of political, social, and economic disadvantage and extends formal mechanisms to recognize religious communities only in the domain of cultural rights. Therefore, even though the Muslim community in India remains politically underrepresented and socio-economically deprived, the successive government has shied away from bringing about policy changes whereby Muslims could be brought within the ambit of reservation and affirmative action like the Scheduled castes and tribes.⁴⁹ The reasons behind this are both institutional and

political. The state institutions historically accustomed to treating minority demand solely defined by religious identity, have been uninterested to acknowledge it as a ground for policy formulation.⁵⁰ The current beneficiary of reservation too views any extension of similar provisions to religious minorities as necessarily usurping their entitlements and remain opposed to any such concession to the Muslim community.⁵¹ In a communally polarized political context, where political and social prejudiced have been politically employed to stitch expansive social coalitions by the BJP, the fear of alienating even their core supporters would act as deterrent for even the political parties desirous of Muslim votes to take community-specific initiatives to address even the socio-economic deprivation of Indian Muslims.

The Indian Muslims are underrepresented in almost all the significant institutions of the state.⁵² They are underrepresented in the Cabinet, as office-bearers in the polity-wide parties, key political offices.⁵³ Though the Muslims have remained underrepresented throughout, it has deteriorated further since the 1990 s, coinciding with the rise of the BJP.

Absence of any enforceable constitutional provisions has meant that the representative claims of the Indian Muslims have largely remained dependent on the informal initiatives by the political class. However, in the absence of any formal institutional mechanism, the informal initiatives remain subjective to the ideological consensus amongst the political elites.⁵⁴

For instance, in the past, one such informal corrective mechanism pursued by political parties to compensate for Muslim underrepresentation in the political arena was to accommodate their representational claim in the Rajya Sabha. The indirect nature of election, dependent solely on the strength of the party in the state legislature made the parties confident about the winnability of their candidate. The average Muslim representation in the Rajya Sabha since 1952 has been 12 percent, which is double their representation in the Lok Sabha. The BJP's expansion has had a negative effect on Muslim representation. Muslim representation in the Rajya Sabha, as of 2019, stands at 7 percent (Table 11). This is likely to fall further as the tenure of sitting Rajya Sabha member ends. The dispensability of Muslim voters in BJP's electoral calculations makes it unlikely to accommodate Muslim representative claims through formal or informal mechanisms.

Political underrepresentation by itself may not necessarily be linked to majoritarianism. Muslims have been consistently underrepresented in the

Table 11. Muslim representation in Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha (1952–2019).

Phase	Muslim Percentage in Lok Sabha	Phase	Muslim Percentage in Rajya Sabha
1952–1971	5%	1952–1977	10%
1977–1984	8%	1978–1989	10%
1989–2019	6%	1990–2019	12%
2019	5%	2019	7%

Source: Statistical Reports of Election Commission of India & Rajya Sabha website

legislative arena even in the past. However, what is distinct is a decidedly majoritarian understanding of democracy in contemporary India.⁵⁵ The lower representation of Muslims is likely to further embolden this majoritarian impulse and strengthen the culture of impunity in relation to minorities. For instance, the onward March of BJP has coincided with the rise in incidence of cow-related hate crimes, and the number of states where they have been committed.⁵⁶

The growing strength of the Hindu nationalist BJP and its extremist appeals for Hindu votes have made Muslims expendable to the electoral calculations of even the traditional claimants of Muslim votes. The reluctance of these parties to articulate and raise issues important to the Muslim community stems from the fear of majoritarian backlash and countermobilization. Hence, the success of the BJP lies in making Muslim issues invisible from the mainstream political discourse.⁵⁷

This has led to the growing popularity of a new type of Muslim political leadership, most notably represented by AIMIM leader Asaduddin Owaisi. Their performative attributes and more combative rhetorical stance have resonated with a large number of Muslims and provided an avenue to articulate community-specific issues which others are reluctant to talk about. This may not yet translate into the emergence of a polity-wide Muslim-led party; however, this trend is likely to last for some time.

There have also been concerted efforts made both by civil society and political organizations to bring Scheduled Castes and Muslims on a shared platform based on a collective experience of "deprivation and suppression."⁵⁸ The political alliance between AIMIM and Vanchit Bahujan Agadi (VBA) in Maharashtra during the Lok Sabha election⁵⁹ and the social mobilization in opposition to the Citizen Amendment Act (CAA) and National Citizen Register (NRC) should be read against this light. The mobilization against both CAA and NRC is especially significant because they have been organized primarily by civil society organizations, have been citizen-led, and succeeded in bringing together Muslims and Hindus on the same platform.

Conclusion

In a democracy, fair representation is a desirable goal in itself and remains a necessary condition, although by no means a sufficient one, to ensure that diverse voices are not ignored. The consistent Muslim underrepresentation in the political arena is due to the combination of historical, institutional factors, and spatial reasons. The historical legacy of Partition, choice of electoral system, and spatial distribution of the Muslims have all contributed toward the political underrepresentation of Muslims. However, in the past, their inability to address the issue of political underrepresentation did not prevent the political parties from articulating and representing the concern of the Muslim community in the

political arena or even trying from addressing the issue of underrepresentation through informal mechanisms. The fact that today it is only viable to have Muslim candidates to get elected from Muslim dominated constituencies is a sign of political ghettoization of the Muslim community. This reluctance of mainstream political parties to provide an avenue for political articulation has made the community gravitate toward a new type of leadership which is assertive and articulate. They may not yet vote for this leadership, but they still listen to them because of its willingness to voice the concerns of the community.

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