

Representation of Muslim Women and Vote Bank Politics of BJP

Abstract

The scope and focus of Gender discourse has been evolving since 1970s in world politics and state politics. In India also there is a lot of discourse on gender not only in academics but in terms of political mobilisation and marginalisation of an already marginalised community. Presently, BJP is also highly concerned about Muslim women, some concern may also be forthcoming for their long standing agenda like Uniform Civil Code. These developments should also be seen, as the latest move in a political game that not only divides a marginalised community but gets more communal with the interplay of politics and religion. Why is the BJP suddenly focusing on Muslim women and their struggles? For a party known for its Hindutva politics, its anti-minority stance and which has politicians who have blatantly made regressive comments about women, this new interest for the emancipation of Muslim women should be analysed critically. The main **objective** of the present paper is to understand the nature of political representation of Muslim women and its impact on the communal harmony of India.

Keywords: Gender, Knowledge and Social Construction, Representation of Others, Vote Bank Politics.

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to answer two major questions: (1) How knowledge construction about the behaviour and modus operandi of a particular community can empower another community, and (2) false representation of Muslims as 'other' results in the marginalisation of this community that in turn is not good for communal harmony and democratic polity of India. An inclusive democratic political culture is required to uphold normative secular culture of Unity in diversity as envisaged and promoted by great leaders of Indian freedom struggle.

Hypothesis

BJP's representation of Muslim women is based on communal polarisation and mobilisation.

Research Design and Methodology

This paper undertakes a critical analysis of particular political mobilisation strategies that have been effective in producing knowledge about the behaviour of a social community from Foucauvian Perspective and also examines the representation of this community from the perspective of Edward Said. For the said purpose descriptive and analytical method has been employed. Gender studies also being employed to understand the impact of the ongoing process on Muslim women in India.

Review of Literature

There is no systematic and scholarly work available on representation of Muslim women in India. Nonetheless there are some articles available that explain the intentions of BJP and its political gains that it may achieve through this representation. Qazi Sara Rasheed and A.K. Sharma, in their article, Muslim Women's Rights in India ; Codified Personal Laws Needed, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 51, Issue No. 37, 10 Sep, 2016 , claim that although laws like the Muslim Personal Law (Shariat) Application Act, 1937 and other laws are supposed to grant Muslim women rights and protect them from discriminatory customary laws, the absence of codification of Muslim personal laws has resulted in many of the rights granted in religious texts getting negated or diluted. Partha S Ghosh, in his article, The triple politics of triple talaq, *The Tribune*, Jan 18, 2018 also talks about the political nature of this politics of emancipation. Abhiram Ghadyalpatil, BJP reaches out to Muslim women in Maharashtra, www.livemint.com, Feb 16 2018, speaks about the political gain BJP is trying to achieve in terms of vote politics.

Sanjeda Warsi

Senior Assistant Professor,
Deptt.of Political Science,
University of Kashmir,
Kashmir

According to Foucault Power and Knowledge are mutually supportive. He emphasises the role of discourse in the constructing and structuring of knowledge. Language plays a very crucial and important role in political and social construction of a discourse that regulates our day to day life even without being aware of its manifestations.¹ One of the most influential works on representation is found in *Orientalism*² written by Edward Said, published in 1978. *Orientalism* considers the ways in which Asia and Middle East are represented in Western literature. This false representation through imaginative literature exerts an exaggerated influence on Western thought and political process. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault, Said viewed that writing on the Orient is nothing but a discourse. He argue that ideas about Orient has taken a form of established knowledge about the lives and behaviours of Orientals that in turn provide great deal of power to those who construct this knowledge. In the same way, we can locate mutually supportive nexus between power to a specific political party and knowledge construction about the behaviour of Muslim women in a specific repressive political context that exist in contemporary era. Language, ideas and false information play a very important role as a discourse in the constructing and structuring knowledge about this community from global to local level. This representation of political expediency and prudence produce differential benefits for all the communities existing in India.

Today, BJP seems to be clearly working for the emancipation of Muslim women and positioning itself as a political party for the cause of Muslim women and on the other hand, it's positioning everyone else as "the other". These "others" are not only other political parties but social groups who are against Uniform Civil Code (UCC) in India. Though it has been widely debated and discussed that gender justice cannot be ensured only through a legal procedure and given the political nature of UCC it is really needed to arrive at an inclusive idea of justice than political applications. There has always been concerns regarding the model of proposed UCC as Hindu laws and legal laws followed in other countries couldn't bring parity between the sexes, are discriminatory in nature and place more importance to masculine values in society. This is also wrongly perceived by many that Hindu laws offer equal rights to men and women and Muslim women in India as devoid of rights with the only recourse open to them being to challenge their personal laws. A detailed critical analysis of Supreme Court's judgements and discriminatory laws is available that shows that discrimination of women is universal and not specific to any particular community. Lack of media coverage of important judgments plays a role in perpetuating this myth³. The recent focus on the plight of Muslim women has an agenda of political construction of Muslim women as most discriminated and repressed and Muslim men as merciless human beings, who divorce their wives any time and at pleasure; a stereotype of Muslims men as violent, ruthless, and immoral provides an opportunity to any political establishment for systemic discrimination. The Muslim

leadership is propagated as horribly patriarchal that is why Muslim women are in dire need of support,. The fact remains that Muslim men in India neither have the sole proprietary rights over patriarchy nor over ideologies which perpetuate inequalities and social discrimination. This is true for the majority of men not only in India but elsewhere. The vast majority of Hindu women live every day of their lives in constant fear and uncertainty, despite the enactment of several progressive laws to address these vulnerabilities in the last hundred years.

There is no denial of the fact that Muslim society has forgotten Islamic Values, ideas and Laws. Rather being governed by Islamic principles, they are governed by worldly desires and temptations. In the garb of religion they maintain perpetual exploitation of women through un-Islamic practices. Their mala fide intentions amount to malign the reputation of Islam and without taking into account the real teachings of it and its rights for whole humanity whole humanity people pass ill-informed judgements against Islamic laws. "Asghar Ali Engineer (2009) argues that Muslims defend and resist any kind of reform in Muslim personal law thinking that it is divine. But the personal law as practised today is actually the Anglo-Muhammadan law which was practised before independence. It was renamed as Muslim personal law after independence. Solanki (2011: 268) argues that "Muslim Personal Law in postcolonial India is based on local custom, Islamic laws and precepts, customary laws made by sect-based organisations, state-law enactments, and judicial precedent⁴." Therefore, Muslim personal law as practised today is not completely in compliance with the shariat as a result of which certain aspects of it are unjust to Muslim women." Same is the issue of triple talaq. Triple Talaq issue is a political and not a legal issue. Partha S Ghosh⁵ argued that The BJP's politics is threefold and it's Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Bill, the so-called triple talaq bill aims at all three in one go. First, works for the party's commitment to a Uniform Civil Code, which it knows is unachievable; second, it pushes the Muslims into a corner, thanks to the assured political advantage that its Hindutva agenda has wrought; and third, it reduces the political appeal of the Congress by converting it into B-team party, one that merely reacts but seldom calls the shots. A little less obvious is the link between the triple talaq judgment and the BJP's longstanding demand for a uniform civil code, which is one that the party made in its manifesto for the 2014 general elections as well.

Given to the political character of the ongoing debate regarding the empowerment of Muslim women only, leaving the other deserving women of different communities aside it is believed that the BJP is testing a possible new vote bank the Muslim women. The party is launching a yatra of Muslim-dominated areas in the state to educate Muslim women on how Prime Minister Narendra Modi's government is working to ensure that the rights of Muslim women are protected. (BJP) in Maharashtra is reaching out to Muslim women as it believes that a large number of Muslim women voted for the party in

the 2017 Uttar Pradesh assembly elections which the BJP won comprehensively. According to the 2011 Census, Muslims account for 11.54% of Maharashtra's nearly 120-million populations. The BJP reckons that around 6 million Muslim women, assuming 50% of the 12.5 million Muslims in the state, can be tapped as a potential constituency⁶. An Attempt is being made by the BJP to create a vote bank among Muslim community on the basis of creating a psyche of Muslim women of their plight and care and concern of BJP for Muslim women. Though this unfair representation of Muslim community by BJP is only meant to serve its interest in power politics. A genuine democratic process requires an inclusive approach when women as a whole are witnessing gender biases in India. Exclusion of all others is intentional, political and wrong to achieve planned political outcomes. It may further harm communal harmony of India as biased political constructions create binary and fragmentations in the society.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Gender bias is a universal phenomenon and is needed to be criticised by all corners and sections of the world with a true motive of reform, emancipation and inclusion. Those, who isolate groups with an eye on political gain, harm the integration of the Country in gradual manner. There is a need to bring reform but as our great leaders and social reformers realised that it should be through a renaissance based on our own sacred literature. Cultural constructions must be challenged but not against the spirit of multiculturalism and multicultural

tradition of which India has been known in the world. If any Uniform Civil Code is capable to accommodate interest of social and cultural diversities existing in India, is most welcome. As the demand for a codified personal law is seen as the first step towards achieving justice and equality for all Muslim women in India, it is also pertinent to take cognizance of the fact that a lot believe that the codification of the Muslim Personal Law based on the Islamic knowledge (in accordance with Quran and hadiths) would provide more rights to Muslim women. Any political body meant for the purpose should have genuine representation of not only Muslim Community but all those who would be affected by the decision.

References

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