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THE QUESTIONS THAT MATTER OBC POLITICS IN MAHARASHTRA

Ambedkar front's wooing of OBCs may dent Congress-NCP chances

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THE PRAKASH Ambedkar-led Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi's decision to field candidates in all the 48 Lok Sabha seats in Maharashtra could take away OBC votes from both the Congress-NCP and Shiv Sena-BJP alliances. However, the pinch may be felt more by the Congress-NCP, the front that had been hoping to get Ambedkar its way.

In Maharashtra, OBCs comprise more than 250 castes and sub-castes, and account for nearly 52 per cent of the population. Traditionally, however, the OBC vote has been fragmented. This changed with the 2016 Maratha assertion seeking 16 per cent reservation for the community — culminating in a Marathas-versus-OBC polarisation.

Unlike SC/STs, OBCs don't have any reserved seats in the Lok Sabha or Assembly elections, though there is a 27 per cent quota for them in local bodies like gram sabhas and panchayats. Out of Maharashtra's 48 Lok Sabha seats, there are five SC seats and four ST.

The two key players in the Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (meaning Front for Deprived Castes and Communities) are the Ambedkar-led

Bharip Bahujan Mahasangh and Asaduddin Owaisi-led AIMIM. Both came together and formed the Vanchit Bahujan Aghadi (VBA) in June last year. Later, the VBA took on board OBCs, becoming thus a conglomeration of SCs, STs, OBCs and Muslims.

Ambedkar claims they have a combined votebank of 40 per cent in Maharashtra. Party leaders cite the crowds at their rallies as a sign of their support base. Claiming over 5 lakh had turned up at some meetings addressed by Ambedkar and Owaisi, a leader said, "Such massive response has not been drawn by any leader in Maharashtra."

Noting the "greater ghettoisation within OBCs" since the rise of the demand for Maratha reservation, OBC Sangharsh Samanvay Samiti president Chandrakant Bavare said their greatest fear is that Marathas would use the Social and Economic Backward Class (ECBC) certificates, granted to them by the BJP state government, to assert themselves at the local political level too. "There are strong undercurrents pointing to OBCs exploring newer options in the VBA," he added.

Between the BJP-Sena and Congress-NCP, the OBCs are seen to be closer to the Sangh alliance as the Congress and NCP are identified as Maratha-led parties. The BJP believes there is still no reason for the OBCs to leave the party,



MAHARASHTRA

48 seats

Voting on April 10, 17 and 24

2014 LOK SABHA POLLS

BJP	23 seats (27.56% vote share)
Shiv Sena	18 (20.82%)
NCP	4 (16.12%)
Congress	2 (18.29%)
Others	1 (17.21%)

given the number of welfare measures extended by its government to OBC communities (such as the Dhangars). Among the 122 Assembly seats and 23 Lok Sabha constituencies won by the BJP in 2014, OBC representation was 40 to 45 per cent — the highest ever.

Senior BJP leader Madhav Bhandari said, "The BJP government gave 16 per cent reservation to Marathas in the special ECBC category. The 27 per cent reservation to OBCs remains intact."

Ambedkar, who kept waiting for a tie-up with the Congress-NCP, says the OBCs won't vote for the Congress or NCP. "NCP president Sharad Pawar's withdrawal from Madha seat is a clear indication. The Dhangar community there had decided to teach the NCP a lesson. Its

ramifications will be felt across the state... The big battle will be between the VBA and BJP-Sena across the 48 Lok Sabha seats."

Ambedkar had demanded at least 12-13 seats to be part of a Congress-NCP mahagathabandhan. It was offered four, two each from the quota of the Congress and NCP.

Acknowledging the challenge posed by "complex OBC politics", senior Congress Dalit leader Nitin Raut cited the example of the Vidarbha region. "If you field a Kunbhi candidate, the Teli community which is equally dominant will drift away. So, holding on to all dominant OBC castes and sub-castes together is a challenge for every party."

Calling Ambedkar's demands therefore untenable, Congress leaders pointed out that in the 2014 elections, of his 23 Bharip Bahujan Mahasangh candidates, 22 had lost their deposits. The total votes received by BBM candidates were 3.6 lakh, or 0.45 per cent. Even in the Assembly elections six months later, the Congress leaders say, the BBM fared no better, with 62 of its 70 candidates losing their deposits and only two of them winning.

Claiming they were not surprised by Ambedkar's announcement that he would go alone, Maharashtra Congress spokesperson Sachin Sawant said, "We knew he would not go with us. This is because he is playing into BJP hands." Former chief minister Prithviraj Chavan too said, "We suspect he is



Prakash Ambedkar (right) with Asaduddin Owaisi at a rally in Aurangabad. Express

being backed by the BJP. It is not easy to hold rallies costing over crores and fly from one place to another."

Sawant, however, acknowledged that Ambedkar's decision would hurt the Congress-NCP. "We can't say how many seats will be affected, but one thing is for sure: such parties are funded by BJP to cause damage to Congress-NCP," said Sawant.

Questioning Ambedkar's motives, Dalit activist Manav Kamble said Ambedkar himself had never won without the Congress support. "Twice he won with Congress support, and lost four times when he did not have its support."

Regretting Ambedkar's decision, Kamble

added that in the wake of Bhima Koregaon, "Ambedkar, the grandson of B R Ambedkar, had been able to carve out a space for himself. Instead of capitalising on it, he is trying to take the wrong path".

Denying they were supporting him, BJP spokesperson Madhav Bhandari said, "He has been pouring scorn on us and making all sorts of charges. Besides, our ideologies are different."

NEXT

#40 Will AAP in Punjab struggle to do a repeat of 2014?



POWER BUTTON

At an awareness campaign on VVPAT (Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail) organised by the Election Commission in Kolkata. VVPATs will be used at all polling stations in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. Partha Paul

SCHEMES AND A FAMILY YOGESH KASHID, MAHARASHTRA

A resident of Rajgurunagar, a semi-rural town in the Pune Metropolitan Region with a population of 35,000, Kashid availed the Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana to set up a computer training centre last year, becoming the first entrepreneur in his family. The MBA from Pune University lives with his parents, wife, and elder brother's family, and hopes his computer institute becomes a training centre for the National Skill Development Corporation

1. YOGESH KASHID, 29

In mid-2017, while working part-time with a private company in Chakan near Pune, and simultaneously pursuing his MBA, Kashid decided to seek credit to set up a small firm. The younger son of a farmer who owns two acres of land in Pune's Khed taluka, Kashid's loan didn't get cleared. Later, the 29-year-old registered for the Maharashtra government's 'Mahalabharthi' scheme. The little known scheme launched in 2017, which literally translates to the 'great beneficiary', asks applicants to fill in details such as name, age, gender, caste, education, employment status and land-holding on an online portal, and then informs them about the list of Central and state government schemes they are eligible for. The applicants receive a letter which has the necessary information and, for gravitas, signature of Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis.

"When I attached the letter with my Mudra loan application, even the bank staff were surprised to see the Chief Minister's name," smiles Kashid, the only graduate in his family. As per the Mahalabharthi letter, he is also eligible for a state government-funded farm pond for his father's land, training in agro-processing industries through the Rashtriya Anna Suraksha Abhiyaan and skill development.

In March 2018, under the Mudra scheme, Kashid took a loan of Rs 5 lakh from the Central Bank of India and set up 'Brilliant Computer Institute', which he runs from a 500-sq foot rented space in Rajgurunagar. The 150 students at the centre are enrolled in courses that last anywhere between two months to a year. The centre has a laboratory with 15 desktop computers and a separate



room for classes. Kashid says he hopes to break even in 2019-20.

2. FATHER BALASAHEB, IN HIS 60s

A farmer, Balasaheb hasn't availed of any government schemes as "I didn't know much about them." Their two-acre field, he says, lies in a canal-irrigated area and so they couldn't avail any crop insurance. Kashid says the family will apply for funds for a farm pond next year.

3. BROTHER KRUSHNA, 33

He runs a small business transporting

sweet corn from Rajgurunagar to Pune and Gujarat. He hasn't availed of any government scheme either. "Earlier, we didn't know about the schemes we were eligible for. Now, with Mahalabharthi, things have changed," says Kashid.

4. MOTHER SITA, 50

She gets her ration under the government's Public Distribution System. The family also avails of LPG subsidy under Balasaheb's name.

KAVITHAIYER

SEAT WATCH GWALIOR

As Cong closes gap, BJP may shift Union minister out

LALMANI VERMA

GWALIOR, MARCH 20

AS THE RSS held its annual Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha (ABPS) meeting recently in Saraswati Shishu Mandir on the outskirts of Gwalior, the swayamsevaks had on their mind one seat: Gwalior.

While the Congress won the recent Assembly elections in Madhya Pradesh, the BJP had suffered only a narrow defeat and won a larger number of votes. However, this satisfaction, particularly after 15 years in power, had been tinged by the results in the Gwalior parliamentary seat, where the BJP won only one Assembly segment (Gwalior Rural) with the Congress taking the remaining seven. The BJP had lost the urban Assembly segments despite winning mayoral elections in Gwalior since 1983.

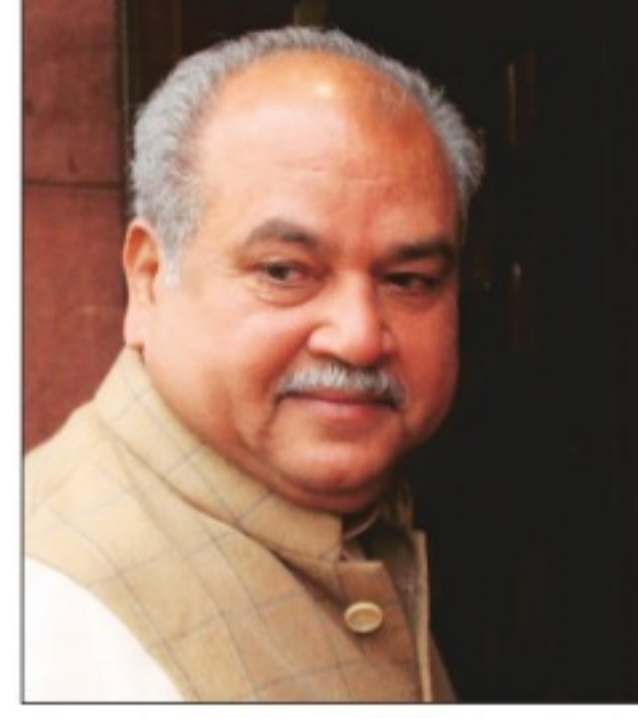
Even in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, Gwalior had proved tough for the BJP. The party's sitting MP, later inducted into the Union Cabinet, Narendra Singh Tomar, won against the Congress's Ashok Singh by around 30,000 votes — among the lower victory margins in the Modi wave election in the state, where the BJP had won 27 of the 29 Lok Sabha seats.

In the 2013 Assembly polls too, the Congress had given the BJP a tough fight from the segments falling under the Gwalior Lok Sabha seat — winning three to the BJP's five.

In terms of social demography, a majority of Gwalior's population comprises OBCs, followed by Thakurs and Brahmins in almost equal numbers. There are also Jatav Dalits in areas close to Uttar Pradesh. Since the general elections in 1957, the Congress has won from Gwalior six times, and the BJP thrice. Earlier, in the first general elections in 1951-52, the Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha had won from Gwalior. The seat has also been won twice by the Jan Sangh, in 1967 and 1971, the latter with former prime minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee as its candidate.

In the 2014 elections, Tomar, a Thakur, had got 44.68 per cent of the total votes, while the Congress's Ashok Singh, an OBC, had got 41.68 per cent.

Within the BJP, there is talk that the party may shift Tomar to either Morena or Bhopal, to minimise the risk of him losing. Tomar has



(Left) MP Narendra Singh Tomar may shift to Morena or Bhopal; Jyotiraditya Scindia

MADHYA PRADESH

29 seats

Voting on April 29, May 6, 12, 19

2014 LOK SABHA POLLS

BJP	27 seats (54.76% vote share)
Congress	2 seats (35.35%)
BSP	0 (3.85%)

been elected from Morena once, defeating the Congress in 2009 by a margin of over one lakh votes.

BJP Gwalior president Devesh Sharma told *The Indian Express*, "At a press conference recently, Narendra Singhji (Tomar) said he would follow the decision of the party and contest from wherever he is fielded."

However, Sharma played down the SC/ST factor, saying that while the anger over the Supreme Court diluting its provisions had been an issue earlier, the situation had changed in the past few weeks. The Modi government had later amended the law to bring back the provisions. Sharma said, "Narendra Modi's biggest positive is that nobody has any resentment against him and the development schemes he has launched."

The "nationalism" sentiment after the Pulwama attack would also play a role, Sharma added. "People are with those who speak in favour of nationalism and in national interest."

However, voters like veterinarian Mahesh Sharma said the BJP has not had a connect with the people of Gwalior for some time. "In small cities like Gwalior where the lack of development is an issue, people vote considering the influence of the candidate and how available he or she is to address their problems... In terms of infrastructure, you can see Indore has grown better than Gwalior."

Congress Gwalior president Devendra Sharma said the party is optimistic after having won all the urban segments under the Gwalior seat in the Assembly elections. He added that one of the names doing the rounds for candidate is of party general secretary Jyotiraditya Scindia, the current MP from Guna. Scindia's father, the late Madhavrao Scindia, was a nine-term MP, who had been elected four times from Gwalior.

"If Jyotiraditya Scindia contests from Gwalior, his presence would have an impact in nearby constituencies as well, including those bordering UP," Devendra Sharma said. The Congress recently appointed Scindia as in-charge of western UP.

THE DAY'S DRAMA

"@MamataOfficial, let's see who knows more governance, last I checked that's what elections were about."

VK SINGH, MoS, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS; @GEN_VKSINGH, 1.58 MN Twitter followers

Singh was reacting to remarks made by West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee at an event in Kolkata on Tuesday. "Puja does not mean only sporting a tilak. Amit Babu and Modi Babu come and have a competition of shlokas with me. Let's see who has more knowledge about Sanskrit mantras."

POLL MATH

