

Phase 1 Crucial for BJP; SP-Cong, BSP Sense Opportunity

MATTER OF CHOICE Jats appear to be dividing votes between RLD and BJP while Muslims are likely to vote for party that can defeat BJP



ZAHID

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New Delhi: Polling for the political-crucial state of UP will begin on Saturday with 73 constituencies spread over 15 districts of the western part voting in the first phase in which the sizable presence of Muslims and Jats will play an important role in deciding the fate of SP-Congress combine, BJP, BSP and RLD.

Though the shadow of the 2013 riots is still cast in the area, especially the Shamli-Muzaffarnagar-Meerut belt, the Jats to have moved on. Unlike the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, they are dividing their votes between the RLD

and BJP. The Muslims, however, give clear indications that they will vote for whichever party is in a position to defeat the BJP in a particular constituency. Polling will be held in riot-scarred Shamli and Muzaffarnagar; Meerut, Bhagpat, Ghaziabad, Gautam Buddha Nagar; Hapur; Bulandshahr; Aligarh, Mathura, Hathras, Agra, Firozabad, Etah and Kasganj on February 11.

BJP has tried to polarise the elections in the western part of UP with the likes of Yogi Adityanath, Hukum Singh, Sanjeev Balyan, Sangeet Som and Suresh Rana making remarks targeting Muslims. The party has raised the issue of Hindu migration from Kairana and Shamli under

pressure from local Muslims, cow slaughter, Muslim boys wooing Hindu girls. The party has promised in its manifesto that it will close down slaughter houses and form Anti-Romeo squads (which are sent largely as a move to curb 'Love Jihad').

However, the Jats appear disenchanted with the BJP due to the developments since the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. Locals talk about the way the BJP government in Haryana quelled the Jat agitation for reservation, not getting sugarcane dues, demonetization and a host of issues on which they feel the Centre as well as the Samajwadi Party government has let them down.

BJP and Ajit Singh-led RLD. This can upset BJP calculations in many constituencies going to polls in this phase. BJP is banking on the non-Jat Dalit and the Most Backward Caste votes in this region. However,

MAJOR FACTOR
Muslims, who represent more than 30% in West UP may play key role

RLD has fielded non-Jat candidates (like Gujjars or from MBCs like Sainis, Pal), which will dent BJP.

Muslims, who represent more than 30% of the electorate in several constituencies of western UP, will decide the fate of the polls to a great extent. While SP-Congress combine is their first choice, BSP is a clear gainer in seats where the alliance has put up a weak candidate. Several constituencies are witnessing interesting contests and prominent leaders are in the fray in many seats. Sangeet Som (Sardhana), Rajnath Singh's son Pankaj (Noida), Suresh Rana (Thana Bhawan), Lakshmi Kant Bajpai (Meerut), Srikant Sharma (Mathura), Hukum Singh's daughter Mriganka (Kairana), Nahid Hasan (Shamli), Shahid Manzoor (Kithore) are some of the important candidates in the fray.

A Test for BJP's Plan to Woo MBCs

TARGET FIXED Party eyeing non-Yadav OBC and non-Jatav Dalits voters to counter rivals SP & BSP

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New Delhi: BJP's electoral strategy to form a rainbow coalition of small groups within backward community will be first put to the test in West UP's 15 districts, which are covered under the first phase of the UP assembly polls on February 11. These 15 districts have considerable population of the small groups within backward, who are also referred to as Most Backward Castes.

BJP has been eyeing the non-Yadav OBC voters as well as non-Jatav Dalits voters in its attempt to counter its both rivals- SP and BSP. Yadavs and Jatavs are considered to be base votes of SP and BSP respectively. If BJP's strategy for mobilising MBC voters in its favour works, it may help the party compensate for its possible loss of Jat voters in different constituencies of the 15 district, which would go to poll on February 11. What manifests BJP's special focus on MBC voters is good representation given to this group in its candidates' list. While BJP selected about 180 candidates from the upper castes, it has fielded 120-plus faces from such backward castes. Kurmi, Maurya-Kushwaha-Shakya-Saini, Lodh and Nishad-Bind-Kashyap castes have got their good share in the BJP list.

ter for all the three major political players- BJP, SP-Congress alliance, and BSP. Both the camps- SP and BSP tasted success by bagging the MBC votes in the past assembly polls. BJP has made a fresh attempt to woo the MBC voters in this election by bringing the defectors from BSP in its camps. Swami Prasad Maurya, Dara Singh Chauhan and Dr Dharam Singh Saini, who left BSP and joined the BJP, are good examples of BJP's MBC faces. SP Singh Baghel, who was in BSP and SP in the past, is now with the BJP.

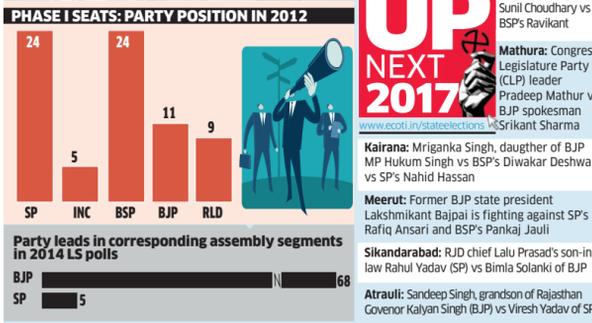
Early indications suggest willingness among most of the MBCs to go with BJP in different constituencies of the 15 district, which would go to poll on February 11. What manifests BJP's special focus on MBC voters is good representation given to this group in its candidates' list. While BJP selected about 180 candidates from the upper castes, it has fielded 120-plus faces from such backward castes. Kurmi, Maurya-Kushwaha-Shakya-Saini, Lodh and Nishad-Bind-Kashyap castes have got their good share in the BJP list.

Phase I: UP Poll Battle Kicks Off Today

Nearly 2.6 crore people in 73 constituencies of western Uttar Pradesh will be eligible to vote on Saturday in the first of the seven phases of the high-stakes assembly elections, seen as a litmus test for Prime Minister Narendra Modi's nearly three-year rule. A total of 839 candidates are in the fray...



CANDIDATES FIELDIED BY...	KEY CONTESTS
Bahujan Samaj Party 73	Noida: Rajnath Singh's son Pankaj Singh vs Samajwadi's Sunil Choudhary vs BSP's Ravikant
Bharatiya Janata Party 73	Mathura: Congress Legislature Party (CLP) leader Pradeep Mathur vs BJP spokesman Rakesh Sharma
Rashtriya Lok Dal 57	Kairana: Mriganka Singh, daughter of BJP MP Hukum Singh vs BSP's Diwakar Deshwal vs SP's Nahid Hassan
Samajwadi Party 51	Meerut: Former BJP state president Lakshmi Kant Bajpai is fighting against SP's Rafiq Ansari and BSP's Pankaj Jauli
Indian National Congress 24	Sikandarabad: RJD chief Lalu Prasad's son-in-law Rahul Yadav (SP) vs Bimla Solanki of BJP
CPI 5	Atrauli: Sandeep Singh, grandson of Rajasthan Governor Kalyan Singh (BJP) vs Viresh Yadav of SP
CPM 4	
Other parties 261	
Independent 291	



Party leads in corresponding assembly segments in 2014 LS polls

BJP	5
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BJP Hopeful of Last-minute Change of Heart Among Jats

GOING ALL OUT BJP has given 15 tickets to Jat candidates in phase 1; many leaders are confident that community will vote for BJP

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Lucknow: BJP is betting on a last-minute change of heart among Jats in favour of it and a strong showing in urban centres to put up a strong show in the 73 assembly seats in western Uttar Pradesh that go to poll on Saturday.

"This phase is the most crucial for us. We aim to win at least 35-40 seats here. Things have changed in our favour here in the last few days," a senior state BJP leader told ET. He claimed that party president Amit Shah's meeting with nearly 600 Jat representatives earlier this week mollified the community that has been up in arms against BJP over denial of reservation to Jats in Haryana. But reactions from Jat leaders are mixed.

Yudhvir Singh, general secretary of All India Jat Mahasabha, said the meeting was "constructive" and Shah agreed that many cases in the Haryana agitation should be dropped, and a commission should be constituted to consider their reservation demand. "We do not issue any political fatwas, but humne Jaat samaaj mein message bhej diya hai ki humari sarthak meeting hui hai (we have sent a message to Jat community that we had a positive meeting)," he told ET.

Some other major Jat outfits said Shah's meeting was just a damage-control effort to mislead the community. "Nothing can be solved at the last minute," said Yashpal Malik, national president of Akhil Bhartiya Jat Aarakshan Sangarsh Samiti that is leading dharnas in 19 districts of Haryana. "Narendra Modi gave us an assurance a year ago to consider reservation for Jats in Haryana but nothing happened. Is Shah above Modi? Jats will not sup-



BJP supporters at an election rally in Kashipur last week-PTI

port BJP till they actually get reservation, or those jailed for last year's protests in Haryana are not released," he told ET.

Yet, many BJP leaders are confident that the community will ultimately vote for the party. "What alternative do Jats have? They won't go with BSP or SP-Congress, which are openly wooing Muslims when the issue of polarisation very much still exists in west UP," said a senior party leader involved in negotiations with Jats. "The choice for Jats could have been RLD but Jats know RLD is extremely weakened and it won't be in any position to form the government and will ally with SP-Congress. Jats may have been angry and wanted to be listened to. Now, on voting day, they will still choose BJP," he told ET.

BJP has given 15 tickets to Jat candidates in the first phase. "That shows we are

with Jats. On the other hand, RLD has given a bulk of tickets to non-Jats. Jat voters won't get divided," said Sunil Bansal, its state general secretary.

BJP, which in 2012 won only 10 out of the 73 western UP seats going to polls on Saturday, now sees this area to be its stronghold after winning 13 out of 14 Lok Sabha seats here in 2014. That was helped by wholesome support of Jats.

BSP had won 25 seats here in 2012, SP won 24, Congress won 5, and RLD had won 9. "Phase I is most crucial for us. If we do well here, our momentum will build," a senior state BJP leader told ET. The party is enthused by its own ground feedback of a split in Muslim votes between the SP-Congress alliance and BSP.

CHEERS, IT'S A FIELD DAY FOR SOME JATS

UTTAR PRADESH POLLS 2017 Indrajit Hazra and Anirban Bora get heartfelt in the heartland and encounter voters of India's largest—and most unpredictable—state

I could have sworn that the young man gesturing at me was bunking class from Chaudhury Charan Singh University, formerly Meerut University. His friend and he were sitting in an open shed in the distance next to a field growing sugarcane. As I drew closer I realised he was drinking whisky from a plastic cup. At 3.30 in the afternoon.

because he's Charan Singh's son and that he's a Jat. But what difference will he do? He's too provincial. Western UP has seen no [unprintable] development. All the roads, malls, stadiums have happened in eastern UP. Voting for nal [the hand pump, which is the RLD election symbol] is a waste. I asked Saurabh whether demonetisation has affected people in Western UP where many Jats are reportedly angry with the central government. The matchsticks are gathered again to explain how India (one stick) can never prosper if people hoard most of their money (three sticks) by not paying taxes. He also insists that money is not delayed as he gets his money for his crops by cheque.

Just before I leave, he describes Akhilesh Yadav as a 'buffalo's offspring' - but in a more unprintable manner - but also explains why 'some Jats' are indeed upset at the BJP. "Payments [for cane crops in this sugar belt] have been delayed. They have not provided any subsidies. Loans have been waived to other communities by other parties. But the BJP has given no such loan waiver to Jats." By this time, he has grown friendly with me, commending that I am the first person to have spelt his name write in English and that he also used to live in east Delhi. I cross the field with the sugarcanes waving in the background and think how at least some Jats in western UP are not quite living the bad life that they imagine they are.

THE SWEET SMELL OF CANE

A little further down the highway, a tractor is dumping sugar canes in large piles. Kishan Pal is 45 and looks 60. Unlike young Tomar, he isn't a landowning farmer but the kind of farmer that newspapers carry pictures of to show that the person is a farmer. The place smells of slightly fermented sugarcane, a sweetly sweaty smell that I could imagine could give me a high if I joined Pal in his work.

"We make gur (jaggery) here from the cane," he explains, after clearly stating with the honesty that only honest, hardworking folks in movies are shown to state. "What will happen in the elections, no one knows. The wind is blowing this way. But then it is blowing some five other directions as well. No one knows."

He, too, says the demonetisation hasn't created trouble for him. A bit later he puts it more in context.

"There are problems we face all the time. There are small problems and there are big ones. This wasn't a big problem. One just stood in lines longer."

GUR, BAD & THE UGLY

Nearby in a shed, I caught an elderly gentleman wearing a woollen cap saying 'Indian' lying back on a chair. Along with was a visible pair of legs lying on a makeshift bed wearing track pants. He introduced himself as Surinder Singh, one of the owners of the cane fields on which Pal

works. The legs belonged to his younger brother Ajit Singh, who perked up and laughed when I asked him whether his namesake would do well in the polls. The Brothers Singh believe that at least Jats like them have been pushed into the corner to support the BJP. "Kyaa kare, mazburi hai," says Ajit. Surinder pipes up, "[Sangeet Singh] Som [the BJP incumbent candidate from Sardhana, Meerut] is a not a good man. He's not visited here once since he became MLA. But what does one do? You can't vote for Ajit Singh because he has no connection with the Centre. Akhilesh and the Congress are no longer a choice." Mayawati, of course, doesn't seem to exist for the Singhs.

I ask Ajit, looking very Danganal-like, whether he wrestles like Netaji. He lets out a loud laugh. "Mulayam was a wrestler 50 years ago. Now he's just gone mulayam [soft]." Both brothers insist that I try a bite of their cane gur. I politely decline as it looks too hard.



Sweet taste of success: Sugarcane to gur-making tools, Meerut

BAND BAJAA IN MODILAND

Earlier, as we entered Modinagar - not that Modi's nagar - we are greeted by a giant poster of Gujarmal Modi who founded this town starting with a sugar mill in 1933. Today, some of us associate him with being IPL founder Lalit Modi's grandfather. Here, I encounter Raju. Just Raju, who owns a franchise of his own: The Great Milap Band. His shop also provides horses, buggies, lights generators, dhols and fireworks if and when required. So which political party does he think will hire The Great Milap Band and its accessories on March 11 when the election results are announced? "It's heard to tell, but all I can say is that the wedding season's back again on March 1 and 2. And that's all I care for." Is that the voice of the new Uttar Pradesh that goes to the polls from today?

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