In the ongoing general election, Seemanchal, a historically neglected and yet socially and politically significant region in Bihar, has once again registered a high voting percentage. Comprising four districts — Purnea,Katihar, Kishanganj and Araria — Seemanchal has a population of about 1 crore. It assumes sociopolitical significance owing to the large proportion of Muslims in its population. On average, these districts have 47% Muslims as against Bihar’s Statewide average of 17% and the all-India average of 14%. In this election, of the nine Muslim candidates who have been chosen by different parties in Bihar, five are contesting from constituencies in Seemanchal. The region is a fertile ground for political parties that pit Hindus against Muslims.

Continued neglect
It may have political and symbolic value, but Seemanchal fares poorly on welfare indices. It is an example of political apathy towards the minorities. According to Census data, the average literacy rate of the four districts is 54% as against Bihar’s average of 64%. The average per capita district GDP of the region is ₹10,000, while it is ₹14,574 for the State. In districts with a higher density of Muslims, the situation is worse. For example, in Kishanganj, with a 68% Muslim population, nearly 50% live below the poverty line.

The socioeconomic indicators may be woeful, but there has been remarkable enthusiasm in electoral participation, seen in the last six general elections. This year, Seemanchal saw a voter turnout of 64.8%, which was much higher than Bihar’s average of 58.6%. In the last five general elections, the average voter turnout in Seemanchal was around five percentage points more than the average turnout for the State. Clearly, the voters in the region care about exercising their franchise. They believe that their electoral participation can make a difference to their dismal socioeconomic situation. But why is an electorate with such a dominating presence helpless in this region? What explains their continued neglect despite having elected influential leaders in the past, such as M.J. Akbar, Tariq Anwar and Pappu Yadav?

Both Muslim vote bank politics and the political ghettisation of Muslims have given rise to identity politics in Bihar. In recent years, polarisation has demonstrated that a party can secure majority votes without accommodating Muslims. Such political non-mobilisation of Muslims has resulted in two things. One, it has led to the idea that Muslims are a homogenised community who root their politics in religion. Two, it has led to Muslims realigning themselves to the background of active politics.

A welfarist agenda
This should stop with Seemanchal. Despite constituting a high percentage of the voting population in the region, Muslims have not been able to assert themselves. As a result, parties have used them as bait to get parachute candidates elected. These candidates secure votes in the name of protecting a misunderstood and universal idea of ‘Muslim identity’ and not to improve their welfare in the region. For example, Asaduddin Owaisi’s All India Majlis-e-Ittehadul Muslimeen (AIMIM) contested in the region in the 2015 Assembly election, but it failed to win even a single seat. Yet, again the AIMIM has pinned its hopes on Akhtarul Iman from Kishanganj this time. These Muslim parties have failed to gain a stronghold in the region because Muslim voters have opted for a welfarist agenda and not one that is centred on their religious identity alone.

Further, even within the Muslim community, there is marginalisation of backward Muslims such as the Pasmandas who are represented not by their own but by the upper caste Ashrafs. Since the 1990s, the assertion of rights by groups such as the Pasmanda Muslims paved the way for inclusivism and social justice. In this context, Seemanchal can be a fertile ground for the emergence of rights-based politics. The struggle of Pasmandas and their under-representation in politics have been largely ignored. In Seemanchal, though Pasmandas constitute two-thirds of the Muslim population, there is no Pasmanda candidate for the elections. Late ly, Chief Minister Nitish Kumar and the BJP have espoused concerns about backward and Dalit Muslims, but more in rhetoric than in action.

Contrary to popular perception, Muslims do not always prefer en bloc voting along religious lines. In Seemanchal, specifically, they are divided by caste, class and language, and vote for leaders they think will address their deprivations. It is high time our concerns move beyond politics and religion.

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