

## From New Delhi by Susan Maitra

### In search of Muslim votes

*The electoral arithmetic concocted by armchair analysts has little to do with reality in India today.*

With the general elections for the 10th Lok Sabha (parliament) around the corner, local analysts, completely at sea as to which way the prospective voters are leaning, are calculating and re-calculating the caste and religious factors to try to predict winners. One hot item on the agenda is to decide which way the 200 million-plus Indian Muslims will vote this time.

All the major political parties—the Congress (I), the Janata Dal of former Prime Minister V.P. Singh, the Samajwadi Janata Dal of Prime Minister Chandra Shekhar, and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—are finding it increasingly difficult to convince the electorate of their stated commitments. If one party gets a reasonably respectable reception in one state, the same party is drawing a blank in the neighboring states.

The armchair analysts have pulled out all demographic records to put the Muslim votes in one grab bag. In their view, one of the keys to the situation is the sudden rise of the Hindu chauvinist, anti-Muslim BJP. The BJP, which secured a surprising 86 seats in the 520-member ninth Lok Sabha, is polarizing the Hindu and Muslim communities.

Last October, following an attempt by its militant wing to demolish the Ramjanambhoomi-Babri Masjid (mosque) at Ayodhya in order to build a Ram Temple on the premises, the BJP withdrew its support from the ruling National Front government and brought down the 11-month-old V.P. Singh government. The government opposed the demolition of the

mosque, and projected itself as the defender of the Muslim faith, while the BJP has accused the government of dancing to the Muslims' tune. The analysts have seized on this shadow-play as conclusive evidence to now put the Muslims voters safely in V.P. Singh's bank.

Another issue is the disturbed situation in Jammu and Kashmir, a disputed state bordering Pakistan with a majority Muslim population. The militant Muslims there have stepped up anti-India activities over the last 16 months or so. As a result, the state is under emergency governor's rule, and the militants, who are seeking an independent state, and the security forces are involved in constant skirmishes.

The situation got nasty in the winter of 1989-90, and Prime Minister V.P. Singh sent a tough administrator, Jag Mohan, to curb the militancy. He has been accused of using an iron fist, but V.P. Singh quickly washed his hands of the accusation, claiming that Jag Mohan was appointed under pressure from the BJP. Seizing this, too, as evidence of V.P. Singh's good rapport with the Muslims in general, analysts claim that the Muslim electorate is for V.P. Singh to pluck.

Whatever the merit of such analysis, the Muslims do have a distinct impact on politicians looking desperately for votes. V.P. Singh, for example, spent three hours in the company of the obscurantist Shahi Imam of Delhi's Jama Masjid, wooing the Muslim cleric to throw his support to the Janata Dal. Reportedly, the wily Imam agreed to V.P. Singh's pleas,

but not before making sure that some of his friends in the state of Bihar were placed on Janata Dal tickets.

On the other hand, the Congress (I), which has been credited over the years with having a vise-like grip over the Muslim votes, is distinctly rattled by these analyses. The party president, Rajiv Gandhi, has paid more than one visit to Aligarh Muslim University, one of the major seats of Muslim intellectuals in the north, to listen to their grievances and ostensibly to formulate a policy which will bring the Muslim voters back into the Congress fold.

There are reasons to believe that the Muslim votebank is a chimera, a mere brainchild of the demographers. While V.P. Singh sat around for three hours with the Shahi Imam, who is despised by many Muslims because of his obscurantism, there are many who maintain that the Imam's writ does not even cover the mosque he controls.

The myth about the Muslims voting *en bloc* has been exposed again and again. All that the statistics reveal is that they might have voted *en bloc* in certain circumstances after a riot, as in 1975 over the issue of forced sterilization, but have never voted for a political party which tried to strike a posture as pro-Muslim.

These statements are indicative of the fact that there is no party which can be considered a clear choice of the Muslims of India. Despite the posture of power on the part of the semi-literate Shahi Imam of Jama Masjid, the fact is that a large number of Muslim youth, with professional education and far removed from the political intrigues and patronage of the Imams, have distinctly changed the nature of Muslim politics in India. These individuals, not inconsequential in number anymore, are now articulating viewpoints which are democratic and distinctly non-religious.