

MUSLIM LEADERSHIP WITHIN GUJARAT'S CONGRESS IN THE 1980s

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ABSTRACT Much literature covers how the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in India impacted on the political marginalisation of Muslims, while it has not been examined in sufficient depth how the internal dynamics of Congress contributed to this decline in Muslim nominations for elections. This article examines the Congress party's organisational circumstances that affected Muslims' electoral representation in 1980s Gujarat. It demonstrates that, along with the influence of competing Hindutva forces, the ongoing 'deinstitutionalisation' of the Congress party also damaged the political representation of Muslims. Interview accounts and archival documents indicate how factional fighting within Congress subverted the faction-like consolidation of the Muslim leaders' negotiation power. The article argues that despite vertical and dyadic ties with Hindu leaders inside the party, Muslim Congressmen could not attain unified leadership to generate sufficient pressure on the party to nominate Muslims for elections.

KEYWORDS: *candidate selection, Congress, elections, Gujarat, Muslims, party organisation*

Introduction

Seeking to elucidate how the Congress party's organisational circumstances resulted in Muslim marginalisation in Gujarat during the 1980s, this article sheds

new light on the relationship between the political marginalisation of Muslims and the ‘deinstitutionalising’ process of the Congress party during this time. Various accounts of the BJP’s rise to power have illuminated the historical significance of ethno-religious mobilisations, which contributed to the party’s political emergence (Chatterji et al., 2019; Corbridge & Harris, 2000; Hansen, 1999; Jaffrelot, 1996). Particularly, it is well-known that anti-Muslim violence waged by militant Hindu groups contributed to the BJP’s rise and the political marginalisation of Muslims (Brass, 2003; Wilkinson, 2004). On the other hand, the Congress party’s decline tends to be portrayed as a trajectory of confusion, ideological chaos, authority vacuum and decay of the party organisation (Kohli, 1990; Kothari, 2002). Quantitative trends clearly show an evident gap between nomination of Muslim candidates by the BJP and Congress, indicating the significance of different ‘ideological compulsions’ between parties (Ahmed, 2008). Examining the 1980s Congress in Gujarat provides clues to the puzzle of how intra-party politics affected the party’s Muslim nominations, well before the completion of the bipolar competition with the BJP in the 1990s. Elucidating the inner workings of the Congress party during the 1980s, focused on the Gujarat Congress, the most ‘conservative’ unit of this national party (Jaffrelot, 2017), this article reveals how the party’s organisational problems reinforced an already existing Muslim marginalisation in two major cities of Gujarat.

Showing the inner workings of the Gujarat Pradesh Congress Committee (GPCC) during the period under examination, this article obtains insights on the factors behind the declining number of Muslim candidates. The article also illustrates the significant impact of the ‘clientelist tie’ with Hindu bosses inside the Congress party and the ways in which this clientelism worked to constrain Muslim Congressmen. It follows the definition of a clientelist tie as ‘a non-ascriptive two-person relationship founded on exchange, in which well-understood rights and obligations are established between the two parties’ (Nathan, 1977: 382). It is argued that such informal one-to-one relationships, particularly with Hindu leaders in superior positions, served as barriers keeping Muslim Congressmen from asserting collective influence over party authority. The article presupposes that the impact of organisational problems within Congress had an overwhelming influence on the behaviour of Muslim politicians, while any existing intra-Muslim conflicts would have had less significant impacts.

Considering this highly volatile background, and to protect research participants, pseudonyms are used for relevant political actors, the names of cities, state assembly constituencies, municipal wards, political groups and people. Only the names of well-known entities such as Congress, the BJP, the BJS (Bharatiya Jana Sangh), Indira and Rajiv Gandhi, Madhavsingh Solanki, Chimanbhai Patel and Amarsingh Chaudhary, are exceptions. To ensure as much anonymity as possible, the author also compromised the accuracy of information about research participants by not providing details of caste, sub-caste and sub-sect backgrounds of the individuals concerned and left out some pertinent references that would affect anonymity.

Candidate Selection and Minority Representation

Political scientists emphasise the significance of candidate selections for elections due to their 'defining functions of a political party' (Hazan, 2002; Hazan & Rahat, 2010: 6). Ranney (1981: 103) states that the struggle to choose a party's candidates constitutes a conflict over 'control of the core of what the party stands for and does'. If there are no mechanical reservation seats, then the candidate selection process reflects power balances among factions and intra-party groups. Especially regarding religious minorities in India, where no preferential laws guarantee their political representation, the discretion of parties is highly significant. Regarding the difficulties minority politicians face inside parties, authors discuss the effects of cultural discrimination, aversion from other minority leaders, gangsterism and patronage in electoral competitions (Kishwar, 1996). However, few studies present a detailed examination of the dynamics within parties. Chandra (2016) emphasises the significance of intra-party politics through the lens of dynastic recruitments, while Rai (2017) focuses on women's participation in electoral politics. Some early ethnographic work has meticulously depicted the negotiations within Congress (Roy, 1967), but overall, this topic has remained a black box for political scientists, especially regarding post-1980s developments.

Regarding clientelism within state-level politics in India, the Hindu-Muslim dichotomy may be considered an overly simplistic and stereotypical projection on politicians' relationships. Certainly, sub-regionalism (Palshikar, 2017: 50), the influence of sub-sects of religions and castes (Engineer, 1989), and personal

antimonies (Brass, 1965) also play important roles in forming intra-party groups. Additionally, sub-categories of Muslim communities may be important, given that particular sects have different degrees of institutional strength and differing relationships with other religious groups (Engineer, 1989). However, in the specific context of the deinstitutionalising Congress in the 1980s, under the homogenising pressure of Hindutva forces, both of which entailed the participation of criminal elements (Vaishnav, 2017), it is argued that Muslim elites in urban Gujarat shared a certain level of danger and vulnerability, regardless of their internal cleavages.

Further, reflecting the process of the Congress party's decay, Indira Gandhi's 'personalisation of power' was made visible through office allocations (Kohli, 1990; Manor, 1983). The party's factions lost their roles as 'in-built correctives' to create consensus inside the party organisation (Kothari, 2002: 41). While much literature has studied the qualitative shift of the party organisation of the post-Indira Congress, studies on Muslim Congressmen during this period are limited. Kohli (1990: 54) only mentioned that Muslims 'are becoming alienated from Congress'.

To examine Muslims' political representation in Gujarat, multi-layered analysis including both state and local elections is essential, because single-layer analysis focusing on Lok Sabha elections alone does not work due to the marginal Muslim representation at the national level. In addition, multi-layered analysis allows exploration of the hierarchical dynamics working vertically inside Congress. This article therefore examines state politics and two anonymised municipal corporations, 'riot-prone' Ranbirnagar and 'peaceful' Nadishaher, both witnessing the declining presence of Muslim leaders inside the Congress. The destroyed (Ranbirnagar) and divided (Nadishaher) leadership of the Muslim Congressmen can be considered one reason for decreasing number of the party's Muslim nominations for local elections. Cases from these two large cities, with different communal histories, yet within the identical context of state politics since the 1960s (Varshney, 2002: 20), provide insights into the mechanism of how the 'deinstitutionalisation' of a state unit of the Congress organisation had an excluding effect on Muslim Congressmen from political power, long before the BJP became prominent.

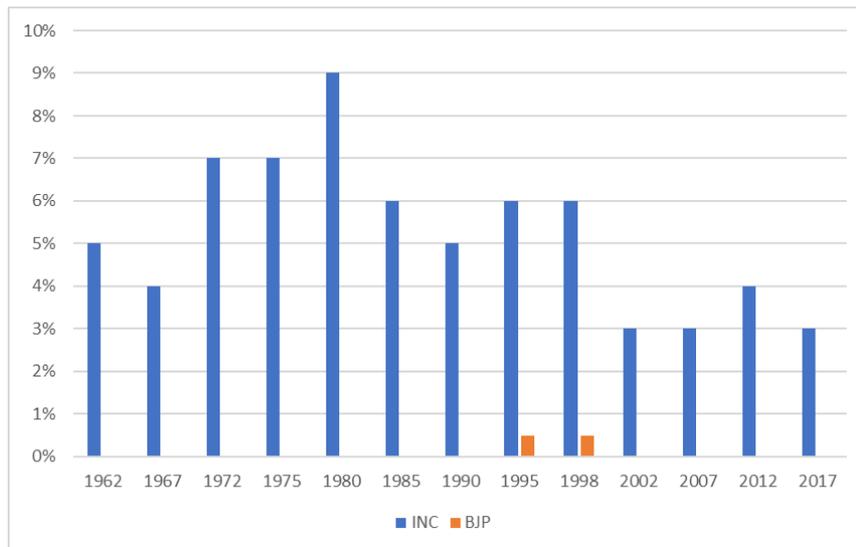
Gujarat Congress, Muslims and the Two Urban Scenarios

The 2011 Census gave the proportion of the Muslim minority population in Gujarat as 9.67%, followed by Jains (0.96%), Christians (0.52%), Sikhs (0.10%), and Buddhists (0.05%). Hindus constituted 88.57%. Of the Hindu population overall, as calculated by the author, partially based on Desai and Shah (2009: 190), almost 12% were said to belong to upper castes (Baniyas, Brahmins and Rajputs), 13% to middle castes (Patidars), 40% to Other Backward Classes (OBCs), including Kolis, 7% to Scheduled Castes (SCs) and 14% to Scheduled Tribes (STs).

The percentage of Muslims in Gujarat presents their marginality in comparison with other states in northern and western India (19.26% in Uttar Pradesh, 16.87% in Bihar and 11.54% in Maharashtra), where the Muslim population is not as significant as elsewhere in India (<https://www.census2011.co.in/religion.php>), with 27.01% in West Bengal, 26.56% in Kerala, 34.22% in Assam, 96.58% in Lakshadweep, and 68.31% in Jammu & Kashmir. During the period of 1952-2002, the average Muslim population in Gujarat was 8.59 %, while the average representation in the State Assembly was 1.87%, marking a deprivation ratio of 79.27% (Ansari, 2006: 209). Given that other states in northern and western India have much lower deprivation levels (45.70% for Uttar Pradesh, 46.48% for Bihar, and 62.32% for Maharashtra), Gujarat is seen as ‘the most deprived state’ in terms of Muslim political representation in India (Ansari, 2006: 207).

Such an under-representation is said to derive from parties’ hesitance in nominating Muslims as electoral candidates (Ahmed, 2008; Ansari, 2006). Figure 1 shows how in Gujarat, Congress Muslim nominations for state assembly elections declined after the 1980s, especially following the stabilisation of the BJP’s rise and the complete Hindu-Muslim polarisation in 2002. The Muslim candidate ratio remains below 5% even recently, which can be seen as triggered by the 2002 anti-Muslim violence.

Figure 1: Percentage of Muslim Candidates in the Total Number of INC and BJP Candidates in Gujarat State Assembly Elections from 1962 to 2017



Sources: Election Commission of India *Statistical Reports on Gujarat State Assembly Elections 1962–2012*. URL (consulted 30 April 2017), from <http://eci.nic.in/eci/eci.htm>; *The Indian Express* (2012, December 21). URL (consulted 20 December 2017), from <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/muslim-m-las-down-from-7-to-2-after-the-gujarat-assembly-elections-results-declared/1048461/>. *The Indian Express* (2017, December 20). URL (consulted 8 April 2020), from <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/muslims-in-gujarat-polls-just-a-few-candidates-tiny-voteshare-4990441/>

Regarding Muslim representation, under the bipolar fighting with the BJP, the Congress has been under constant pressure of the ‘Hindu backlash’, which discouraged the party from nominating Muslim candidates (Jaffrelot & Verniers, 2018). Long before the violence in Gujarat in 2002 and its aftermath, the 1980s offered a critical prerequisite to the impending rise of the BJP, which was about to ‘reap the benefits’ of the decades-long endeavour of organisation-building in this state (Shah, 1998: 244). The active participation of militant Hindu groups in frequent turmoils in the 1980s has been widely discussed (Engineer & Tanushri, 1986; Sanghavi, 2010; Shani, 2007, 2010; Spodek, 2010; Sud, 2012; Yagnik & Sheth, 2005).

At the 1980 state assembly elections, the Congress’ KHAM mobilisation canvassed Kshatriya, Harijan, Adivasi and Muslim voters. The backlash from high-caste Hindus started as anti-reservation movements mainly in 1981 and 1985, and then took a communal turn in 1985 (Shani, 2007). Muslims were initially one of the minority groups under KHAM jointly confronting the high-caste Hindus, but their gradual isolation from other groups became clearer over time and the

Congress government lost the Muslim voters' confidence. First surfacing in the 1987 Ranbirnagar Municipal Corporation election, this loss of confidence was an important factor in the party's subsequent defeat in the 1989 national election, too, which marked the historical end of one-party Congress dominance in Indian politics.

The following sections examine the Ranbirnagar and Nadishaher Municipal Corporations, two urban units witnessing different developments of the marginalisation of Muslim Congressmen. Ranbirnagar as a political hub in the state witnessed major conflicts that were depicted as part of Gujarat state's political history. The widely known local 'authority vacuum' (Kohli, 1990: 199) in the Ranbirnagar Congress during the 1980s critically affected Muslim Congressmen because of their status as minority leaders. When the party was involved in communal mobilisation, the Hindu-dominant 'clientelist tie' (Nathan, 1977: 382) and informal networks surrounding Muslim leaders seemed to work to destroy their consolidated leadership.

In Nadishaher, on the other hand, the intra-party divide brought by the Congress' factionalism had a huge impact on the intra-Muslim relationships inside the party organisation. Hindu-dominated clientelism between Congressmen was a factor here as well, undermining the unity of influential Muslim leaders. The combined informal and personalised forms of networks enforced by the decaying Congress organisation contributed to dismantling intra-Muslim unity in both cities.

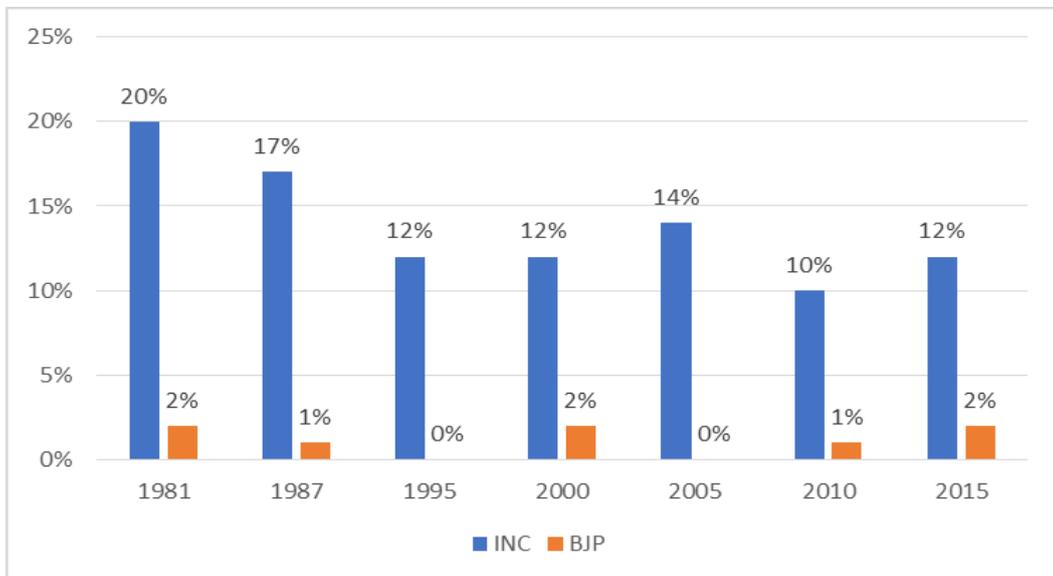
Ranbirnagar as a Hub of Conflict

The 2011 census gave the Muslim population ratio of Ranbirnagar as 13.51%. In the 1980s, it was presumably around 15%, as Shani (2007: 26) refers to a 1976 Ranbirnagar Municipal Corporation (RMC) document which cites the 1971 census. The caste-wise composition of this city was not available for the same period.

Figure 2 shows that the ratio for the Congress party's Muslim nomination was maintained between 10-20% for four decades, presenting a much higher standard than the state assembly, as shown in Figure 1, and achieving an over-or-near proportionate nomination ratio to the Muslim population throughout. However, the decline in the number of nominations was beginning to be evident

in the 1980s (Figure 2). In 1981, Congress nominated 20 Muslims, 20% of the total of 102 candidates from RMC, for this election. In 1987, the ratio dropped to 17%, with 22 Muslim candidates among a total of 127. The planned election of 1992 was cancelled, because of the state-wide turmoil triggered by the Hindu nationalist campaign and riots sparked by the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in December 1992. The next election was held in 1995, in which the Muslim ratio in the INC declined further to 12% with only 16 candidates. This marked the beginning of the constant trend of less than 15% Muslim nominations until 2015.

Figure 2: Muslim Candidate Ratio of INC and BJP for the RMC Elections, 1981-2015



Sources: Calculated by the author from RMC documents (on 1981, 1987, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2010, and 2015); *Sandesh* of 29 and 30 January 1981; *Gujarat Samachar* of 16, 17 June 1995, and 13 October 2005.

The KHAM privilege in intra-Congress politics was reflected in the lists of the GPCC presidents in the 1980s. Up to 1988, leaders from backward communities occupied this position, including Shahzad Mehta, a Sunni-Muslim leader, who served in the late 1980s. Another Muslim was appointed as mayor of Ranbirnagar in July 1980. The unprecedented pro-backward scheme in office allocation in the Congress organisation triggered intense backlash from Patels and other high castes in Gujarat. By 1985, the conflicts started taking a communal colour,

polarising the city's Hindu and Muslim residents, leading to violent clashes in the city, later prompting *The Times of India* (1987, May 17: 4) to ask rhetorically what had happened to Gandhi's Gujarat.

The events of 1985 and 1986 also involved inter-mafia clashes, battles between the mafia and the police (Shani, 2007, 2010) and power struggles within Congress (Kohli, 1990: 262). Mohammad Fusain Khan, a Muslim bootlegger, was prominently involved in these conflicts, protecting Muslim residents by portraying himself as a Robin Hood for the Muslims (Shani, 2007). The intra-Congress conflicts, accompanied by mafia street battles, resulted in scapegoating of Muslims and influential Muslim Congressmen. A Dalit activist, a former Congress politician's son, believed that the INC(I) instigated the 1985 communalisation by using Muslim mafias, aiming to divert people's attention from powerful anti-reservation agitations (interview, 5 December 2018). This interviewee emphasised that the INC(I) inflamed communal turmoil, so that the party could dilute the intensity of anti-reservation agitation, perceived as critically detrimental by the INC(I) government. Regarding the mobilisers within Congress, a retired Muslim politician in Ranbirnagar suggested a dyadic negotiation between a high-caste Hindu Congressman and a Muslim leader that he witnessed inside his party during interview with the author on 14 September 2015:

Mr. Salim Shaikh ... was [an] ex-MLA of [the] Congress party ... in 1981 from [the] Rubynagar ward ... In [the] 1985 [state assembly election], he was not allocated [a] ticket from [the] Congress party, you know... Congress got ... more than 145 seats... in that assembly election...at that time, the anti-reservation movement [had] just started... Then [the] ... minister ... Mr Mahendra Rana... Between Mahendra Rana and Salim, what's set up, God knows, but they succeeded to turn the anti-reservation movement into communal violence.

It is difficult to determine the validity of this account. However, even if this conspiracy did occur, the power balance between Mahendra and Salim was most likely uneven, implying a vertical relationship, for two reasons. First, the gap in power and resources between a high-caste state minister and a Muslim MLA representing an underdeveloped constituency was huge. Second, more importantly, their succeeding career paths diverted dramatically after the 1985 scenario. After serving as an MLA and a cabinet minister from 1980 to 1985, Mahendra became the GPCC's president in 1988, which can be considered the symbolic moment of

the end of KHAM politics within Congress, bringing high-caste leaders back into the party office, as *The Times of India* (28 December 1988: 7) observed. Salim, however, was arrested under the National Security Act (NSA) with other Congress Muslim councillors, as confirmed to the author in an interview with a Muslim politician on 1 January 2019. In interview with a journalist, Salim himself said he and his Muslim colleagues, but no Hindus, were arrested. According to Salim, it was due to the (ruling party's) intention to demonstrate that the government and the administration supported the Hindu side (Tully, 1992: 252).

Asking what sort of person Salim was perceived to be by local Muslims, we find that first, he was known as the court lawyer of Mohammad Fusain Khan, the above-mentioned influential gangster, who had connections with first-tier politicians (Tully, 1992: 251), further discussed in the next section. A senior Muslim resident in Ranbirnagar stated that Salim's home was close to Mohammad's place and the men had been friends since childhood (interview, 10 December 2018). Second, Salim was also famous as a charismatic protector for ordinary Muslim residents. A senior Muslim clerk stated that during Salim's tenure as an RMC councillor in 1969, Salim fought with Hindu-inclined police forces during communal violence, declaring that he, rather than the police, would protect Muslim residents (interview, 10 December 2018). In the 1980s, too, a foreign journalist mentioned Salim's initiative to mobilise 20,000 Muslim women to protest the shooting of Muslim residents during communal violence (Tully, 1992: 253). Recollecting Salim's contribution, a Muslim resident interviewed by a newspaper resented the current vacuum of Muslim leadership during the post-2002 rescue programmes (*The Times of India*, 27 March 2002). After his arrest in the 1980s, Salim disappeared from state and local-level politics and moved to a distant village, as a Muslim politician stated (interview, 1 January 2019). This interviewee added that Salim's profile as an active Muslim lawyer was not 'preferable' for the Congress authorities.

Given these points, even if Mahendra and Salim were involved in any sort of conspiracy, whether by negotiation or coercion, the high-caste Mahendra would have been dominant. Even if their collusion did not occur, clearly the Congress leadership was under severe pressure from Hindu Congressmen during this period. The Hindu-dominated Congress machinery significantly threatened local Muslim leaders along with an evidently biased police force, which arrested a number of

Muslims under the Public Security Act. A news article stated that despite pressure from the then GPCC president Shahzad Mehta, a Muslim, the police did not release those arrested, even on bail (*The Times of India*, 19 June 1988: 9), thus ‘teaching Amarsinh a lesson’. The fact that this intra-party strife occurred in highly personalised settings critically damaged the unity of Muslim leaders. A Muslim Congress MP indicated how difficult it was to access the concealed decision-making process, even for a national-level Muslim leader (Tully, 1992: 259). According to this MP, the party’s intention regarding Salim’s arrest was unclear. When this MP phoned the then-chief minister of Gujarat, the reply was that he needed ‘to take some Muslim leaders into custody as a balancing act’. This response confused the MP, since no Hindu leaders were arrested.

Overall, the personalised and informal negotiations excluded Muslim leaders inside the Congress party, isolated Muslim Congressmen from each other and gave them no opportunity to unify their influence. The president of a local think tank said that in those days, there was a vacuum in Muslim leadership inside the Congress party (interview, 5 September 2015). This study argues that, consequently, Muslim leaders could not maintain influence over party authority, and over candidate selection during the 1987 election, two years later.

The inner workings of Congress during this election further explain the lack of Congress Muslim leadership. Their shrinking presence in the 1987 election was prompted by the overwhelming influence of an independent candidate, none other than Mohammad Fusain Khan. Contesting this election from five wards, he won all, but then had to withdraw from four seats after the election, which left three seats for BJP candidates and one for Congress (*The Times of India*, 1 February 1987: 1), allowing the BJP to capture the civic body.

According to a Muslim Congressman who lost the 1987 RMC election, Mohammad Fusain Khan had successfully mobilised the anti-Congress front in Muslim-dominated wards, including his own area (interview, 1 September 2015). Collaborating with the BJP to establish a group called Ali Mohammad Sangh to defeat Congress Muslims, they succeeded through supporting the candidacies of ostensibly independent Muslims to split the Muslim vote. In other words, the BJP used Khan’s influence to capture the Congress vote bank in riot-affected constituencies. A senior Muslim resident stated that Khan’s network spread to both BJP and Congress veterans (interview, 12 September 2015).

In addition to Khan's overwhelming influence, intra-Congress factors also adversely affected the significance of Muslim Congressmen for local society. First, the Congress gave up the KHAM alliance during candidate selections for local elections in many parts of Gujarat (*The Times of India*, 12 January 1987: 1). This meant Muslims could no longer use KHAM privileges in the ticket race. Further, during the 1987 candidate selection, parties, including Congress, nominated those who had contributed to the 1985 and 1986 riot mobilisations (*The Times of India*, 9 February 1987: 8), leading Muslims to reject Congress. The recruitment system relevant to riot productions was already seen at this point in urban Gujarat, so that participation in riots became a gateway for young leaders' political debut.

This line of explanations is supported by another article, claiming that Congress unreasonably injected 'new blood' by proposing new candidates for seats, excluding seasoned veterans from the ticket race (*The Times of India*, 29 January 1987). A news article detailing possible reasons for the Congress' defeat at the 1987 election criticised the party's un-strategic choice of candidates. In the ten wards in which Congress abruptly switched candidates at the last minute, it fielded eight Muslims among a total of 32, but only two Muslim candidates won (*The Times of India*, 29 January 1987), confirmed also by RMC election documentation. Clearly, these last-minute changes in ticket allocation ruined the party's chances of winning. A witness of this election indicated the calculations by various party leaders. A senior journalist from a local news agency claimed there was collusion between the BJP and Congress in the 1987 election (interview, 8 December 2018). Therefore, he continued, winning was unimportant for Congress, explaining why the party deliberately lost the election at that time. As Kohli (1990: 15) pointed out, the 'purposive' feature of Gujarat's political developments during those days meant this election could also be seen as a product of top-level calculations conducted by the party leaders.

Here again, personalised networks among top-level Congressmen spread under overwhelming influence from Muslim gangs and escalating pressure from high-caste Hindus within Congress, along with the informal participation of riot instigators who interacted with Muslim Congressmen. Because of the 'small group' and 'proximity' of grass-root politics (Bardhan, 2005: 95), all these developments were playing out within a stone's throw of local Muslims,

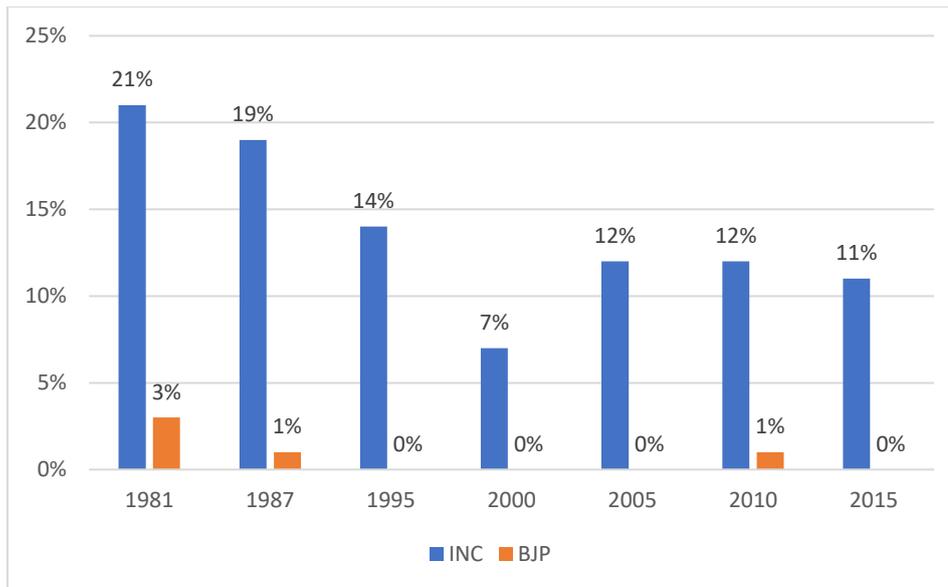
especially in ‘sensitive’ areas of the city. In this situation, it could be imagined that Muslim leaders inside Congress faced difficulties in getting united or prompting Muslim representation through electoral nomination. The decline in the number of Congress’ Muslim candidates in the 1987 Ranbirnagar election thus needs to be understood as a reflection of the shrinking influence of the subverting presence of unified Muslim leadership.

The Nadishaher Case of Divided Muslim Leadership

The 2011 Census gave the Muslim population ratio in Nadishaher as 11.63%. An unpublished report of 1993 from the Centre for Social Studies in Nadishaher regarding the early 1980s says that it was 15%, and mainly constituted of ‘Shiyas and Sunnis’ (p. 21). The author of this report added that the upper castes (‘Baniyas, Brahmins, Rajputs etc’) were 15%, ‘middle and artisan castes’ (‘mainly, Khattris, Kanbis, Modis or Modha Vanik’etc) were 40%, and Dalits and ‘the low and backward castes’ were 20%. Details of the remaining 10% are unclear in the 1993 report, presumably they are Adivasis.

As in Ranbirnagar (Figure 2), both parties had been apparently willing to nominate Muslims in Nadishaher city elections (Figure 3), more than for the state assembly (Figure 1). However, the declining trend is also very clear in Nadishaher. In the 1981 Nadishaher Municipal Corporation (NMC) election, Congress fielded 13 Muslims, constituting 21% of its total 62 candidates. The ratio declined to 19% in 1987, when the party nominated 18 Muslims in a total of 93 candidates. The ratio of Muslim candidates dropped further after the 1992 Babri Masjid riots, when the planned NMC election was cancelled by the state authorities for security reasons. Since 1995, when these postponed NMC election were held, the Muslim ratio of INC’s candidates has remained at below 15%. The question here is how and why Muslim nominees constantly declined in post-1980s Nadishaher, a place known for its amicable Hindu-Muslim relationship.

Figure 3: Pattern in the Congress and BJP’s Nomination of Muslims for Nadishaher Municipal Corporation Elections: 1981–2015



Sources: Calculated by the author from NMC documents on 1995, 2000, 2005 (for wards 1-34), 2008 (for wards 35-38), 2010, and 2015; *Gujarat Mitra* on 29 January 1981, 29 January 1987, and 15 January 1995; interviews on 26 December 2018, 24 January 2019, and 19 November 2020.

This section reveals that the divide between two local Muslim leaders, Altaf Shaikh and Daudbhai Saiyed, was largely related to the cleavage between the INC(I) and the INC(O), following the expulsion of Indira Gandhi from Congress in 1969. This conflict between powerful Muslim Congressmen in 1980s Nadishaher provides important further insights regarding the declining trend in Muslim candidate nominations by Congress during this period. A local journalist said that because of the presence of Morarji Desai and Manish Bhatt, the chief of INC(O) and a veteran of INC(I) respectively, the area surrounding Nadishaher had become a hub of intra-Congress conflict since the 1960s (interview, 5 September 2018), on which see also Sanghavi (2010) and Jaffrelot (2017).

In the 1980s, Desai's Syndicate Congress (INC(O)) failed to garner enough support in Nadishaher. Thus, as a local journalist stated (interview, 10 September 2018), this group approached the BJP to maintain its political power. Consequently, the BJP emerged as a coalition of people from INC(O) and the Hindu-right Jana Sangh, predecessor of the BJP. This is the crucial context to understand the framework of the emerging local power politics for Muslim leaders within Congress.

Altaf Shaikh started his political career in 1962 as a student activist (interview, 22 December 2018). In 1970, he began serving as secretary of the Congress'

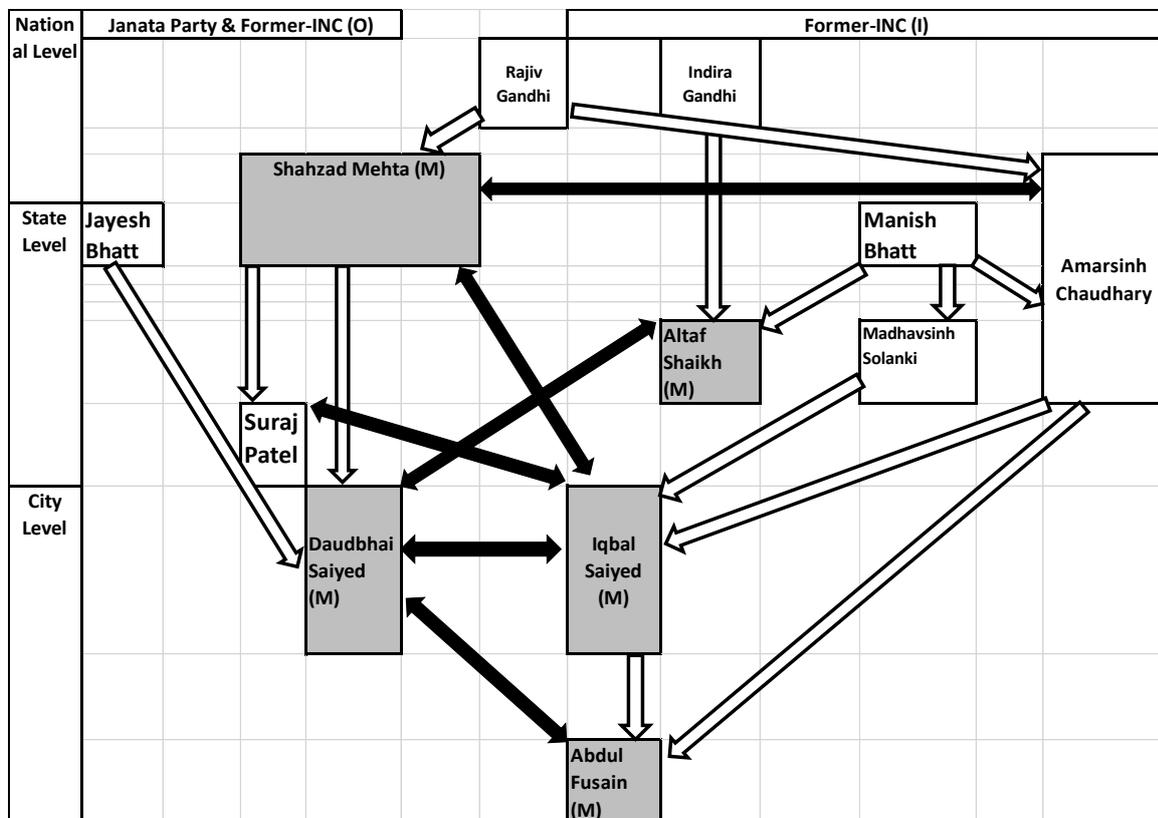
Nadishaher District unit, becoming its president in 1972. In those days, Manish Bhatt, a core INC(I) leader, supported Altaf's career and acted as his 'political guru'. Because of the recognition from top authorities in the INC(I) group, Indira Gandhi directly suggested that Altaf contest the 1975 state assembly election, which he said he declined, due to 'economic circumstances'. However, Altaf did contest the state election in 1980 and won, obtaining almost 50% of the total votes in his constituency. In this election, Altaf also won the factional conflict between the INC(I) and INC(O). Jayesh Bhatt from the Janata Party, a Brahmin who was originally from the INC(O), serving as the state government's cabinet minister, experienced a humiliating defeat in this election due to Altaf's candidacy. This scenario offers an important context to understand the background of the political rivalry between Altaf Shaikh and Daudhbai Saiyed, since Daudhbai emerged as an INC(O) leader due to considerable help from Jayesh Bhatt. After becoming an MLA through this victory, Altaf also served as a cabinet minister from 1980 (interview, 26 December 2018). Altaf's career path made him a 'bigshot' in the eyes of other Muslims.

Daudhbai started his political career as a student leader as well, actively joining the Nav Nirman movement, an anti-corruption agitation against Chimanbhai Patel, in 1974 (interview, 12 September 2018). His account indicates that he already had connections with the opposition forces against the INC(I) regime in those days through these agitations. Daudhbai started contesting the NMC elections with Janata Party tickets in 1974 and 1981, winning both elections. A Muslim Congressman in Nadishaher confirmed that in those days, Daudhbai was supported by Jayesh Bhatt, the former minister who lost to Altaf in the 1980 state election. After Indira Gandhi's death in 1984, Daudhbai somehow switched his official affiliation to INC(I), after which he rose swiftly through the hierarchy with support from Shahzad Mehta, the GPCC's president. Daudhbai ran successfully for the NMC election in 1987 on an INC(I) ticket, became the Standing Committee Chairman of the NMC, as reported in a local paper (*Gujarat Mitra*, 2 January 1987: 9) and consequently became the city's mayor in 1988.

The intra-party politics during the candidate selection process for the 1987 NMC election highlight again the vertical ties with different Hindu leaders binding Muslim Congressmen. These interpersonal connections ran vertically from national-level leaders to the local level. The city politics reflected the state-

level conflict within the Congress party, playing out as a discord between Amarsinh Chaudhary and other leaders, including GPCC president Shahzad Mehta (*The Times of India*, 24 June 1987: 8 & 28 November 1989: 7). Figure 4 shows the constraints of the ‘clientelist-ties’ (Nathan, 1977: 382), the one-to-one relationship with Hindu superiors that mattered to the inter-personal relationship among Muslim Congressmen. In Figure 4 black arrows mean conflicting relationships, while the white arrows represent the direction of protection given by patrons to their clients. This mapping indicates that vertical cleavage significantly worked to divide these two Muslim politicians, apart from the possibility of personal tensions among them. As similarly pointed out by other scholars working on north India (Brass, 1965; Jaffrelot, 2003), this chart shows that elite Hindu dominance in the Congress factions was visible in 1980s Gujarat, too. While Indira Gandhi had already died in 1984, it seems that in 1987, her patronage still had a prolonged impact on Altaf Shaikh’s prominence.

Figure 4: **Map of Congress’ Muslim Leaders (M) within the Factional Structure of the Party at the Time of the 1987 NMC Election**



Sources: Constructed by the author, based on NMC documents on 1995, 2000, 2005 (for wards 1-34), 2008 (for wards 35-38), 2010, and 2015; Election Commission of India statistical data on the 1985 State Assembly Election (ECI Website); *Gujarat Mitra* of 29 January 1987; Interviews on 17 September 2018, on 16, 18, 19 and 22 December 2018; 30 July 2020, 21 September 2020; 28 August 2021.

In the 1987 NMC election, two other Muslim leaders could not obtain INC tickets because of this factionalism outlined in Figure 4. The candidacy of Abdul Fusain was rejected by Suraj Patel, who was in charge of ticket allocation for this election (interview with Abdul Fusain, 19 December 2018). Since Abdul was close to Amarsingh Chaudhary, then Chief Minister of the state, Suraj refused to nominate Abdul Fusain due to his conflict with Amarsingh (see Figure 4). The second leader was Iqbal Saiyed, Abdul's superior, who also belonged to the Amarsingh-Indira faction (interview, 19 December 2018). Iqbal served as the Standing Committee Chairman of the NMC, a post usurped by Daudhbai Saiyed in 1987. Iqbal could not contest the 1987 election due to the presumed intentions of Suraj Patel, who was close to GPCC president Shahzad Mehta.

The discord among Muslims involved in this Hindu-dominated factionalism was further escalated by the increasing communal turmoil after the 1990s. In 1992, Nadishaher witnessed Hindu-Muslim violence, atypical for this locality in post-independence history, but brought on by the Ayodhya mosque attack. The first four days of conflict that started on 6 December 1992 claimed the lives of 197 people, 22 Hindus and 175 Muslims (Varshney, 2002: 255). Thereafter, in 2008, the BJP government arrested Altaf Shaikh, alleging his involvement in a bombing incident in Nadishaher in 1993. Altaf spent several years in jail, until the Supreme Court finally acquitted him and other accused Muslims in July 2014 (*India Today*, 5 October 2014).

While there were different views regarding this story, some Muslim politicians and journalists close to Congress were convinced that Altaf was framed by his enemies. A non-Congress Muslim leader stated that Altaf supported 'all ammunition' for the 1993 incident (interview, 21 December 2018), while some Congress Muslims emphasised Altaf's innocence. They shared the view that Altaf's opponents, people from INC(O) and the BJP, managed to remove him from the party leadership. A journalist claimed that Altaf told him directly that a colleague of Altaf, particularly a Congress Muslim, sent him to jail while 'Altaf

did not mention the colleague's name' (interview, 26 December 2018). One Muslim politician supported this view, pointing out Daudhbai's involvement in this conspiracy (interview, 18 December 2018).

While the validity of each account is hard to judge, the important point here is that even if Daudhbai participated in the plot, he was most likely constrained by the vertical relationship with Hindu bosses in his faction, as seen during the 1987 election. Daudhbai's subsequent career path supports this perspective. In 1990, he ran for the state assembly election from a Hindu-dominated constituency in Nadishaher and lost to a BJP candidate by a wide margin. Given that the seat, with a minor ratio of Muslim voters, was not secure for Congress, it can be said to reflect that Daudhbai's influence over the party authority was limited. A Muslim politician in Nadishaher stated that putting Muslim candidates into Muslim-weak seats has been a common formula for Congress authorities to reconcile soothing frustrated Muslims with keeping their power limited (interview, 18 December 2018).

Furthermore, local researchers pointed out that already in 1990, the BJP-Congress fighting had taken on communal features in this city. The BJP succeeded in polarising the society to consolidate Hindu votes even in Nadishaher which had remained tension-free until then. It could be argued that during this period the vulnerability of Muslim politicians escalated, regardless of their factional affiliations within Congress. Because Muslims were a minority, they faced intensified pressure to obtain protection and favour from Hindu politicians, more than ever before. As a whole, the party's use of Daudhbai in the 1990 election and the overwhelming pressure from the Hindutva forces after 1990 need to be considered. Hence, it is reasonable to assume that Daudhbai fell also under the solid structure of Hindu-dominance in the party organisation of the Gujarat Congress.

Some authors certainly point out that historical schisms, such as the Shia-Sunni divisions, also existed among Muslims in Nadishaher (Varshney, 2002: 229-38). However, it could be hypothesised that Hindu-centric clientelism had more overwhelming impact on the relationships among Muslim Congressmen. That is because, understandably, under the homogenising pressure brought by Hindutva forces within and without Congress, Muslims had structurally shared a certain level of vulnerability in Nadishaher. Under the riot-production systems

(Brass, 2003) which appeared to have worked in Nadishaher, it is likely that, especially after the late 1980s, Muslim politicians could not escape from direct or indirect pressure from their Hindu patrons, even in 'peaceful' Nadishaher. This would have provided an important background in stifling the emergence of unified Muslim leadership inside Congress in this city. Ultimately, it is hypothesised that the absence of pressure from Muslims could have worked as one factor that brought decline in Congress Muslim candidates for NMC elections.

Conclusions

After the 1987 elections in Ranbirnagar and Nadishaher, the era of 'backward-group dominance' that started with the 1980 KHAM campaign finally ended in the intra-party politics of Congress. In 1988, the GPCC was restructured under a new Brahmin president, Mahendra Rana, with Rajiv Gandhi's approval. In this organisational change, Shahzad Mehta resigned from the presidential post. In 1989, Congress lost the Lok Sabha election nationally, marking the historic end of one-party dominance in Indian postcolonial politics. Meanwhile, Muslim nominations in the Gujarat Congress in Ranbirnagar hit the trough of below 15% of the total candidates in 1995. The intra-Congress exclusion of Muslims during the 1980s factored into the continuous dominance of the BJP and was prompted by the bipolar competition initiated in the late 1990s.

This article has tried to elucidate the ways in which the organisational constraints that emerged through both deinstitutionalisation and the Hindu-centric nature of the Congress party in the 1980s adversely affected any chances to consolidate the leadership of Muslim Congressmen, some of whom, significantly, were MLAs and city mayors during the 1980s. In Ranbirnagar, the growing vacuum in Muslim leadership was reinforced by highly personalised negotiations among top-level Congressmen, which damaged Muslim leadership. In Nadishaher, the factional cleavage that structurally maintained the Hindu-dominant hierarchy in each group negatively affected also the leadership consolidation of Muslim leaders. Both developments together weakened Muslim politicians' influence over the party authority, with huge implications for the effort to scrutinise intra-Congress mechanisms that brought declining nominations of Muslims for state and local elections. These hidden dynamics formed the backdrop against which the BJP rose to power in Gujarat's state politics in the 1990s.

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