

Mahendra Singh Tikait, Syed Shahabuddin, Kanshi Ram, represents powerful electoral triumvirate

Mahendra Singh Tikait, Syed Shahabuddin and Kanshi Ram have established pockets of influence in the Hindi heartland, the crucial battlefield in the next election. They now represent a powerful electoral triumvirate.

ADVERTISEMENT



BHASKAR ROY

October 31, 1989

ISSUE DATE: October 31, 1989

UPDATED: September 10, 2013 12:52 IST



Kanshi Ram Leader, Bahujan Samaj Party

With the general elections round the corner, their shadows are looming large on the political horizon. Like vandals capable of wrecking the fortunes of the major contenders, a strange triumvirate - Kanshi Ram, Mahendra Singh Tikait and Syed Shahabuddin - has staked its claim to the electoral sweepstakes.

The trio have little in common except for the ability to cut into the votes of both the Congress(I) and the Janata Dal and upset the applecart of the principal bidders for power in the forthcoming elections. Though obscure figures a few years ago, the three are now weighing heavily on the psyche of leaders of the major parties.

And with every passing day, their stock is rising in the pre-election political bazaar. Emissaries from both Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi and Janata Dal President Vishwanath Pratap Singh have

Kanshi Ram's parochial campaign has radicalised Harijan politics. He now has a strong Dalit base.

made a beeline for their doors in a desperate bid to win them over.

Aware of their crucial role, the three are proving to be hard bargainers. They admit as much.

Shahabuddin, president of the Insaaf Party which he recently launched, says: "I am waiting for the market to rise. And of course mine is a seller's market, not a buyer's one."

For the record at least, leaders of both the mainline parties maintain a brave front and try not to betray the fact that they are worried by the peripheral politicians' increasing clout. They dismiss as a mere myth the ability of these leaders to swing the votes of the social groups they claim to represent.

ADVERTISEMENT

Says AICC(I) General Secretary V.N. Gadgil: "Harijans are not a monolith. Though not strictly in the Marxist sense, class consideration transcends caste consideration. What is really important in elections is what the Americans call the misery index - unemployment and inflation in our context." Janata Dal leader Satyapal Malik accuses the trio of pursuing "wrong politics that isolates a particular caste or community".

Away from media attention, Kanshi Ram has worked tirelessly - and launched a sheerly parochial campaign - to radicalise Harijan politics over the last five years. He now has a strong Dalit base that cuts across several states. The successive poll performances of his Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) point to a growing sway over the Harijans.

The BSP got a mere 2.4 per cent of the total votes polled in the Uttar Pradesh assembly elections in March 1985. In the Uttar Pradesh by-elections held in March 1987, the BSP polled an impressive 26.7 per cent. Kanshi Ram again demonstrated his clout in the prestigious Allahabad parliamentary by-election last year.

Pitted against the combined opposition candidate, V.P. Singh, and the Congress(I)'s Sunil Shastri, he polled over 72,000 votes. "You can guess the tremendous growth of my support base from the fact that during the December 1984 general election my candidate got just 1,716 votes

in Allahabad," says Kanshi Ram. Admits a Congress(I) leader: "Of the three, Kanshi Ram can do the maximum damage."

Tikait, the dour kisan leader - who laid siege to Delhi's Boat Club grounds last year when he led a prolonged dharna of farmers there - might not agree with that calculation. The stronghold of his Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) is western Uttar Pradesh, where it could tilt the balance in a dozen-odd Lok Sabha constituencies.

So could Shahabuddin, who yields considerable clout over Muslims throughout Uttar Pradesh and Bihar - both electorally crucial states. By taking a rabidly militant line on key issues affecting the community - the Muslim Women's Bill, the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi dispute and Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* - Shahabuddin has tried to project himself as the messiah of the Muslims.



Mahendra Singh Tikait Leader, Bharatiya Kisan Union

Though he claims to be a "graduate from the Janata University", Shahabuddin attributes his incompatibility with the present Janata Dal to the party's decision to have seat adjustments with the BJP. In the event of a poll-eve polarisation on communal lines as a result of the recent flare-ups in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, Shahabuddin certainly stands to gain.

Interestingly, though the fringe leaders may not be able to ensure the victory of their own candidates, they can wreck the chances of either of the mainline parties. For instance, in the Punjab assembly elections in September, 1985, though the BSP polled a mere 2.2 per cent of the votes, its presence sealed the fate of the Congress(I) which lost the polls by less than 1 percent.

ADVERTISEMENT

That is why, immediately after the Allahabad by-election, both Congress(I) and opposition leaders started wooing Kanshi Ram. A number of Central ministers, including well-known negotiators like Sheila Dikshit and Rajesh Pilot, held talks with him. Kanshi Ram says that he

declined the offer of a berth in the Union Cabinet in lieu of the BSP merging with the Congress(I).

The ruling party's concern is understandable. Kanshi Ram has succeeded in denting the traditional Congress vote-bank which comprises Brahmins, Harijans and Muslims. With the Muslims still alienated from the party, the loss of Harijan votes will prove disastrous for the

**is keeping his options open- negotiating with both Rajesh Pilot of the Congress and emissaries of Janata
ongman Devi Lal.**

Congress(I).

Basking in the glow of this new-found importance, the BSP leader makes it a point to mention that a dozen-odd ministers and senior Congress) leaders have so far approached him. During the recent parleys, AICC(I) General Secretary Ghulam Nabi Azad, Pilot and the prime minister's man Friday Satish Sharma urged him to meet Rajiv, claims Kanshi Ram.

The wily BSP leader is learnt to have agreed to the proposal. Though Kanshi Ram has suggested seat adjustments with the Congress(I), he is cautious about the outcome. He candidly admits:

"My votes are transferable, but not those of the Congress(I)." Sitting in his dingy party headquarters in Delhi's Karol Bagh area, he outlines his strategy to reach his ultimate goal and 'rule at Delhi".

Says he: "By deciding to concentrate in the large states of the Hindi heartland, I wanted to take the enemy by the neck." He moves a stick over the contours of the Hindi belt on the map pinned up on a wall and claims that of the 240 parliamentary seats in the region, the BSP will bag about 80.

"Both the Congress(I) and Janata Dal are status quoist parties. We are for change. While others buy votes, I in fact made it a point to collect a rupee from everyone who intended to support me. One vote, one note - that was my slogan in Allahabad."

Kanshi Ram says that one of the ruling party's proposals is to field backward class candidates (not Harijans) in constituencies where he is not confident of victory. The design is clear: use Kanshi Ram to cut into the Janata Dai's votes as the backward classes have consolidated behind the Opposition.

The BSP leader has promised to put up one such candidate in the prime minister's constituency, Amethi to crush the Janata Dal challenge to Rajiv. Kanshi Ram's disarming smile cannot conceal his penchant for boasting. This bragging, however, is not an end in itself. It aims at inflating his importance at the hustings.

It is precisely for this reason that he has floated the Parivartansheel Morcha along with Deve Gowda's truncated Janata Party to "bring about fundamental, structural change" in the country. Kanshi Ram says that the morcha will provide an alternative to both the Congress(I) and the Janata Dal.

ADVERTISEMENT

As they happened to meet at the airport the day after the morcha was launched, V.P. Singh told Kanshi Ram that they could join hands in bringing about parivartan (change) in a more sweeping manner.

Shahabuddin too is caught between the devil and the deep sea. Despite an offer from V.P. Singh to become a member of the Janata Dal Parliamentary Board, Shahabuddin balked at the party's decision to have seat adjustments with the BJP which "represents Hindu chauvinism".

Taking umbrage at the idea of being bracketed with other fringe leaders, the articulate parliamentarian remarks: "It is rather the BJP that has shrunk into a fringe party."

The Congress(I) bosses have also been trying to win him over to their side. Ali Siddiqi, a sycophant of the Gandhi family, was among those deputed to persuade Shahabuddin to align with the Congress(I).



Syed Shahabuddin President, Insnaf Party

While still being urged to reconsider his decision by his old socialist comrades in the Janata Dal like George Fernandes, Jaswant Sinha and Surendra Mohan, the Muslim leader seems to have veered round to the view that for the minorities, the Congress(I) is the lesser evil.

Says he: "The major issue in the next elections is the rising wave of Hindu chauvinism, which must be contained. To me it does not matter who becomes the next prime minister."

'Mahatma' Tikait with his rustic wisdom is also keeping his options open - holding negotiations with both Rajesh Pilot and Haryana Chief Minister Devi Lal's emissaries. In the heady days of 1987, when the Jan Morcha juggernaut was rolling all over western Uttar Pradesh, Tikait himself sought a meeting with V.P. Singh.

However, lures from the Congress(I) in recent months have proved irresistible. He brags:

"Elections or no elections, I alone can ensure that the Congress(I) will remain in power provided they concede our demands." He says he will issue *afatwa* (edict) to his followers a couple of days

hahabuddin's militant stance on key issues has won him considerable support among Muslims in the heartland.

before the polls.

Entrenched at the BKU headquarters in Sisauli near Muzaffarnagar, Tikait has given short shrift to consistency in declaring war on the Delhi durbar one moment and praising the prime minister the next. Tikait-watchers, however, discern a method in this madness and point to his shrewdness as a bargainer.

Certainly, in the race for enlisting the support of the fringe leaders, the Congress(I) has an edge over the Opposition. The Government can easily announce concessions or implement an old pledge to appease any section of the electorate. The Opposition at best can only make promises. Says Pilot: "We will try to take help from everyone without compromising our ideology." Some significance is also being attached to Shetkari Sanghatana leader Sharad Joshi's recent meeting with Rajiv Gandhi.

The Janata Dai's negotiations with these leaders, on the other hand, are being hampered by the intense group rivalry in the party. Devi Lai, during a prolonged meeting with Kanshi Ram, reportedly remarked: "Your supporters are naked, mine are in loin cloth. Why don't you team up with me?" Clearly the Haryana strongman's effort is to extend his own base rather than enhance the electoral chances of the Janata Dal.

However, the party in its talks with these three leaders has proposed seat adjustments. Since the BKU is an apolitical organisation, the Janata Dal has offered its symbol to its candidates. The response to this proposal is not yet known.

Nevertheless, it may not be all that easy for these fringe leaders to deliver the votes of a particular group at the door of any party of their choice. For instance, Tikait has inherited the Jat constituency of the late Chaudhary Charan Singh. Jat farmers, traditionally anti-Congress(I), may not oblige if he issues a diktat to vote for the party.

While Tikait is looked upon as a leader of the farmers' movement, Charan Singh's political mantle has fallen on his son, Ajit Singh. Says Janata Dal National Executive member Som Pal: "He (Tikait) must size up the popular mood."

Similarly, Shahabuddin will find it difficult to convince the Muslims to vote for the Congress(I), whose government has been held responsible by the community for the ghastly Hashimpura carnage in 1987.

Kanshi Ram too will have to tread cautiously since he has built up his base solely on the anti-Congress(I) plank. Says Malik: "If these leaders decide to align with the Congress(I), they will lose their base."

The hectic parleys establish two facts: the importance of the trio who hold sway over crucial regions; and the vulnerability of the mainstream parties. The three leaders of course have an inflated sense of their own importance and stress that it is they, rather than the national parties, who represent mainstream politics. But the line of demarcation between the fringe and core of Indian politics seems to be getting increasingly blurred.

<https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/special-report/story/19891031-mahendra-singh-tikait-syed-shahabuddin-kanshi-ram-represents-powerful-electoral-triumvirate-816674-1989-10-31>