

Bengal Politics at Crossroads: Anticipations and Implications

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore why, despite the BJP's promising performances in the Lok Sabha and assembly elections in West Bengal since the rise of the Modi government at the centre in 2014, the party wrestled to achieve the long-awaited electoral success in the 2024 Lok Sabha election in the state. The party's struggles raise important questions about its strategies and the challenges it faces in a state where the political environment is in flux following the electoral success of the TMC in 2011 and the waning of the Left. As Bengal politics stands at a crucial crossroads, understanding the reasons behind the BJP's stalled progress becomes essential for grasping the future trajectory of the region's political scene.

Keyword: 2024 Elections, Modi government, West Bengal

Introduction

Party politics in West Bengal is marked by intense factionalism and a history of violent confrontations between rival political parties. The state boasts a long-standing tradition of political activism and mobilization, with parties often depending on grassroots support to retain their power. Before independence, West Bengal was a significant hub for anti-colonial resistance and nationalist movements, which laid the groundwork for the strong political culture observed today. The region's diverse population and complex social dynamics have also shaped its fragmented political landscape. The Indian National Congress (Congress hereafter) rose to prominence in the region following independence and the partition in 1947, establishing itself as a dominant political force. Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy, the state's first Chief Minister, was instrumental in shaping the political discourse during this time. His leadership and vision helped consolidate the INC's influence, yet the leftist parties, which had gained traction before independence mostly

due to peasant labour movements, continued to challenge the Congress's dominance in West Bengal after 1947. Additionally, Hindu nationalist forces, particularly the Hindu Mahasabha, played a crucial role in the political decision-making process before partition, although they gradually lost their influence as the Congress and leftist parties gained strength in the post-independence period. The political landscape of West Bengal has remained dynamic and diverse, making it a key battleground for various ideologies and parties vying for power and influence.

The next significant political shift in West Bengal occurred in 2011 when the All-India Trinamool Congress (TMC), under the dynamic leadership of Smt. Mamata Banerjee, came to power. This marked the end of an unprecedented thirty-four years of uninterrupted Left Front rule in the state. Mamata Banerjee, a seasoned politician who had been associated with the Congress for several decades, took a bold step in 1998 by splitting from the Congress Party. Over the years, Banerjee emerged as the primary opposition voice to the Left Front, galvanizing public sentiment against the government's approach to the establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and the controversial process of land acquisition for industrialization. By the time the 2011 state elections arrived, she had cultivated a significant following, leading to a remarkable and historic landslide victory for the TMC. This victory not only signified a dramatic political transformation in West Bengal but also set the stage for comprehensive policy changes and a new governance approach under her leadership, which aimed to address the long-standing developmental needs of the state and its people.

What intrigued social scientists the most was the emergence of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the state, especially in the years following the pivotal 2014 Lok Sabha elections. This development was particularly noteworthy given that the BJP's presence had been minimal during the 1980s and 1990s. In a region dealing with a complex web of communal tensions during and aftermath of the partition, and grappling with the large influx of Hindu refugees from East Bengal, there was an urgent need to address the concerns and aspirations of the displaced individuals in a fractured landscape of West Bengal. Before the partition of India, Bengal experienced a gradual yet steady rise of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), which played a pivotal role in establishing the Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS) in 1951, led by the influential Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee. In 1977, the Jana Sangh actively teamed up with various opposition groups to create the Janata Party, fostering a united front against the Congress party. This collaboration laid a solid

foundation that, by 1980, constructively evolved into the Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP (Baxter 1969). In the first general election following India's independence in 1952, the BJS achieved notable success, particularly with the wins of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee from the Calcutta South East constituency and Dr. Durga Charan Banerjee from Jhargram in Midnapore. This initial foray into electoral politics marked a significant moment for the party, as they captured the interest of the electorate, however, following the untimely demise of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the party's electoral performance began to decline steadily (Dasgupta 2020). Besides, the reach and influence of Hindu nationalist politics, especially those political wings seeking to represent Hindu interests and cultivate a sense of cultural nationalism within the community—remained somewhat constrained in the state. Neither the Hindu Mahasabha nor the BJS effectively mobilised the Hindu refugees in West Bengal and the political prospects of Hindu nationalism remained relatively limited compared to other regions of India. This limitation could be largely attributed to the formidable presence of leftist ideologies and movements in the state, which dominated the political scenario in the decades following independence and partition. The socio-economic viewpoints and values brought forth by these movements overshadowed the efforts of Hindu nationalist groups, leaving them with limited political traction. Yet, as the latter half of the twentieth century unfolded, the state's political landscape shifted, gradually creating an opening for the BJP. This shift was particularly influenced by pressing issues such as the infiltration of illegal Bangladeshi migrants, the prominent Ayodhya movement, and the BJP's growing engagement with rural constituencies. In a notable strategic manoeuvre, the party formed a temporary alliance with the TMC during the 1998 Lok Sabha elections. This coalition yielded immediate rewards, enabling the BJP to secure its inaugural Lok Sabha seat in West Bengal and boosting its overall vote share (Gillan 1998; Mayers 1998). However, despite this momentary success, the partnership ultimately failed to fortify the BJP's presence on the electoral stage in the long term, leaving the party struggling to establish a robust and lasting foothold in the region's complex political arena.¹

Saffron Wave in Bengal: The Realities

With the diminishing status of the Left after the emergence of the TMC in the ruling position, and specially following the ascent of Narendra Modi's leadership at the national level, BJP made significant strides in establishing a solid support base.

Table 1: BJP's performance in the Lok Sabha elections in West Bengal

Year	Seat	Contested Won	Vote share
1998	14	1	10.20
1999	13	2	11.13
2004	13	00	8.6
2009	42	1	6.14
2014	42	2	17.2
2019	42	18	40.22
2024	42	12	38.73

Source: <https://results.eci.gov.in/PcResultGenJune2024/partywiseresult-S25.htm>

As the political scenario in West Bengal underwent important transformations, organizations aligned with the Hindu right started to gain both visibility and influence, particularly in the northern regions of the state and among certain tribal communities. In these areas, the complexities of caste and ethnic identities have played a crucial role in shaping local political allegiances, making them fertile ground for political activities. North Bengal and the tribal-dominated regions, often characterized by their slower pace of development in comparison to other parts of the state, became increasingly amenable to political mobilization driven by caste and ethnic identity. This dynamic was especially evident in the Darjeeling constituency, where the BJP first made significant inroads in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections, thanks in part to the backing of the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM), showcasing the intersection of local aspirations and larger political trends (Kanungo 2015). The increasing confidence of the indigenous population in the BJP was vividly illustrated during the Lok Sabha elections of 2019 and the subsequent Assembly elections in 2021. The party's message resonated deeply with a diverse and expanding segment of the electorate. Other than successfully securing seats in the North Bengal districts such as Jalpaiguri, Alipurduar, Balurghat, and Cooch Behar in the 2019 Lok Sabha election, the party also showed a strong performance in tribal-heavy areas, particularly in Jhargram, Purulia, and parts of Bankura and West Midnapore. Here, the support from tribal voters proved vital for the party's victories.²

In the landscape of electoral demographics, the Scheduled Caste Rajbanshi community, predominantly found in the districts of Cooch Behar and Jalpaiguri, has developed a perception of the BJP as a political entity capable of effectively addressing their long-standing grievances. This community has historically sought improved representation in governance, which they feel has been overlooked by previous administrations. The BJP's strategic positioning and its emphasis on Hindutva, alongside a robust national security policy, resonated strongly with voters in these regions. Many constituents were increasingly concerned about significant issues such as illegal immigration and cross-border terrorism, both of which have been critical topics in local discourse. Besides, the BJP capitalized on sentiments among the local Rajbanshi and Adivasi populations, who felt that the TMC had consistently favored urban and mainstream Bengali elites. This strategic approach sought to engage the anti-elite sentiments prevalent within these communities, while simultaneously articulating the party's commitment to safeguarding the indigenous interests of the northern districts of West Bengal. The Scheduled Caste Matua community, primarily consisting of refugees from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), has a notable presence in several districts, including North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas, Nadia, and Cooch Behar. The BJP identified this community as an important demographic for political engagement, particularly because of their growing disenchantment with the TMC. This disillusionment is largely rooted in their long-standing demands for Indian citizenship and legal recognition. The BJP's promise to provide citizenship through the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) aligned closely with the Matua community's aspirations for rehabilitation and acknowledgement. This strategic political manoeuvre allowed the BJP to make significant gains in areas dominated by the Matuas. The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) was designed to provide a path to citizenship for non-Muslim refugees hailing from Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Afghanistan, specifically those who entered India before December 31, 2014. This legislation aimed to address the historical and ongoing plight of these refugees, granting them formal recognition and the opportunity to obtain Indian citizenship. One of the key communities benefiting from this act was the Matua community, which had long advocated for the acknowledgement of their rights and status within India. The BJP emphasized the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) as a central issue during the 2019 Lok Sabha and 2021 Assembly elections to address the aspirations of the Matua community and registered a good amount of success in it. A prominent example of this was Shantanu Thakur's victory in the Bongaon Lok Sabha seat during the 2019

elections, which underscored the BJP's successful outreach to this community. The BJP's strategy to foster a relationship with the Matua community identified their efforts to consolidate the Hindu refugee votes within Bengal (Guha 2024). The allure of the CAA initially attracted considerable support from the community, however, the subsequent delay in the Act's implementation posed significant challenges, allowing the TMC to make concerted efforts to regain the confidence of the Matua community. Alongside, capitalizing on the diminishing influence of traditional political stalwarts—the communist parties and the Congress—the BJP adeptly positioned itself as the primary challenger to the ruling TMC in the subsequent elections. This strategic manoeuvring not only highlighted the changing political allegiances in West Bengal but also set the stage for an intense electoral rivalry that would shape the future of the region's governance.

The BJP witnessed remarkable success during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, skilfully leveraging a significant decline in the electoral support for Left parties. This electoral victory, however, did not pave the way for similar achievements in the subsequent 2021 assembly election. Despite carrying the momentum from their previous triumph, the anticipated unification of opposition votes failed to take shape in the assembly polls. A considerable segment of the so-called Left liberal Hindu bhadraloks perceived the BJP's growing influence as a serious threat to both the cultural and political fabric of West Bengal. Consequently, the BJP managed to secure only 77 seats, garnering 38.1 percent of the total vote share in the assembly elections. This result was a considerable letdown, given the party's earlier successes and expectations for continued dominance.

The Identity Question

The assembly elections in West Bengal in 2021 marked a significant political event, culminating in a resounding triumph for the TMC, led by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. The election results demonstrated that the BJP struggled to establish a dedicated voter base in the state by actively mobilising Hindu voters, however, it failed to counter TMC's strategy of stamping BJP as an outsider party controlled by the leaders from the Hindi-speaking belt of the country. The TMC successfully banked on a Bengali ethnic identity as a major force to influence the political opinions in the state against the BJP's attempt to mobilise a Hindu religious identity. Maxime Vincent's recent study highlights how the TMC leveraged a regional Bengali identity, while the BJP focused on a broader pan-Indian Hindu identity to shape voter sentiment.

Interestingly, despite being significantly influenced by the religious undertones of national politics, BJP's so-called 'Hindu' voters still tended to prioritize their local political needs. This indicates a certain vulnerability in the Hindu political identity when it comes to regional concerns (Vincent 2022). By making the Bengali cultural identity the sole identifier in the political opinion-making process, the TMC tried to balance the caste-class factors with that identity so that the cultural-historical uniqueness of the land could best be saved from the so-called 'outsiders'.

Since its rise in prominence in the state after 2014, the BJP has actively sought to mobilize Hindu voters by emphasizing Hindu religious issues and events, as well as by accusing Banerjee's government of appeasing the Muslim community, which comprises approximately 30% of West Bengal's population. Interestingly, the BJP also made significant investments in crafting an overarching 'Hindu identity' that seeks to unify various caste and class considerations when necessary. This approach was intended to create a cohesive identity while also addressing and subsuming the diverse sectarian and cultural traditions that are inherent to Hinduism. Central to this effort was the ideology of Hindutva, which the BJP emphasized as a guiding principle. This ideology not only outlines specific characteristics that its proponents believe represent a standardized definition of Hinduness, which they claimed is shared universally among Hindus in India, but it also served as a political framework capable of subsuming and dominating the myriad lesser streams of Hindu practices that strive to maintain their uniqueness and distinctiveness. When examining the politics of Hindutva in the specific context of Bengal, it is essential to consider the implications for the Bengali Hindus. If we momentarily set aside the complexities surrounding the Muslim question—a critical element in the broader discourse on Hindutva—we must acknowledge the challenges it poses for Bengali Hindus. These individuals have long cherished a unique sense of Hinduness, characterized by their cultural nuances and historical experiences. They have emphasized personal and community-driven mechanisms for the construction of their Hindu identity, often distinct from the monolithic portrayal put forth by the BJP.

In the assembly election of 2021, the TMC effectively portrayed the BJP as being fundamentally opposed to the interests of both the state and its people, particularly the Bengali community. Despite the BJP's attempts to challenge this narrative, the party struggled to shake off this negative perception. Additionally, the central leadership of the BJP

has yet to establish a robust organizational infrastructure or an effective election campaign machinery in West Bengal. Unfortunately, the local Bengali-speaking leaders of the BJP who speak, whether they were affiliated with the RSS or were newcomers from the TMC, did not acknowledge the shortcomings within the party's organizational structure and strategic approach. Instead, they placed their hopes heavily on the prospect of Modi's charisma, believing that it would work in their favour as it had in previous elections. During the campaign period, Prime Minister Modi's numerous visits to West Bengal—more than any other state—conveyed a strong message: the local party organization seemed to be relegated to a limited role in favour of Modi's personal appeal.

Setting the Background

However, as the 2024 Lok Sabha election approached, the anti-incumbency sentiment appeared to be gaining traction for the BJP in West Bengal. This shift in voter sentiment is underscored by the BJP's focused campaign, which highlighted the administrative failings of the ruling TMC. Key issues, such as alleged recruitment scams, the ongoing concerns regarding illegal infiltration from Bangladesh, and the safety of women, have been thrust into the spotlight. Modi's promise of a "double engine government" in the state has stirred hope among the Bengali populace for much-anticipated advancements, particularly in attracting industrial investments and generating new employment opportunities. While the BJP occasionally highlighted the potential benefits of a double engine government during their campaign, they fell short of clearly outlining the specific developmental initiatives they would implement if they regained power at the centre in 2014. Additionally, the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya, coupled with the support from several local Hindu philanthropic organizations aligning with the BJP, played a crucial role in awakening a sense of Hindutva among certain segments of the *bhadraloks*. These individuals, who previously identified more with a secular elite status, are now beginning to embrace a different aspect of their cultural identity.

Despite a powerful surge of public sentiment in favor of the BJP, as reflected in numerous electoral surveys conducted by various media outlets, the outcome of the 2024 Lok Sabha elections turned out to be unexpectedly disappointing for the party. The BJP experienced a significant drop in its seat count compared to the 2019 elections, managing to secure only 12 seats while obtaining 38.73 percent of the overall votes cast. In stark contrast, the TMC saw remarkable gains in

its electoral representation. The party not only strengthened its foothold in the state but also achieved an impressive 45.76 percent of the vote, marking a notable shift in the political landscape.³

What went wrong?

What went wrong for the BJP in the 2024 elections in Bengal? As highlighted by political analysts, the party's shortcomings became evident when considering the support for the state government's social welfare initiatives, particularly the Lakshmir Bhandar scheme. This program provided cash assistance to women aged 25 to 60, winning over a significant portion of the electorate. The party failed to demonstrate a genuine interest in attracting the women or minority voters and did not grasp the implications of repeatedly criticising the TMC for offering cash assistance to low-income women. Furthermore, the BJP struggled to effectively highlight the serious issues of alleged harassment by local TMC leaders against women and the illegal occupation of villagers' cultivable lands in the remote Sandeshkhali area of the Basirhat constituency. Despite grabbing national media attention, the party's inability to maintain a politically viable narrative regarding women's exploitation and land seizure by the TMC prevented them from enjoying an opportunity similar to what the TMC capitalised on during the Singur-Nandigram events before 2011. On top of this, the demographic makeup of Basirhat, which features a significant Muslim minority and women who support the TMC's welfare policies, coupled with the BJP's lack of grassroots connections, turned what could have been a pivotal issue for the opposition into a missed opportunity (Ghosh 2024).

Evaluating the impact of the welfare schemes introduced by the TMC on voter behaviour reveals a complex narrative. It is challenging to determine whether these initiatives alone prompted voters to overlook serious allegations of corruption and violence associated with the party. Notably, the TMC effectively crafted a compelling narrative that positioned the BJP as an adversary of Bengal. This was achieved through a sustained campaign that highlighted claims of the central government's failure to release funds for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), which resonated with the electorate's concerns. The party organized numerous public demonstrations to protest against what they termed the deprivation of Bengal's rightful resources by the authorities in New Delhi. In addition, after negotiations with the INDIA bloc regarding seat-sharing fell apart, the TMC intensified its criticisms of both the Congress and Left parties.

By accusing them of inaction on the crucial issue of demanding Bengal's fair share from the central government, the TMC sought to portray itself as the sole champion of the state's interests. This strategy reinforced the perception that the party was tackling these challenges independently, further solidifying its image as a proactive force fighting for the rights of Bengal's citizens.

Interestingly, some local BJP leaders continued to allege after election that "conspiracy and backbiting" were responsible for the party's electoral loss, questioning why the BJP could not sustain its growth in Bengal after the 2021 Assembly elections (Dasgupta 2024). Senior BJP leader and former state president Dilip Ghosh, having lost to TMC's Kirti Azad in the Bardhaman-Durgapur seat by a significant margin of 1.37 lakh votes, attributed the loss to internal dissent. "For over a year, I poured my time and resources into Medinipur, but I was sidelined and not allowed to contest there. The results in both seats, Medinipur and Bardhaman-Durgapur, speak for themselves," he remarked. Ghosh's criticism directed at party members was often interpreted as a veiled jab at Suwendu Adhikari, the Leader of the Opposition in the state Assembly, who switched from the TMC to the BJP in 2020. While Ghosh did not name anyone specifically, Adhikari was perceived as the key decision-maker in the ticket distribution process for the Lok Sabha elections (Gupta 2024). It is true that making Suwendu Adhikari the face of the local campaign created internal discontent specially among the old guards of the party hailing from an RSS background. Although Adhikari may have retained his strength in the Kanthi and Tamluk constituencies—his home turf—he ultimately fell short of becoming the true face of the opposition in the state. This can largely be attributed to his past connections with the TMC and his tendency to launch repeated personal attacks on Mamata Banerjee and her family. Instead of focusing on the BJP's ideological stance of Hindutva or developing a solid Hindu voter base that includes both urban and rural populations while addressing the diverse caste, class, and ethnic concerns among Hindu voters, Adhikari and his followers chose to concentrate on tarnishing the image of TMC leaders in the eyes of the public. Their repeated focus on the ongoing anti-TMC legal matters at the Calcutta High Court, along with the prominence of ED and CBI investigations into the TMC primarily concerning corruption charges, was expected to yield positive outcomes for the party. However, their sole reliance on such negative campaigning against the TMC ultimately fell short of persuading the electorate. Voters remained doubtful about their constructive political agendas capable of fostering the state's development in the near future. The party's inability to articulate a

clear vision for governance, beyond simply attacking the TMC, led to a loss of confidence among the electorate. Without a well-defined and optimistic campaign strategy, they struggled to establish a meaningful connection with voters who were looking for some solutions to their problems, not mere criticisms. This negative approach left many of the pro-BJP voters feeling uncertain, as the BJP candidates did not inspire hope and offer actionable plans to improve their lives. The strategy of targeting the ruling individuals by calling out names could eventually be proved beneficial in a state grappling with corruption allegations against the ruling party and lacking significant growth in the job market, especially regarding new industrial ventures. However, such an approach would only be effective if the dominant opposition party establishes its own robust support system and organizational structure, aligning closely with their national policy direction.

Incidentally, as part of the election campaigning, Bengal witnessed the rapid emergence of numerous YouTube channels, digital media outlets, and a new group of media analysts who often sink to alarming lows by fabricating news, spreading misinformation, and highlighting issues that could foster communal polarization in the state. None of the political parties — the TMC, the BJP, or the Left — effectively addressed the surge of fake news, often seeming to exploit these channels whenever it suited their political agendas. Since the BJP, as the new main opposition in the state, has yet to establish an intellectual cell to articulate its views in the media, the public witnessed a group of self-proclaimed 'leaders' stepping up as pro-BJP panellists in media debates. Many of these individuals came from legal backgrounds, mixed in with some familiar faces with old Leftist affiliations. However, they struggled to compare with the status and reputation of a longstanding national party like the BJP that has won elections based on solid political grounds across various Indian states, rather than on flimsy narratives hastily constructed to take revenge on the TMC for the Left's defeat in 2011.

Conclusion

The legacy of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee, who worked tirelessly to nurture the early development of BJP's predecessor, the Jana Sangh, in West Bengal, seems to be overshadowed by the party's current lack of direction and focus. For political parties to gain the trust and support of the electorate, it is essential to offer a clear and compelling vision for governance. Unfortunately, the new leaders of the Bengal BJP have struggled to align their image with the prestige and charisma of a national figure like Mookerjee, who stands as a towering presence in

Indian politics. It seems they rely heavily on media attention and support from national leaders, which has led to a disconnect with the common people. In light of the 2024 Lok Sabha election results and the forthcoming 2026 assembly elections, the BJP is confronted with significant challenges as it endeavours to establish itself as the primary opposition in the state. The party is currently grappling with its perception as an outsider, primarily driven by Hindutva, which often stands in contrast to the region's rich tradition of intellectual diversity.

On one hand, the BJP's influence in the southern districts of Bengal has proven to be limited, while the consolidation of the Muslim vote in favour of the TMC has materialized as a significant reality. Conversely, the BJP has not yet succeeded in achieving a comparable consolidation among Hindu voters. The TMC's extensive reach at the grassroots level effectively engaged with a variety of caste and class groups with different strategies and eventually disturbed the BJP's efforts to consolidate the Hindu vote. To counter the TMC's prevailing dominance, the BJP must adopt a strategy specific to regional needs that aligns with the aspirations and identity of the people of Bengal. Absent this strategy, the BJP risks failing to capitalize on support from the central leadership and the potential anti-incumbency sentiment that may arise against the ruling TMC in the 2026 assembly election.

End Notes

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