

# The Riddles of Hindu Politics in Bengal and the Lok Sabha Election of 2019

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The democratic experiences in India had ever been a process of multiple encounters between ideas and approaches from different fragments of the society and polity. I am using the word 'fragment' in a sense that it encouraged to think a segment of the electorate differently from the other, without putting much emphasis on what defines the mainstream in a certain decision making procedure. One must not interpret the word 'fragment' tantamount to the concept of an identity, which I believe often reflects the tendencies of being political in a situation which demands an open nomenclature for the actual contextualization of the question, 'who represents whom' in a democratic condition. Rather in a democratic experience it is better to uncover fragments as a site of exploring the expectations of a group of people those who have been struggling to translate their presence into a political reality. The 2019 Lok Sabha election result in West Bengal provides an interesting opportunity to unveil the nuances of that struggle so far remained segregated or interrupted under a series of historical compulsions. The 2019 Lok Sabha election results in West Bengal brought all the issues which determined the way how a fragment supposed to speak for the whole, back to the public domain and engaged in dealing with the problems of looking at a fragment of the political society beyond the lens of identity formation or identity conflicts. The stunning entry of the Bharatiya Janata Party in the Trinmool Congress strongholds might have been evolved as one of the crucial factors which attracted manifold political interpretations from the media houses, the election results itself challenged a series of presupposed assumptions and notions of interrupted permanence which dominated Bengal politics since 1947. That is how a fragment of a political society taking hold over the rest, emerged far more important than an identity getting high on an individual, and the Lok Sabha election results in West Bengal mirrored exactly what we call an 'alternative', both in discourse and reality. I don't want to indulge myself in eulogizing the Hindus as a fragment in Bengal society or the Muslims as an 'identity', rather prefer to locate a set of ideas, metaphors and anecdotes which helped to make the election

results a dramatic incident, if not unanticipated in general. Inclusive to the understanding of the patterns of election politics in West Bengal, these ideas and anecdotes appeared unchallenged in the last decades, which endeavoured to set the political destiny of the state in a specific way, mostly in favour the dominant political parties in West Bengal. The aim of this paper is to locate these ideas which aptly describe the emergence of BJP in Bengal as an important voice of the fragment and gradually steps out to be the mainstream at the political and non-political level. Mainstreaming a certain brand of politics needs the support of the people irrespective of their identity issues, and it needs extra care and passion to replace one dominant mode of opposition politics with the other. The rise of the left in the 70s might have introduced an era of regimented party politics in Bengal leaving the Congress at a point of unpredictability, the rise of the BJP showed how a hitherto undefined domain of politics, lacking organizational strength or electoral networking could have had produced unique opportunities for itself mostly on some flimsy grounds. The BJP mode of Hindutva politics might have been appearing to be a consistent threat of bhadrak politics in West Bengal, the general conception of West Bengal being a superior sacred uncontaminated space of 'secular' politics also nullified the claims of the up country Hindi speaking leaders seeking visibility inside the 'elite' clusters of party politics in West Bengal. BJP's image of being the upholder of Hindutva in India did not receive any attention in West Bengal at the initial stage, rather the party continued to fight an uncanny battle of ideological legitimacy and political despondency in the state for long. In such a situation, it becomes important to trace the reasons why and how the BJP successfully registered its presence in West Bengal in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, far more strappingly than the previous decades.

Out of 42 Lok Sabha seats in the state, the lotus bloomed in 18 seats, reducing the TMC to 22 seats from its earlier position of having 34 seats. The Congress returned with 2 seats and the left parties failed to win a single seat in the 2019 election. The BJP however made a landslide victory in the country, returning to power at the centre with biggest majority. The face of the opposition, the Indian National Congress has been wiped out from the electoral game, while most of its celebrated candidates failed to retain their seats. Riding back on the Modi wave all over the country, the BJP improved its vote share from 31.34 percent in 2014 to a new record high, the Congress experienced minimal changes in its vote share from the last elections. Political analysis's might have used series of explanations to show how did the BJP manage to come back in power with massive mandate, the exciting part of the story,

however, remained imbedded at the regional level especially in a state like West Bengal where the party fetched of 40.25% votes and a large chunk of the Left votes went to the BJP. Contrary to popular belief that the Left vote bank would remain uninterrupted, the BJP this time cut into the vote bank of the left and also attracted the bonafide voters from other parties. In North Bengal region and especially in the border regions of the state where a sizeable number of Hindu refugee population is settled down, the BJP successfully managed to mobilize the illegal infiltration issue in its election propaganda. Demolishing the myth of being an urban centric Hindi language party, the BJP swept the poll in different rural pockets of North Bengal and responded to the challenges of having a poor organization and less popular candidates in most of the constituencies. Did the party employ its slogan of Hindutva as a complete package of electoral manoeuvrings? Did Bengali Hindus wholeheartedly receive the party leaving all their earlier inhibitions far behind? Why the subaltern poor of the state, especially those from the vulnerable sections of the society favoured the party in some of the most crucial constituencies where the ruling party had been enjoying a strong support base for long? Before entering into these immediate issues and concerns of the Lok Sabha election of 2019, it would be quite refreshing to take a quick look at the position of the Bengali Hindus on the Hindutva question, adopted and utilised by the Sangh Parivar and their allied forces.

#### Lok Sabha Result in West Bengal

Party	2014 Result	2019 Result
TMC	34	22
INC	4	2
BJP	2	18
CPIM	2	-

Approaches leading to the consolidation of Hindutva had never been alien to Bengal. Infact the word Hindutva was coined by a Bengali named in. The liberal-humanitarian world view of Hinduism appeared to be a stimulating force behind the waves of resurgent Hinduism from late 19<sup>th</sup> century, even though the word Hinduness or Hindutva offered multiple dimensions of being and becoming a Hindu in the socio-cultural landscape of Bengal. Interestingly Bengal did not ever opt for a homogeneous mode of political Hindutva at least the version of Hindutva popularised by V.D Savarkar hardly made its presence felt among the cross section of the Bengali Hindus. Twenties of the 20th

century could have been located as one of culminating into the phase of institutionalised form of expressing the Hinduness of a Hindu particularity in regard to the emergence of what is described as Hindu nationalism in India. The ideology has been interpreted differently, however, the subsequent rise of the themes like an 'enemy other' or the 'dying Hindu' and its capturing the attention of a section of the Hindu literati and political ideologues created favourable situations for the greater politicization of the idea called Hindu nationalism in Bengal. The moment Hindu nationalism successfully claimed its legitimacy over Indian nationalism, at least among a sizeable section of the Hindu upper castes in Bengal, especially in situations when the question of separate electorate and lower caste representations in the legislature became prevalent, the notions of an 'enemy other' or 'dying Hindu' attained its much awaited justification both in the political and non-political domain. Such slogans might have shown its manipulative impact over cross sections of the Hindu electorate, however, brought no significant results in consolidating a strong powerful Hindu block against the vote bank politics of the Muslim League. Muslim League, for instance could have its own limitations of not reaching out all sections of the Muslims in an equal manner, it tapped into those issues which affected the community as a whole and successfully worked on the phrase like 'Islam in danger'. Interestingly in Bengal, the League had to take a back door entry to get an actual recognition in the mainstream politics since Muslim League did not ever become a popular choice in Bengal at least up to the election of 1937. It was only after the Congress had rejected to go for an alliance with the Krisak Paraja Party (KPP), the most prominent of the regional players after the election of 1937, that the Muslim League got its most anticipated opportunity to form a coalition government with the KPP in Bengal. Within a decade of its official journey in Bengal politics, the Muslim League returned with sweeping majority in the election of 1946 and gradually established its hold over the rural Muslim electorate. Bengal being a Muslim majority province might have provided extra mileage to the Muslim League in the electoral games, the rural Muslims especially the peasants and the masses hardly had anything common with the patterns of politics the League had been instituting at the regional level. Religion would have appeared one of the cementing factors between the city centric English educated leadership structure of the League and the poor Muslim electorate at the Bengal countryside; Hinduism or to be special the so-called idea of Hindu nationalism or Hindutva did not fetch any fruitful in bringing all the Hindus is into a common pattern of politics in Bengal. Dr. Syamaprasad Mookerjee, the sole spokesman of the Hindu Mahasabha in Bengal choose to crave a separate niche for him in the corridors of high politics at the national

level, however, lacked the essential support base to nurture the spirit of Hindutva in Bengal. The Mahasabha mostly working under the shadows of the Congress often attempted to use the Congress platform for electoral gains, but ended it grappling with the charge of being communal and confined to their own limited agendas. Neither it had become a popular political party nor had it any appeal among the common Hindu electorate. As a matter of fact, Hindu bhadraloks those who were keen to retain their secular liberal image intact at the time of growing communal tensions in the province, hardly looked for the Mahasabha something to be a dependable force to tackle the situation, rather preferred to go with the Congress in the hours of crisis. Central to the argument why did the partition happen, the scholars working mostly within the left-liberal framework often found the Hindu bhadraloks responsible for the catastrophe since they had emerged to be the most vocal supporters of partition in the years immediately before the event. Prof. Jaya Chatterjee has systematically analysed why the Hindu bhadraloks and particularly Dr. Syamaprasad Mookerjee should be held responsible for dividing the province because of their inhibitions and pre-determined notions of a possible Muslim domination in Bengal in near future. These people were ready to leave everything but not to stay in a Muslim dominated Pakistan at any cost and skilfully visualised and executed the plans of partition for their own vested interests. Contrary to these arguments one must take cognizance of the fact that neither Dr. Mookerjee represented the Hindu bhadraloks in Bengal nor the Hindu bhadraloks were a consolidated block to take a firm decision of their own. The fear of a possible Muslim domination might have been appearing crucial in the events of partition, but naming that 'fear', if it is so, as simply 'Hindu communalism' fails to do justice to the manifold realities of Bengal partition. What happened to that sentiment of 'communalism' after partition? If such a sentiment was powerful enough to make partition a reality, then why did it fail to sustain its spirit after partition? The Namasudras or the so-called lower caste Hindus those who had suffered the traumas of partition the most did not get any acceptance in the upper caste Hindu society, not even the Hindu upper caste refugees from East Bengal had been welcomed with joy and love in their new homeland called West Bengal. Hindu bhadraloks—a highly fragmented community who had been staying in their small narrow clusters, mostly detached from rest of the 'Hindu masses, did not ever sensitise or epitomise the sense of a Hinduness—necessary for reaping up political gains in a given situation. They might have responded to the ups and downs of the political events culminating towards a certain destiny in the decades before partition, these people had always remain conscious of their self image of being culturally

superior and politically advanced to their counterparts from other provinces. This sense of superiority, insularity and exclusiveness always kept a kind of self imposed restriction over the Bengali Hindu bhadraloks that even in the so-called partition literature from Bengal remained highly sceptical of talking the partition violence openly like what has been thoroughly narrated in the literature from Punjab. The Bengali literati choose to maintain spectacular silence over the issues which could have created some amount of discomfort for the bhadraloks who somehow managed to keep the stories of partition violence at its low and maintained a kind of dignified distance from every political or cultural issues which could bring down the Hindus and the Muslims at a point of mutual blame-game. Hindutva had remained to be a far from distant cry in West Bengal, an enigma for the political analysis's who even lost track of a concrete pattern of Hindu politics in Bengal especially after the sudden demise of Dr. Mookerjee in Kashmir in 1953. The Jana Sangh era in Bengal witnessed the rise of a few personalities; the ideology in general went passive and ineffective. The coming of the left and its gradual prominence over the Hindu refugee constituencies ruined the future of the Jana Sangh in Bengal and the party itself found nothing enterprising in Bengal when the Hindi-Hindu syndrome was growing high in north and north-western provinces. Lack of ground level organizations and dedicated workers could have had contributed to the declining status of Hindu politics in Bengal, the successful implementation of a party society by the leftist regime also spoiled the hopes of an alternative politics in Bengal. The peasants, labourers, the tribes, the schedules caste and the common masses were brought into the party-society structure of the leftist regime when each and political decisions were generated and executed through the party hierarchy with strong networks of ground level organizations and cadres. The rise of the TMC appeared to be the biggest challenge to the left since the TMC had introduced one unique mode of people's society in place of the party oriented political structure. The people's society structure of the TMC established a kind of popular model of politics where individual leaders especially Miss Mamata Banerjee and her image centric support base provided the rocks and bones of a new politics sanctioning the people's choice as the ultimate essence electoral success. What this model lacks a strong sense of ideology or idea which may work for the sustenance of the party in the long run. However, when talking about the BJP's success in the 2019 Lok Sabha election, it was not the lack of ideological orientation from the part of the TMC that helped the BJP in such a breathtaking turnaround, rather systematic mobilization and manoeuvrings by the saffron party fetched it the desired outcome. More Hindus, as a percentage, voted for the BJP in

Bengal in 2019 than the Hindus did for the party in the 2002 Assembly election in Gujarat, where communal rioting had played a definite role in the electioneering policies. Hindus voted for the BJP in Malda— a Muslim-majority district, where there is a Hindu population of 48% while the BJP's vote share in Malda is 36%. It means that good number of Hindus votes for the BJP in Malda and the Muslims were split between the Congress and the Trinomial. BJP's astonishing success in Malda brings forth the hitherto concealed speculations of TMC doing Muslim appeasement politics in Bengal. The bordering districts of Malda, Mursidabad and Nadia had a history of illegal Bangladeshi infiltration since decades and the BJP accused the TMC of doing vote bank politics with the illegal infiltrations. BJP's strategy of showcasing the TMC as the upholder of Muslim appeasement in Bengal fetched good results partly of its campaigns and partly of the social media news and videos. The TMC often declared most of these videos fabricated and a brain child of the BJP, however, the news like banning Durga Puja immersion in Bengal by the TMC government or patronising illegal madrasas at the border districts helping in bringing down the secular image of the TMC in bad light. After independence, for the first time in any of the Lok Sabha election in Bengal, communalism appeared to be a decisive factor while, the idea of a Hindu consolidation was nurtured mostly at the level of accommodating the Namsaduras—Matuas and the adivasis into the grater Hinduisation process for political and economic rights. In the junglemahal destructs of Midnapore, Bakura, Purulia , non-government organizations like the Vanvashi Kalyan Kendra or the Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh performed well to motivate the tribe populations towards the Hindutva ideology, while in the bordering districts of north Bengal and 24 Parganas, the Seemanta Chetna Mancha , Bajrang Dal contributed for the purpose of Hindu consolidation especially among the Dalits. No doubt, the urban Hindu bhadralks, as mentioned earlier one of the most fragmented identities of the Bengali Hindu population took a cautious approach towards the BJP and the urban intellectuals kept on aligning with the ruling TMC government in the 2019 Lok Sabha election; however, the BJP on its part made several attempts to create a space for its ideology among the urban middle class Hindus as well. The noted earlier, the communist workers extended their support to the BJP in the last Lok Sabah election in a overwhelming majority socially in the Bengal countryside, while the communist workers form the cities and the muffusils still continued to work for the Left, especially a few university campus in Calcutta emerged high on anti BJP campaigns so far. In Calcutta and mostly in the south Bengal districts the BJP failed to registered commendable success and the educated intellectual section of the left in general remained divided

between the CPIM and the TMC, particularly the urban-industrial pockets. However, in a regular analysis, it is clear that the Left's vote share has been converted into BJP's gain at the local level. Simultaneously, the Congress's loss was also converted into BJP's gain. The BJP might have eroded some of the vote share of the Congress and the TMC in several constituencies of north Bengal, the same vote share of the TMC and the Left however, moved towards the BJP in western part of Bengal. Why did it happen—whether for the Narendra Modi wave all over the country, for the growing negativity against the Congress or for an thriving anti Muslim sentiment in the state—are yet to get answered. Anti Muslim sentiments definitely played an important part in favour of BJP's attempts of consolidating the Hindu votes in different constituencies and for the first time after independence the so-called liberal-secular image of Bengal has been challenged at a wider scale. In the north Bengal districts BJP's success could be described mostly in terms of it successfully capitalising on the illegal infiltration question, while in the jungle-mahal region the dissatisfaction among the masses especially on the misuse of government funds for public welfare schemes, violence and misbehaviours of the local party cadres and others. The BJP systematically emphasised on these points of syndicate raj, 'tolabaji', 'promotari' to harvest support against the TMC. Unless the TMC addresses the discontent and dissatisfaction of the people in the jungle-mahal region, it would be difficult for the party to keep the tribes in confidence in the next 2021 assembly election. The RSS and the other Sangh Parivar organizations are booming large in their respective domain of Hindu majoritarian politics in Bengal and the anti CAA protest granted them a good amount of political mileage recently.

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