

12 Big national parties in West Bengal

An exceptional outcast?

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In 1967, the decline of the ‘Congress system’ (Kothari 1964: 1161–1173; Kothari 1970) was noticed in both India and in the state of West Bengal. West Bengal was among the nine states where Congress lost power (Chatterjee 1997: 15). For a decade, from the late 1960s to the late 1970s, the state witnessed a transitional period from an unstable and chaotic political system to a long-term political stability (Kohli 1997: 336–366). Such a stability was not provided by the big national parties like the Indian National Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), but instead by the small national parties and regional players, first by the Communist Parties (1977–2011) and later by the Trinamool Congress (2011 onwards).¹ From 1977, in the last four decades, the big national parties (the Congress and the BJP) have been unable to gain political power in West Bengal. In fact, from the late 1990s, the big national parties have been largely trapped in selected zones of the state. From the 1998 Lok Sabha election onwards, in all subsequent Parliamentary and Assembly elections, the big national parties have been always relegated to third and fourth places in terms of vote shares. From the late 1990s onwards, the main political battle has been between the CPI(M)-led Left Front and the Trinamool Congress. In this respect, West Bengal is very similar to Tamil Nadu politics where the big national parties have been unable to capture political power in the state for almost five decades. The story of political stability in West Bengal anchored by small national parties has effectively led to a different electoral system that has been largely immune to the political appeal of big national parties. From the 2014 Lok Sabha election onwards, the BJP has emerged as a dominant party in the national political scene with the continuous decline of the Congress. After the 2014 Lok Sabha election, the BJP is trying to grow in West Bengal when compared to its fringe status in the last three and a half decades in the state. In this context, this chapter looks at whether there is any

possibility of increasing the influence of big national parties among the electorate of West Bengal especially after 2014 Parliament and 2016 Assembly elections in the state. In order to do such an exercise, one must tell the story of the limited presence of the Congress, the continuing decline of the Left, the consolidation of the Trinamool, and the attempts of the BJP to become the main opposition player in the state.

Limited presence of the Congress

The continuous decline of the Congress in West Bengal can be noticed in the last four decades. Barring the 1984 Lok Sabha election, in which the party got sympathy votes for the assassination of the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, it has never reached a two-digit tally in Lok Sabha out of forty-two seats in the state of West Bengal. The 1977 Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections in West Bengal were wave elections against the Congress while the 1984 Lok Sabha election was a wave election in favour of the Congress. Barring these two election years, the Congress was able to manage a vote share of 35 per cent to 42 per cent in all Parliament and Assembly elections in West Bengal from 1980 to 1996. From 1998, the vote share of the Congress got significantly reduced and the party's influence got restricted in three Muslim majority districts of Malda, Murshidabad, and North Dinajpur in North Bengal. From the 2001 Assembly election onwards, most of the Congress members of the state legislature have been elected from these three districts. On the other hand, from 1998 onwards, all its members of the Lok Sabha have been elected from these three districts except in 2004 Lok Sabha election.² This was because, in late 1997, there was a split in the Congress and on 1 January 1998, the Trinamool Congress emerged as a new regional political party in West Bengal under the leadership of its founder and current Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee.³ From 1998 to 2011, the Congress was relegated to third place in the state politics and the Trinamool became the main opposition party in the state. The Congress could now float in West Bengal only as an alliance partner with either Trinamool or the CPI(M) led Left Front. Thus, it made pre-poll political alliances with the Trinamool Congress in the 2001 Assembly election, the 2009 Parliament election, and the 2011 Assembly election and with the CPI(M)-led Left Front in the 2016 Assembly election.

In the 2016 Assembly election, the Congress has been able to become the major opposition party in the West Bengal Assembly after two decades with the support of the Left. In fact, the Left-Congress alliance in 2016 Assembly election has actually helped the Congress

more than the Left (Chatterjee and Solomon 2016). In terms of seats, the Congress became the second largest party, even in the 2011 Assembly election with the support of the Trinamool. Thus, it is basically dependent on either Trinamool or the Left in order to hold on to its limited support base. Even as an opposition party in the state, the Congress is ineffective and it is grappling to hold on to its organisational erosion with the recent intrusion of Trinamool in the Congress bastions of Malda, Murshidabad, and North Dinajpur. In this context, it is very unlikely for the Congress to revive in the near future from its currently marginal status in the political field of West Bengal.

The decline of the left

The limited presence of the Congress in contemporary West Bengal is coupled with the decline of the CPI(M)-led Left Front from the 2008 panchayat election. After enjoying three decades of unchallenged power in West Bengal, the Left was first severely challenged in the 2008 panchayat election, particularly at the lowest two levels of panchayat system (the Gram Sabhas and the Panchayat Samitis). In the May 2008 panchayat election in West Bengal (when the Left was still supporting the Congress-led first United Progressive Alliance government from outside), it somehow managed to win thirteen Zilla Parishads out of seventeen, but it lost a significant number of Panchayat Samitis and Gram panchayats. The two results of the 2006 Assembly election sweep by the Left and the starting point of erosion of the Left in 2008 were at a time when there was a political understanding between the Left and the Congress at the national level. Subsequently, the Left got 43.3 per cent votes in the 2009 Lok Sabha election, 41.1 per cent in the 2011 Assembly election, 29.95 per cent in the 2014 Lok Sabha election, and, finally, it was reduced to 25.69 per cent votes in the 2016 Assembly election while contesting a little over 200 seats. In 2016 Assembly election, the Left had a pre-poll seat-sharing arrangement with the Congress. The Congress got 12.25 per cent of the votes by contesting ninety-two seats. With one NCP candidate and another Left-Congress backed independent, the alliance got a little over 38 per cent of the votes, which was not very different from the 2014 Lok Sabha election when the combined vote share of Left and Congress was 39.29 per cent. The issue is that the independent strength of the Left in West Bengal is continuously dwindling irrespective of whether there is any alliance among the non-Left forces or not. In 2001, there was an alliance between the Congress and the Trinamool, but the Left still managed to get 199 seats (two-third majority) and over 48 per

cent of the votes (5 per cent more than the 2009 Lok Sabha election and 7 per cent more than the 2011 election when Trinamool and Congress had an electoral alliance).

The interesting fact is that in the last decade, while the Congress is able to hold on to its restricted territory by either aligning with Trinamool or the Left, the sharp decline of the Left Front during the same period can be easily noticed. In 2004 Lok Sabha and 2006 Vidhan Sabha elections, the Left Front got 50.8 per cent and 50.2 per cent of the votes respectively. In contrast, the Left got only 29.95 per cent of the votes in the 2014 Lok Sabha election, a loss of nearly 20 per cent of the votes in one decade. Moreover, in terms of seats in the Assembly, the Left has been relegated to the third position behind the Congress. In this respect, as an opposition in West Bengal politics, the Left is facing a severe crisis than the Congress in the 1980s and 1990s. Barring the 1984 Lok Sabha election wave, the Congress maintained a vote share between 35 and 42 per cent in all Parliament and Assembly election from 1980 to 1996 after the rout of 1977; this is far more than what the Left has performed in the 2014 Parliament and 2016 Assembly elections after their defeat in 2011 Assembly election. In the recent by-elections of the Parliamentary constituencies of Tamluk and Coochbehar, and Monteswar Assembly constituency in November 2016 and Kanthi South Assembly constituency in April 2017, the Left further eroded.

In one decade between 2006 and 2016, the poor has actually dumped the Left for Trinamool (Sardesai and Basu 2016). In 2006, the Left managed to get 55 per cent of the votes among the poor (a comfortable majority). However, among the poor voters, the Left got 43 per cent in 2011, 36 per cent in 2014, and only 23 per cent in 2016. If one analyses the electoral results from 2006 to 2016 then it is clear that the major reason for the continuous debacle of the Left in West Bengal from the 2008 panchayat election is because of its desertion of Left politics, i.e. to serve the class interests of the poor, workers, and peasants, along with its inability to invent any alternative Leftwing populist mobilisation instead of following a liberal or neoliberal path. It has little to do with the seat adjustment with the Congress, which is nothing but a result of its debunking of the core left politics after 2006.

The current crisis of the Left had started after the 2006 Assembly election. Such a crisis was fundamentally linked with its inability to provide a counter-hegemonic politics of alternative to neoliberal developmentalism. In fact, neoliberal hegemony has partly influenced the policies and political thinking of the Bengal Left, which was trying

to mimic the Chinese model of corporate-led industrial development, which has been called ‘neoliberalism with Chinese characteristics’ (Harvey 2005: 120–151). The Left forgot to acknowledge that in a country where multiparty democracy is the order of the day, unlike the Chinese and the Vietnamese case, the modernist logic of transition from agriculture to industry has to be negotiated at many levels and in a democratic manner instead of a centralised imposition from above. Moreover, the Left was also unable to understand the complexities of such a forced transition from agriculture to industry, under conditions of ‘postcolonial capitalism’ that is driven by the dual logic of ‘primitive accumulation’ on the one hand and ‘governmentality’ on the other (Sanyal 2007).

Significant sections of urban Bengali middle class, which was traditionally the Left’s support base right from the 1940s till the late 1980s, turned against the Left in the decade of 1990s with neoliberal reforms and the rise of corporate sector offering better opportunities for this class. After almost fifteen years, the Left was able to significantly mobilise this class, particularly in the 2006 Bengal Assembly election on the plank of corporate industrialisation. On the other hand, the peasantry and landless agricultural labourers have historically constituted the solid rural base of the Left, which has remained consistently loyal till the 2006 Assembly election despite the fact that some studies show that the Left had a decline of 5 per cent of rural poor votes while an increase of 16 per cent votes and 18 per cent votes among the urban middle classes and urban rich respectively when compared with the 2001 Assembly election (Yadav and Kumar 2006). In the 2006 Assembly election, out of forty-eight seats in Greater Kolkata – once the non-Left bastion throughout the 1990s and the residence of a big pool of urban middle classes – the Left won thirty-four seats while the non-Left parties won only fourteen seats. So, apart from traditional rural constituencies, an urban middle-class support base for the Left has developed in the recent past. The big capital and urban middle classes in West Bengal, like elsewhere in the country, has been mostly benefited than other strata from neoliberal economic policies and is assertively demanding the fulfilment of its class aspirations. Now, there is a certain tension between the peasant and urban middle-class support base, which the Left faced on the issues of industrialisation and Special Economic Zones (SEZ).⁴ Thus, the class orientation and the class support behind the 2006 verdict in favour of the Left was different from any major election between 1977 and 2001.

In 2006, the Left gave the slogan, ‘agriculture is our base and industry is our future’. This was an attempt to effectively reconfigure the

political field, along with an actual process of depoliticisation and desperation of the Left Front, which had lost its class perspective in its drive for corporate-led industrialisation. This depoliticisation was represented in its consensual practice within the Left parties, which avoided asking pertinent questions like what kind of industry and for whom? Thus, building ‘consensus’ on corporate-led industrialisation was an outcome of a lack of ideological struggle inside the largest communist party in Bengal, effectively speaking the rhetoric of TINA (there is no alternative). In such a context, the people were faced with a historic irony that it was the same Left Front which expropriated their land, livelihood, and peasant economy for a corporate model of industrial development in the last decade of the Left regime, once implemented Operation Barga, and redistributed land among the people in the first decade of the Left Front government. This expropriation of land by the Left Front government from the people created a sense of disrespect towards the Left among the people. A feeling of humiliation by the people became particularly strong after coercive tactics were employed by the Left Front government, as evident in tragic episodes of Singur and Nandigram. Thus, the Left made a great mistake by taking refuge to violence rather than earning consent from the people by politically convincing them for land acquisition. The success and viability of a long-term political project would depend on the nature of people’s active participation and consultations rather than eradicating the space of political dissent with violent methods. For a successful hegemony over the people, a consensus is always better than coercion because the limits of repression can be exposed sooner or later with a resistance to the power bloc – the repressive agency. From an ethical viewpoint, a Left Front government cannot justify coercive methods even if it believed that a particular project of development is *good* and *just* for a collective entity called the ‘people’. In other words, for a successful hegemony, it has to earn *legitimacy* from the people.

But why the people in Bengal turn against the Left Front on a series of elections between 2008 and 2011 after the massive drive for corporate-led industrial development despite the fact that the same people gave a thumping verdict for the Left in 2006 Assembly election? Basically, this popular verdict against the Left was not overnight. It was a result of sedimented discourses of a sense of victimhood and neglect of several democratic demands comprising of socio-economic issues and questions of political empowerment, connected with caste and community issues that the Left has traditionally overlooked. In the 2011 Census, West Bengal was below the national average in access to electricity, access to tapped drinking water, access to banking

services, and access to television. Moreover, in health and education, it was still a moderately performing state even after such a long regime of the Left Front. Those unfulfilled democratic demands of education, health, and infrastructure development got a nodal point in the land acquisition agitation of Singur and Nandigram to implode the Left. This is not to say that the Left has not delivered on certain structural changes that had benefited the rural economy. Indeed, the Left has tried to uplift the basic material living conditions of working classes and peasantry. The Left implemented land reforms and effective institutionalisation of decentralised democracy via Panchayati Raj, which ensured the empowerment of traditionally marginalised sections of the rural population. The distributive policies of agrarian reforms and local representation in the first decade of the Left Front government were later overshadowed by the dominance of the strong machinery of ‘party society’ and the agency of school teachers in the countryside that the Left Front regime was thoroughly dependent on (Bhattacharyya 2016).

From 2008, the Left started losing its traditional support among the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, and Muslims, which constituted of an overwhelming section of the rural poor. The inability to address socio-economic and political questions of weaker sections is due to the *lack* of Left’s creative imagination in understanding the dynamics and constitutive character of the ‘people’. Since the category of ‘people’ has always been articulated in *class terms* within Leftwing political discourses, the Left simply could not understand deeply in prioritising its agenda to fulfill the democratic demands of socio-economic development and political empowerment of marginalised identity groups. This was reciprocated by an overrepresentation of the upper caste *Bhadrolok* (Brahmins, Kayasthas, and Baidyas) from a middle-class background in the political leadership in most tiers of party, legislative, and Cabinet members in the government within the Left Front in Bengal (Lama-Rewal 2009: 370–373, 388–390). This *Bhadrolok* Left leadership has often been culturally alien to the working class and the peasantry. In the past, this cultural non-identification of the Left’s basic classes with the leadership had thus always opened up the conditions for an emerging crisis in the future. During the phase of 2006–2011, one could indeed witness such a crisis of the Left, where cultural alienation of the people with an arrogant Left leadership only widened in the context of a governmental push for corporate industrialisation.

The current crisis of the continuous decline of the Left after the 2011 Assembly election is a result of three processes. First, the denial syndrome of the Left leadership in accepting several mistakes during

the Left Front regime. The present Left leadership has not been able to honestly and frankly articulate to the people about their strengths and shortcomings along with a lack of clarity for what the Left stands for in the twenty-first century. Second, there are (a) the lack of experience of the current Left leadership in doing opposition politics even if there are conditions to mobilise anti-Trinamool voters on issues like agrarian crisis in rural Bengal, (b) the attempts to recapture land from the beneficiaries of land reforms by rural elites and land mafia in the countryside, (c) the extortion rackets in the state, and (d) the corruption (chit funds and primary school teacher recruitment scams) during the Trinamool regime. The present crop of Left Front leaders in Bengal has enjoyed power in the government for an uninterrupted thirty-four years. As a result, the inertia of staying in power for so long has been a deterrent for the existing Left leadership to quickly equip themselves into militant anti-government politics. Third, the Left has been unable to reach out to large sections of the young population with a fresh vision of an alternative path of hope and opportunity, complemented with an absence of a new generation of young leaders. These weaknesses of the Left have created conditions for the consolidation of the Trinamool in the state even if the party has no strategic vision for the future of Bengal, but only thrives on short-term tactical considerations of creating dole-centric beneficiaries.

The consolidation of the Trinamool Congress

In the 2014 Lok Sabha election in West Bengal, for the first time, all four major political formations – the Left Front, Trinamool Congress, Indian National Congress, and the BJP – fought separately in all forty-two Lok Sabha seats. In this election, the Trinamool Congress secured 39.79 per cent of the votes, the Left Front got 29.95 per cent of the votes, the BJP got 17.02 per cent of the votes, and the Congress got 9.69 per cent of the votes. Evidently, the Left Front in West Bengal was routed. Clearly, the only gainers in terms of vote share in the 2014 election in Bengal are the Trinamool and the BJP when compared with the previous 2009 Lok Sabha and 2011 West Bengal Vidhan Sabha elections. Trinamool became successful with a regionalist agenda and without being part of any major political alliance (Kailash 2014: 64–71). In Bengal, the Trinamool emerged as a viable alternative to BJP by consolidating the anti-BJP votes comprising of minorities and liberal-secular sections of the electorate. The minorities relied more on Congress in North Bengal, helping it to win four minority-concentrated seats (Malda North, Malda South, Behrampore, and

Jangipur) out of the original six minority-dominated Lok Sabha constituencies in the state. The two Left MPs are Muslims and won from minority-dominated seats of Raiganj and Murshidabad with a slim majority, both of which were previously held by the Congress. On the other hand, a section of the middle-class support base of Left Front that wanted an aggressive industrialisation and urbanisation by displacing the peasantry shifted towards the BJP in Bengal. The Left leadership in Bengal was already rejected in the Assembly election in 2011. The 2014 election only reinforced the fact that the people do not want a tired and unimaginative Left leadership, detached from the people and people's movements.

The post-poll survey data of National Election Study of Lokniti shows that the Trinamool Congress was supported by all major sections of the population. Even where the Trinamool is politically weak on the question of women's security, 42 per cent of women still voted for the party. The vote share of the Left, on the other hand, had significantly dwindled among the marginalised groups, especially among the Dalits, Adivasis, and Muslims. These three communities along with the poor have voted in large numbers for the Trinamool Congress. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's aggressive campaign against the BJP's prime ministerial candidate Narendra Modi actually attracted the Muslim voters towards Trinamool in South Bengal. The political commentators suggest that 'the aggressive manner in which Mamata Banerjee countered Narendra Modi in her electoral speeches, could be one of the key factors behind the AITC's success among the minority community' (Chatterjee and Basu 2014: 220–221). In an overall analysis, it can be argued that the poor and the weaker sections are almost losing their confidence in the Left. The trend of increasing support of the poor and the Muslims for the Trinamool can be also noticed in the 2016 Assembly election. According to the CSDS post-poll survey data, the Trinamool Congress has been able to increase its support base among the poor from 21 per cent in 2006 to 52 per cent in 2016. Similarly, among Muslims, it enhanced its support from merely 22 per cent in 2006, 35 per cent in 2011, 40 per cent in 2014 and 51 per cent in 2016. In contrast, 38 per cent of the Muslims supported the Left and the Congress alliance while 6 per cent voted for the BJP in the 2016 Assembly election (Sardesai and Basu 2016). The Trinamool-led West Bengal government has also started giving various kinds of assistance to the poor among which four welfare schemes have ensured enormous popular support: Khadyasathi (rice and wheat at Rs 2 per kg), Sabooj Sathi (free bicycles for schoolchildren), Kanyashree (cash incentives to girls for continuing school education), and

Yubashree (financial assistance to unemployed youth). In the context of an impending agrarian crisis in rural Bengal and farmer indebtedness, these welfare schemes have actually ensured a solid rural support base of Trinamool. In a state where 82 per cent of family households exist with less than Rs 5,000 as the monthly income of highest earning member,⁵ the welfare schemes are a huge bonus for the people. Simultaneously, the Trinamool has been able to manage considerable sections of the non-corporate capital and the informal sector labour force.

Moreover, the post-poll survey of the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) suggests that the voters think that the performance of the Trinamool-led government has been much better than the Left Front on three aspects – condition of roads, electricity supply, and supply of drinking water (Sardesai and Basu 2016). Even if the perception of some voters is that the Trinamool-led government has been relatively corrupt than the Left Front regime, a large number of voters have actually supported the Trinamool on the development plank (Banerjee and Attri 2016). The popularity of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee among significant sections of the electorate and the increasing support of women voters (as high as 48 per cent in the 2016 Assembly election) has been important factors for the consolidation of the Trinamool (Aasaavari and Mishra 2016).

Today, Trinamool as a leader-centric party has actually transformed itself from articulating a Centre-Right political agenda during its proximity with BJP during the phase of 1998–2006 to a Centre-Left populist politics from the Singur agitation after the 2006 Assembly election. Trinamool's hands-off policy on SEZ and land acquisition, its opposition to foreign direct investment in retail and its opposition to demonetisation clearly indicates that the party has been more focused on the prime constituency of the informal sector. Simultaneously, its anti-Centre politics like opposition to the Centre's decision of interest rate cuts in bank savings schemes, its opposition to the delay of funds disbursement by the central government in NREGA and several welfare schemes have a traction among the Bengalis.

Trinamool has been able to win away substantial sections of the erstwhile Left Front voters and potential Left supporters in the state for three prime reasons. First, primarily as a regional player, the Trinamool has been more Bengal-centric than the Left. In contrast, the Left has to weigh its various political options and key decisions on the political-tactical line while keeping a balance between its other strong bases in Kerala and Tripura. Second, the visibility of a subaltern image of the Trinamool party organisation has been relatively more than the

Left. The Left had an educated middle-class leadership. In contrast, the visibility of several Trinamool functionaries, including some in the top party leadership hailing from the lower-middle class background, has been instrumental for mobilising the poor. Finally, it has been able to manage the vast sections of the informal sector, the domain of ‘political society’⁶ in contrast to the Left, which has still some hold over the workers in the organised sector through trade unions. In a situation where the Trinamool is getting further consolidated and the Left and Congress are on the decline, the opposition space is open, which the BJP is eyeing to capture. Can it actually rally significant sections of the Bengal electorate in the coming years? That is the question that I shall now try to answer.

The game of the BJP

One significant trend in West Bengal is the growth of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), inspired by the *Hindutva* ideology of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in the state. In the 2009 Lok Sabha election, the BJP contested forty-two seats in West Bengal and polled just 6.14 per cent of the votes while in 2011 Vidhan Sabha election, it polled only 4.06 per cent of the votes and did not have a single Member of Legislative Assembly (MLA). Within three years, the BJP’s vote share increased more than four times as it polled 17.02 per cent in the 2014 Lok Sabha election. Not only has it won two Lok Sabha seats (Darjeeling in North Bengal and Asansol in South Bengal), it has also come second in three Lok Sabha seats (Kolkata North, Kolkata South, and Malda South). In thirteen Lok Sabha seats, the BJP has polled more than 20 per cent of the votes.⁷ The post-poll survey of CSDS suggests that in the 2014 Lok Sabha election, the BJP has been relatively popular among the upper castes and urban educated middle class than among other sections of the population (Chatterjee and Basu 2014: 216–220).

The recent rise of vote share of the BJP in Bengal was also a result of the increase in low scale communal conflicts. In fact, police records and newspaper reports suggest that low-scale communal clashes have increased in rural Bengal. Such incidents of communal violence generally occurred in Bengal, annually, between twelve and forty from 2007–2012 and it suddenly peaked at 106 in 2013 (Das 2014). After 2014 Lok Sabha election, a noted social scientist has pointed out in an interview to a Bengali newspaper that the two states where the BJP has performed beyond anyone’s expectations are Assam and West Bengal and the BJP might try to make communal polarisation in these

states in order to grow further (Chattopadhyay 2014). In 2014 Lok Sabha election, the degree of polarisation was greater in states with a higher Muslim population and West Bengal was no exception (Sardesai, Gupta and Sayal 2014: 28–44).

After the 2014 Lok Sabha election, an interesting phenomenon was noticed in terms of an unprecedented growth of BJP's Muslim membership in some pockets of Birbhum and North 24 Parganas (Bagchi 2014). In fact, most of them were erstwhile supporters of the Left Front who have joined the BJP, as the Left leaders were failing to guarantee security against the political violence of the Trinamool in several districts of Bengal. However, the BJP lost momentum in the 2015 civic election by becoming a distant fourth without winning any municipality corporation in the state. In the 2016 Assembly election, the party lost nearly 7 per cent of the votes from the 2014 Lok Sabha election and just polled 10.16 per cent, even lower than its electoral performance in the 1991 Lok Sabha and Vidhan Sabha elections of over 11.5 per cent of the votes in the state during the Ramjanmabhoomi movement. In the 2016 Assembly election, the BJP contested 291 seats but forfeited the deposit in 263 seats and won only three seats. But in the by-polls after the 2016 Assembly elections, while the Trinamool has further consolidated and has increased its vote share, the BJP has significantly gained at the cost of the Left.

Thus, there is no denying the fact that the BJP is growing in Bengal particularly from the 2014 election onwards. This growth of the BJP is also linked with the recent growth of the RSS after the 2011 Assembly election. According to an organisational report of the RSS, while there were just 580 shakhas in West Bengal in 2011, the number rose to 1,280 in 2014 and 1,492 in December 2016 (Chanda 2017). There are three principal reasons for the growth of the BJP in the state. First, the continuous decline of the Left as an alternative political-ideological force from the local neighbourhoods. The retreat of the Left has also created conditions for competitive political articulation grounded upon religious identitarian politics between the BJP and the Trinamool. The possibility of identitarian politics in the wake of the collapse of the organised mainstream Left in West Bengal was already predicted by a noted political analyst (Bhattacharyya 2010: 51–59). Second, significant sections of the Hindi-speaking population from northern and western India in some cities, like Kolkata, Howrah, Asansol, and Siliguri, are now seeing the BJP as their natural choice.⁸ Third, in a highly competitive world, there is the anxiety of a section of educated middle-class youth and upper caste students under the age of twenty-five who are uncertain about their future in a state with lack

of employment opportunities due to limited expansion of the private formal sector on the one hand and nearly 50 per cent reservation in education and jobs in the government sector on the other. The post-poll survey of CSDS has shown how these sections have voted for the BJP in the 2014 Lok Sabha election in Bengal. This is also the same young population who have not seen the demolition of Babri mosque, the post-Babri riots, the Gujarat genocide, and the attacks against the Christian minorities in the 1990s and early 2000s.

After the massive victory in the 2017 Uttar Pradesh Assembly election, the Sangh Parivar organised the Ram Navami celebrations in some parts of the state with unprecedented fervour. People were surprised to see armed processions of Hindutva activists carrying swords, machetes, and tridents. Young students and children were also mobilised to take part in this procession.⁹ However, it would be wrong to see this Hindutva assertion during the Ram Navami celebrations as a spontaneous reaction of the Hindus. This is because an overwhelming majority of Hindus in West Bengal and in several parts of India do not rally behind the BJP-RSS just like Muslims in Bengal and India do not vote for Muslim parties like the Muslim League, MIM, Jamaat-e-Islam-backed WPI, etc.¹⁰ The Ram Navami processions were well organised by the RSS-BJP leadership after the UP election results. The jubilation and show of strength were the most important motives, along with a counter to Muharram celebrations in some parts of Bengal. The campaign in social media by the RSS-BJP along with the visibility of those processions in the electronic media although created a spectacle.

The major strength of the BJP in the state is that it is still an untested party. In fact, apart from a section of urban upper caste and middle-class voters, the BJP has been already able to gain some support among few Tribal pockets of North Bengal, neighbouring Assam, and one Tribal pocket, neighbouring Odisha. It is also interesting to note that in the 2016 Assembly election, the BJP had fielded sixteen scheduled caste and one schedule tribe candidate from unreserved constituencies, far more than the Left and the Trinamool. In doing so, the BJP is clearly sending a message of reaching out to significant sections of non-upper caste voters, who are still alienated from the party. But, the absence of a dominant, intermediate landed caste across rural Bengal, which might be comparable to the Lingayats and Vokkaligas of Karnataka, the Vellalas of Tamil Nadu, the Reddys and Kammas of Andhra, the Yadavs, Jats, and Rajputs of North India, or the Marathas in Maharashtra, is an impediment for an anti-upper caste politics (Chattopadhyay 2013: 99–101). However, after the 2014 Lok

Sabha elections, scores of central leaders of the BJP are often coming to the state in order to motivate the local organisation, which shows that the party is seriously looking for some inroads in Bengal. Being in the central government, the BJP has some influence over a section of voters where the state BJP unit is able to highlight any policy of the central government as an advertisement for the party as well.

In contrast to the strengths of the BJP, the party has major weaknesses in Bengal. First, it lacks a mass leader, which could match up to the popularity of Mamata Banerjee. West Bengal has witnessed the rise of Jyoti Basu as an opposition leader during the Congress period while the emergence of Mamata Banerjee during the Left Front regime. BJP is yet to score on that front. Second, West Bengal has a history of long stable regimes if a government is voted back to power with a comfortable majority (Bhattacharyya 2009b: 326–345). Barring the period of instability during 1967–1977 when no decisive mandate was in favour of any single political formation, the logic of long years of stability has been the case during the Congress system, the Left Front regime, and has been continuing at present during the Trinamool regime. Third, the large presence of Muslim minorities constituting 27 per cent of the population, with the potential to influence the electoral outcome without a prominent minority party, unlike Assam, could deter the polarising tactics of the RSS-BJP. Fourth, a new educated middle class is slowly growing among the OBCs and Dalits under the Trinamool regime because, in government jobs and education, the reservation policy is now strictly getting implemented. Fifth, the popularity of the incumbent Trinamool government among both urban and rural poor has created conditions in which the BJP is finding it difficult to make a viable social coalition for larger political mobilisation. Sixth, factional fights in the BJP at various levels have been a reality in Bengal along with a lack of discipline among its new entrants due to the absence of a popular leader. Finally, West Bengal is an extremely politicised state, which has been largely a ‘party society’ (Bhattacharyya 2009a: 59–69) with everyday politics in many local institutions including that of educational institutions, local clubs, and citizen’s platforms. The strong presence of the Left and the Trinamool in the existing local institutions is a counter to the RSS at the social sphere.

Given the multipolar nature of the contest, the division of votes among the opposition parties, the dole giving strategy of the West Bengal government, and the consolidation of the poor, significant sections of the Scheduled Caste groups, Other Backward Classes, and Muslim minorities behind the ruling party, it will be difficult to dislodge the Trinamool from power in the near future. At this moment, the BJP is

fighting for the second place in the state in order to become the prime opposition party. In the 2019 Lok Sabha election, if the BJP becomes second in the state in terms of vote share then it would be a morale booster for the party for the 2021 Assembly election. If the BJP is able to become the primary opposition party in the 2021 Assembly election, then the political discourse of West Bengal might significantly change from discussing basic issues of health, education, and employment to religious identitarian issues and dietary habits. The current political discourse in the state is already pointing out towards such an ominous trend. The phenomena of using religious symbolism in political mobilisation in contemporary West Bengal is certainly a regressive turn of events after all the gains made by the largely secular democratic and progressive political culture of the state in the last six decades.

If the Left continues to decay in the state, then it is not impossible for the BJP to become the main opposition party in West Bengal. The point, however, is that both the big national parties, the Congress and the BJP, are still unable to make a significant dent in Bengal in order to capture political power. In other words, the big national parties are an exceptional outcast in Bengal in the last four decades when compared with most states in the country. All evidence and political dynamics of the state shows that there is no reason to believe that this trend will soon change in favour of the big national parties.

Notes

- 1 The Trinamool Congress was originally a state party from 1998 to 2016. From September 2016, it was recognised as the seventh national party by the Election Commission of India along with BJP, BSP, CPI(M), CPI, INC, and NCP.
- 2 All calculations are made from the Election Commission of India data. In 2004 Lok Sabha election, the Congress managed to win the Darjeeling Lok Sabha seat in North Bengal with the support of local Gorkha parties in the hills.
- 3 Information gathered from All India Trinamool Congress website. All India Trinamool Congress, About the Party. <http://aitcofficial.org/the-party/> (accessed 15 April 2017).
- 4 Prabhat Patnaik predicted the tensions and emerging contradictions out of these contesting social forces just after the 2006 West Bengal Assembly elections (Patnaik 2006: 23–25).
- 5 *Socio-Economic Caste Census*, 2011, <http://secc.gov.in/stateSummaryReport> (accessed 24 April 2017).
- 6 The concept of ‘political society’ has been innovatively formulated by Partha Chatterjee (Chatterjee 2004, 2011).
- 7 All calculations for 2009, 2011, and 2014 elections are based on the Election Commission of India data.

- 8 According to the Linguistic Survey of India (2011), the Hindi-speaking population is over 7 per cent in the state.
- 9 'Sangh Parivar organise unprecedented Ram Navami celebration across Bengal', *Hindustan Times*, 5 April 2017, www.hindustantimes.com/kolkata/sangh-parivar-organise-unprecedented-ram-navami-celebration-across-bengal/story-eEuaCHGT1N3RdU6Vo7pHwN.html (accessed 2 May).
- 10 In 2014 Lok Sabha elections, the Muslim parties like Badruddin Ajmal and Siddiquallah Chowdhury-led AIUDF (All India United Democratic Front), WPI (Welfare Party of India), and SDPI (Social Democratic Party of India) together got less than the NOTA vote of 1.1 per cent. In the 2016 Assembly elections, the Muslim parties like IUML, SDPI, and WPI together contested forty seats, forfeited deposits in all those seats and got a mere 0.12 per cent of the votes, much less than the NOTA vote of 1.52 per cent.

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