



Cover Page



## FACTORS THAT PREVENTED BJP'S CHANCES TO WIN 2021 WEST BENGAL ASSEMBLY ELECTION: A STUDY

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**Abstract:** Despite enough efforts and speculations, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) finally not became able to bag the majority number, required to form the government in West Bengal in the 2021 Assembly election. The anti-incumbency waves were there. Still the aspirations of BJP were finally locked within less than one third of the total assembly seats. Interestingly, the Trinomool Congress (TMC) won more seats this time than they had acquired in the last assembly election in 2016. The Left-Congress alliance left their followers perplexed as they failed to win a single seat. Their percentage of vote was also reduced. West Bengal witnessed several challenges prior to the assembly election; Covid-19 pandemic and Cyclone Amphun were most remarkable constraints Infront of the TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee. Riding in a wheel chair, she still had managed to keep her fortress invincible from BJP. This article reflects on the factors that have played a crucial role in bringing victory to TMC.

**Keywords:** BJP, TMC, Mamata Banerjee, CPIM, Congress, Assembly, Election, Bengal.

### Introduction

After much hullabaloo in different media platforms, the final verdict of 2021 West Bengal Legislative Assembly Election was out. Trinomool Congress (TMC), despite enough incumbency as directed by many media channels across the nation finally emerged victorious with 213 seats out of 292 seats, keeping Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) locked in 77 seats, far enough from the war-cry to cross the benchmark of 200 seats as claimed by the national level BJP leaders including the Prime Minister and Home Minister of India during their total 38 rallies in the state. (TNN, 2021). After the Lok Sabha election in 2019, the BJP as one of the national level political parties emerged as the second largest seat holders and the main opposition in the political history of West Bengal, bagging 18 seats out of 42 LS seats. (PTI, 2019). That was really a breakthrough in BJP's political career in a state like West Bengal where religion, customary beliefs, jingoism, animals and border politics hardly influence vote banks. Surprising the prevailing trends of beliefs, the BJP made a road map into the Bengal's political journey categorically. Bengal subsequently became the first priority of BJP's national level political agenda. (Dasgupta, 2019, The Telegraph). Changes started taking place in the state's political scenario since then. Shifting of political leaders from the green house to the saffron brigade became a trend. (Joydeep Thakur, 2020, The HT). The green house here refers to the Trinomool Congress bastions. The series of shifting sides from TMC to BJP took place rapidly in last few months before the election. All those turncoats were famous names in Bengal politics once upon a time and were highly proactive during their tenure as MPs or MLAs of TMC. (Joydeep Thakur, 2020, The HT). The trend became so frequent in last two months before election that almost everyday audience were found eagerly waiting for such news in local media channels. The evening talk shows in reputed Bengali TV news channels e.g., ABP Ananda, Zee 24 Ghanta, Kolkata TV, News 18 Bangla, R Bangla, News Time and the newly introduced Republic Bangla were filled with discussions by experts on these issues. The local BJP leaders started campaigning across the state against Mamata Banerjee's fallacious policies, administrative failures, corruptive practices, mollycoddling of a particular community, lackluster governance and many such issues. Even the Prime Minister and Home Minister also started a high-pitched battle against the Mamata Banerjee government in their rallies. The Cyclone Amphun and its after effects played a positive catalytic role and offered huge opportunity to BJP leaders to malign the image of the state government. There was emergence of Left cadres again in various social media platforms posing an imminent threat to TMC. All these apparently denoted the possible breakdown of Trinomool Congress party in the upcoming Assembly election then. But the result indicated a different outcome; more than 47.9% vote was grabbed by TMC in this election whereas BJP managed to keep around 38.1% of votes. The vote percentage of Trinomool Congress was highest ever as compared to previous terms. (Shiv Sahay Singh, 2021, The Hindu) and (ECI, 2021).

### Objectives

- To find out the factors from newspaper reports and television news channels that played significant role in becoming the decisive factors among the voters of West Bengal in the Legislative Assembly Election 2021.
- To analyse the role of these factors and its reporting in print and audiovisual media news channels.



Cover Page



## Research Methodology

This is a systematic review of literature of various reports collected from different dailies and television-based talk shows. A total of 65 reports were considered as samples. The convenience sampling (non-probability sampling) method is followed. This is a descriptive study.

**Tools:** Inputs from the published reports from the online versions of The Times of India, The Economic Times, India Today, The Indian Express, The Hindustan Times, The Telegraph, The Hindu (English Dailies) and inputs from Talk shows (Ghanta Khanek Sange Suman, Najore Nota from ABP Ananda)

**Data:** Secondary.

## Findings and analysis

### Price hike and market scenario

The price hike of daily commodities largely affected the middle class and poor sections, which form the majority of Bengal's population. The regular hike of petrochemical products which ultimately affects the entire market condition indirectly compelled this larger section to gradually withdraw their support from the BJP. (Ray, 2021). The morbid economy of Bengal was hit more by Cyclone Amphan and Corona pandemic, which was aggravated by the central government's defective economic policies. The regular depreciation rate on bank deposits cornered the middle-class Bengalis. The retired persons found the same frightening enough to sustain their existence. Daily wage earners and employees in the unorganized sectors became clueless after the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. Challenging the adverse scenario during lockdown, the return of the migrant labours especially the Muslim community from different BJP ruled states like Haryana, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka to Bengal was also considered as a negative factor. At such adverse scenario, the economic grants in terms of free rationing, health schemes, women-promotion centric schemes, benefits provided to unemployed sections, etc. offered by Mamata Banerjee's government played a significant role to get back the support from the marginal sections in Bengal. The major breakthrough that Mamata Banerjee did was the introduction of Swasthya Sathi health card which offers free medical benefits up to Rs. 5 lakhs for every citizen of the state. (Shiv Sahay Singh, 2020). The card carries the name of the first lady of the family whereas all other members of the same family are enlisted as beneficiary members. (Shiv Sahay Singh, 2020). That was her master stroke. Being a woman Chief Minister, her empathy towards the women section played a significant role in this regard.

### CAA and NRC

Though BJP bagged 18 seats in the Lok Sabha election in Bengal in 2019, the national leaders of BJP probably failed to realize the importance of the Muslim vote banks in this state. More than 27% of the entire Bengal population belongs to the Muslim community. (Sen, 2015). The repeated announcement of the implementation of NRC and CAA by the Union Home Minister and other BJP leaders appeared as a threat to the Muslim population of Bengal who have been living here since decades and centuries. (Datta, 2020). The implementation of the same in Assam and the after-effects reported by various leading media houses left not only the Muslim society panicked, but also increased their distance from the BJP. (Inputs from Chatterjee, Parashar, 2021). This factor basically polarized the vote banks of Bengal. The same approach was not even liked by a section of other religious groups including Christians, Sikhs, etc, who have been living in West Bengal since decades. Even a large section of the Hindu community also did not accept the same fearing their own roots in Bangladesh from where once upon a time their ancestors came and settled here. (Chatterjee, Parashar, 2021). Bengal has been practicing a harmonious relationship between different religious groups since time immemorial. History records that the attempt of dividing Bengal in 1905 in religious ground by the British Raj administration was vehemently opposed by the two major inhabitants of the state i.e., Bengali speaking Hindus and Bengali speaking Muslims. Opposing such a heinous move, the introduction of the holy Raksha Bandhan by Rabindranath Tagore to strengthen the communal integrity in the state was mentioned in the history. Repeatedly focusing on that issue during the electoral rallies, the TMC strengthened its vote banks among the Muslim community and other minority groups. The repeated announcement by Mamata Banerjee to prevent the implementation of NRC and CAA in Bengal at any cost and even at the cost of her own life established Trinomool Congress as the last resort to Muslims and other secular minded people to save their identity and existence in India as her citizens. (Bhattacharya, Chowdhury, 2020). The Left and Congress equally failed to win the mass support in this regard. The mandate has been reflected in the election result too. The districts of West Bengal which have a predominance of Muslim population and once upon a time were considered as hotbeds of Congress vote banks i.e., Murshidabad and Malda, came out heavily in support of TMC this time. Out of 22 seats in Murshidabad, 17 seats were bagged by TMC and 3 seats went to BJP. The other two seats are yet to be contested. In Malda, TMC won in 6 seats while BJP bagged 6 seats, leaving zero to Congress and Left. Such is the outcome in many other districts like South 24 Parganas, East and West Midnapore where Muslims are the second majority in population. (ECI databank, 2021).



Cover Page



### **Bengal intelligentsia**

Despite a series of crime took place during the tenure of TMC government in West Bengal, the recent issues in Uttar Pradesh related to violence and atrocities against women was highlighted by prominent Bengali news channels which was discussed much by Bengal intelligentsia in different platforms later. The intellectual section of Bengal has been playing a motivational role in influencing the vote banks since time immemorial. The defeat of Left Front in 2011 Bengal Assembly election was a blatant example when the intellectual class of the state deflected their support from the Left bastion and their policies despite supporting them ideologically for more than three decades.

### **Women empowerment**

Aiming the development of the women sect, the populist policies like Kanyashree, Rupashree, Cycle distribution to the girl students and many others announced by Mamata Banerjee during her ten years (2011-21) tenure as the Chief Minister played a significant role in strengthening the women vote banks towards her political party. Her party's Ma-Mati-Manush slogan (Mother-Soil-Human Being) literally indicated the special focus on women development. (Egiye Bangla, 2021). Prior to Mamata Banerjee, no other Chief Minister of the state has ever focused towards women empowerment in this way. It has been noted by various psephologists too those women vote banks completely turned towards Mamata Banerjee directly and indirectly.

### **Shifting sides**

The shifting of TMC leaders and ministers to BJP after the Lok Sabha election (PTI, 2020) was not accepted wholeheartedly by the BJP's grass root level workers and local leaders. Without keeping them in loop, the central BJP leadership made secret conversation with a section of former TMC leaders and made ways for them inside the party. Even they were given tickets to contest in this election from different seats. "Psephologists and political commentators said at least 140 TMC leaders, including around 37 legislators, had joined the BJP since 2017. Many who had joined even at the last minute at the end of 2020 and early this year just ahead of the polls were given tickets by the BJP." (HT Correspondent, 2021.) The BJP workers who tirelessly worked to bring the party to the forefront during Lok Sabha election in 2019, found themselves in an inferior status. Scuffles and protests also took place in few BJP party offices in districts which were ignored by the BJP's central leadership. (Sarkar, 2021). The live footages of those incidents aired by prominent Bengali TV news channel left the audience perplexed about the future of a party which started clashes in between themselves even before coming to power. Even the distribution of tickets to not-so-famous actors and actresses disheartened the previous lieutenants of the party who truly have the connection with the grassroots level. Turncoats were also not accepted by common mass as they anticipated no change in the political scenario if BJP would come to power with the same faces. The TMC turncoats who joined BJP before the election and contested as BJP candidates in this election like Rudranil Ghosh from Bhabanipur, Baishali Dalmiya from Bally, Dipak Kumar Halder from Diamond Harbour, Prabir Ghosal from Uttarpara and Biswajit Kundu from Kalna lost the electoral battle. (HT Correspondent, 2021.)

### **Cultural ethos**

The brickbats aiming the Chief Minister by few BJP leaders dwindled the acceptance of the party as an alternative political entity to the conservative Bengali middle-class society. The adherence to wearing of Barmuda pants or the frequent use of the derogatory Bengali colloquial words like 'nakamo' (sham) towards the Bengali women by the State President of BJP even was not accepted by soft-spoken and not-so-aggressive Bengali community. The repeated telecast of the same by few prominent Bengali Television news channels also played a magic bullet theory effect on the audience, fanning a tremendous but veiled opposition against the saffron brigade as a whole. (Inputs from Halder, 2021 and HT Correspondent, 2020).

### **Central policies and fear of privatization**

The repeated failure of the Central Government to hold back the public organisations like Air India, BSNL and the merging of nationalized banks sent negative signals to the government job oriented and salary dependent Bengali speaking population. Even the teaching community of state government schools at primary, secondary and higher secondary levels and also at colleges, which constitute a major section of state government employees, became afraid of losing their jobs anticipating that the BJP would privatize these institutions after coming to power. The propagandist media channels also fanned this issue. This resulted in turning the postal ballots in favour of TMC which hardly took place earlier. (Sarkar, Pranesh, 2021).

### **Communication gap**

Bengal is highly sensitive towards her linguistic essence. The love and dedication to Bengali language is well known. This was used meticulously by TMC leaders. Approaching to all levels of society with special reference to keep the Bengali culture alive, Mamata Banerjee and her entire team did the best job to keep themselves psychologically connected with the rest. (PTI, Deccan Herald, 2021). Contrary to that, the huge presence of audience in the public rallies by the national level BJP leaders did not reflect in



Cover Page



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the election result as per their expectations because of the communication gap. Mostly these national level leaders communicated in Hindi language with which the rural Bengal population was not acquainted properly. Apart from few words, the huge volume of rural people hardly realized the message that the central level leaders delivered at them. The only assurance of turning Bengal to ‘Sonar Bangla’ (Golden Bengal) without referring to local issues kept the youth voters at bay.

### No alternative entity

The alliance between the CPI-M-Congress-Indian Secular Front (ISF) failed to make any impact in the division of vote banks. The BJP leadership assumed that the Muslim and secular vote banks of the state would be deflected to this new alliance besides TMC while the Hindu vote banks would be consolidated towards the Lotus symbol. Strikingly, the trio alliance failed to send any positive political message to the grassroots level. The hard core Left and Congress supporters did not accept the alliance as the ideologies of these two parties differ from each other. The earlier Left Front members like Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) and Forward Bloc (FB) did not even join the alliance and nominated their own candidates separately. Many supporters of the Left parties and Congress were found criticizing publicly the relevance of such an alliance. The visuals from the brigade parade ground political rally on February 28, 2021 exposed that when the veteran Congress leader Adhir Chowdhury left the dias after the ISF supremo Abbas Siddiqui had reached the venue. The inclusion of the ISF in the alliance helped the TMC to consolidate the secular vote banks. Many Left party supporters or Congress supporters even voted for TMC as a move to ‘Say No To BJP’, a social media hashtag.

### Conclusion

All these factors have played a significant role in bringing TMC back to power for the third consecutive term and leaving the opportunity to Mamata Banerjee to hold the chair of the Chief Minister of West Bengal. From three (3) seats in 2016 Bengal Assembly election to seventy-seven (77) seats in 2021, the BJP will have to play a constructive role of opposition this time keeping apart their cow and religious dictums, failing which the party will lose its existence in states like West Bengal. Similarly, the Left and Congress have to work hard to emerge as alternative opposition faces in Bengal.

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Cover Page



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