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Will It Be A Saffron Surge In Bengal?

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SNEHASHISH MITRA | 19 MAY 2019



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The Lok Sabha Election of 2019 seems like an ideological 'Waterloo' for West Bengal with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) estimated to make an unprecedented electoral gain. Till 2014 BJP had been an insignificant electoral force, with a vote share oscillating around 10%. 34 years of Left Front rule didn't provide much scope for BJP and other right-wing organizations to proliferate in Bengal due to largely, at least prima facie, class-centric politics. This situation began changing after 2011 when Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress (TMC) assumed power in the Assembly Election.

Mamata has been arguably successful in delivering governance in large swathes of rural Bengal through several welfare policies. Beautification of towns and cities have been notable while civic amenities have witnessed a facelift. Government-owned enterprises such as Manjusha, Tantuja (handloom), Haringhata (meat processing, dairy), Benfish (fish), which were synonymous with losses during the Left Front regime, have been revamped and are now making profits. In 2018 Infosys announced that they would begin their operations in Kolkata, while a 100-acre Silicon Valley Hub in Newtown (adjoining Kolkata) had evoked response from the likes of Reliance Jio and Tata Consultancy Service (TCS). In October 2018, Flipkart announced that it would build a logistical hub which would generate employment for 20,000 people. Therefore, some progress has been achieved, while some others look to culminate in the future. On top of which, Mamata Banerjee's charisma and popularity are unmatched by any political leader in Bengal.

The below-par performance of the Narendra Modi-led central government and the spectre of the exclusionary National Register of Citizens (NRC) in neighbouring Assam, looming nervously over Bengal should have made the 2019 general election in Bengal a cakewalk for Mamata. Several analysts have predicted that Mamata would repeat her performance of the 2014 Lok Sabha election, and might win additional seats. Mamata herself has set the target of winning all the 42 seats of Bengal. Then what prompts BJP president Amit Shah to aim for 23 seats in Bengal and Narendra Modi to claim that TMC would find it difficult to reach a tally of two digits?

In states ruled by BJP/NDA, the election is a referendum on the term of the central government, while in Bengal the election has turned out to be a referendum for the state government. A cursory glance at the themes of Narendra Modi and Amit Shah's speeches in the rallies across Bengal is a testament to such observation as they are unabashedly charging Mamata with nepotism, corruption, crime syndicates and minority-appeasement. While it is undeniable that the Bengal government has made its mark as a welfare state through its various policies, at the ground level people across the state have alleged corruption by local TMC leaders.

The municipal elections of 2015 and the panchayat election of 2018 were the most violent elections in recent times. The Panchayat election saw large number of seats going uncontested, while the polling was marred by violence and deaths. Even TMC leaders and workers in many places didn't get an opportunity to cast their votes. As the voters didn't get an opportunity to register their dissatisfaction with the state government in the local elections, the sentiment is likely to spill over in the Lok Sabha election.

Mamata has been consistently vilified for her government's policy with regard to the Muslims in the form of Imam stipend, disallowing immersion of Durga idols on Muharram and its failure to prevent and contain the riots in Dhulagarh, Baduria and Raiganj. These incidents have climaxed into an unprecedented rise of BJP in the name of Hindutva. The BJP has been propagating the NRC in Bengal, along with the Citizenship Amendment Bill (CAB), which would facilitate citizenship status to non-Muslim refugees in India from neighbouring countries. Bengal's border districts are largely comprised of people from the Matua sect, a Hindu Scheduled Caste community which seems to gain directly from CAB, as large number of Matuas face unresolved status over their citizenship. Mamata, while opposing NRC vehemently, has paid lip service in opposing CAB being an unconstitutional and communal bill, as a clear stance can cost the support of the Muslim and/or the SC communities. Therefore, BJP has successfully engineered a polarization in Bengal through groundwork over the last few years.

In most of the recent by-elections, BJP has come up as second best by relegating the Left Front candidates to third. Besides the incompetency of the Left in Bengal to regain the trust of the electorate, this remarkable surge in vote share of BJP can be attributed to the 'win-it-all' attitude of TMC, which has been consistently orchestrating and forcing elected representatives and leaders from Congress and the Left Front to join its ranks. This void in the opposition allowed the BJP to cash in on the anti-incumbency against the Bengal government, and gain a position to challenge the TMC.

The Sarada-Narada scam and its investigation have been employed to keep several TMC leaders in pressure, with several MPs serving jail sentences, while Mukul Roy shifted allegiance from TMC to BJP. Roy was instrumental in tearing away opposition leaders and inducting them in TMC, now he has taken his game to the BJP and raided the TMC before the election. As a result, several TMC MPs switched loyalty and have been nominated as BJP candidates. Roy has insisted that much would unfold after the election results are declared on 23 May 2019.



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booth-level organization across the state and is likely to gain most of the consolidated minority votes?

Though it is widely anticipated that BJP will attain its highest ever vote percentage in Bengal in 2019, the seat estimates have varied between 3-4 to 7-8 in most of the opinion polls, far from Amit Shah's call for 23. Now this difference of media prediction and BJP's expectation is where we can invest our guestimates and speculate what story lies beyond the statistics.

If Bengal votes in terms of a referendum on the TMC-led West Bengal government, then a chunk of the Left-Congress votes, except in Maldaha, Murshidabad and N.Dinajpur districts, are likely to swing towards BJP which would trouble the TMC in the several seats in South Bengal. Narendra Modi in a recent rally in Bengal made an open claim that 40 TMC MLAs are in touch with BJP. It is a likelihood that disgruntled TMC leaders, workers and supporters, while sporting the green jersey may opt for saffron in the EVM. Significantly some prominent TMC MLAs and leaders, rumoured to join BJP, have barely made any effort to canvass for the nominated candidates in the Lok Sabha election. This undercurrent of passive attitude of the ruling class and subsequent change was also observed in the elections of 2008, 2009 and 2011, towards the end of Left regime. A similar trajectory, if initiated and repeated, would turn the tide in BJP's favour in the Lok Sabha election and could pose a major challenge to TMC in the 2021 assembly poll. While party organization is an important mechanism in Bengal politics, time and again, going back to the 1977 assembly election in which the Left Front won, popular mandate has defied the organizational strengths. Therefore, if these factors come together and function in tandem, BJP's tally would be much closer to Amit Shah's target of 23, therefore emulating a Tripura-like result in Bengal. The wait is till 23 May 2019.