

Assembly Elections in West Bengal, 2021

How Socio-Political Traditions Defeated a Superior Electoral Machinery?

Jawhar Sircar

Introduction

Not even the most proficient of astrologers, psephologists or poll surveyors could predict that the TMC or Trinamool Congress, officially known as the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC), would sweep the elections to West Bengal's legislative assembly in 2021. It defied all predictions of certain defeat at the hands of a highly resurgent BJP and the TMC secured an overwhelming majority of 48% of the total votes cast. The TMC won 213 of the 292 seats for which elections were held and elections to two seats were postponed due to deaths of candidates. Even so, the BJP captured 77 seats, which was its all-time record, as it had won just three seats in the assembly poll of 2011. The only remaining seat was captured by the newly-minted Muslim party that called itself the Indian Secular Front (ISF), and this election proved to be clearly a no-holds barred war between the TMC and BJP.

This result came as a severe blow to the BJP, more so, because the unvanquished duo of the Prime Minister and the home minister had been assuring everyone, for quite some time, that they were sweeping West Bengal. They had concentrated so much of their time in Bengal that they deliberately ignored their more important duty of fighting the covid-19 pandemic. Consequently, they were hauled up by both the national and the international media when the pandemic went out of control. But so overwhelming was their narrative of winning over 200 of the 294 seats that all contrary projections that Bengal's traditional secularism would halt the BJP wave were just shouted down.

Even gamblers predicted a tremendous victory for the BJP and secular forces all over India seemed to give up before the BJP's domineering narrative. The results were a palpable shock to both the BJP and its charmed section of the national media. But the party did not reconcile itself to the resounding loss and went on the warpath after the results were declared by openly declaring its aim to topple the TMC government, on grounds of post-poll violence.

At the same time, the BJP's emergence as the only Opposition party in West Bengal has surely been very impressive. The party had never won a tenth of the number of seats it won in 2021. By then, the political situation had changed drastically with the Modi-Shah combine closely controlling and participating in the BJP's campaign during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. The BJP had startled the TMC at the Lok Sabha elections that year and expectations were even higher this time in 2021, but the results, however, showed that the BJP lost ground since 2019. The TMC recaptured 44 assembly seats (segments of Parliament seats) that were taken by the BJP in 2019 and the BJP's vote share also declined by 2% from 2019, to hover just above 38%.

Since solid in-depth reviews and academic studies have not yet emerged on the elections conducted in West Bengal in March and April 2021, we were left with no option but to refer mainly to media reports.

This exercise is divided broadly into two parts, the first of which seeks to understand the socio-political culture of the state that united, most unexpectedly, and closed all ranks to halt the BJP's unstoppable juggernaut. The present chapter collates and presents these traditions in one place to appreciate how their amorphous elements and ideas could stand up so effectively and defeat more palpable and concrete forces of an unstoppable electoral war machine, backed both by big capital and state authoritarianism. The next chapter focuses on the actual conduct of the elections and the role of the ECI—in the light of the report of the CCE, that we collectively explain. This chapter also shows how vulnerable

constitutionally protected institutions that are moats to defend democracy become when their stewardship is hijacked by agents of a ruthless regime.

It is this very omnipotence that triggered a repulsive swagger in the BJP and its hubris led to proclaim loudly that it had actually won the elections in West Bengal, which alarmed the voters. The hopelessly divided and very argumentative (but politically conscious) voters of Bengal sunk their many, strong differences and closed ranks, to demonstrate that no one decides for them. They ensured a massive support of 48% for the much-criticised TMC, thus nipping in the bud whatever ambition the BJP had in this state. Defeating the largest political party in the world was no mean feat and it is submitted that this was possible because 'intangible' cultural traditions decided to wreak vengeance on the palpable, namely, an arrogant display of political cunningness, lured defections, money power and misuse of central government's investigative agencies.

More cruel, perhaps, was the decision of Bengal's electorate to punish the so-called 'Third Front' of the Indian National Congress and the CPI(M), for getting in between what they believed was a clean fight between the BJP and TMC. In fact, in the 2021 elections, the BJP could win 22 of its 77 seats in West Bengal with margins less than 5,000, mainly because the Congress-Marxist front split secular votes and played spoilsport. The two parties had kept on predicting throughout the long-drawn elections that their 'front' would gain the most from 'the popular disgust with the TMC.' It went ahead and included, rather controversially, the Muslim ISF in its 'front,' thus compromising its own secular image. Bengal's voters taught the two older parties a lesson for cutting into precious votes in this clear war between plurality and communalism. Neither the Congress, that had ruled the state earlier for twenty-five years, nor the all-powerful CPI(M) which controlled the state for thirty-four years could secure a single seat for the first time ever. If we add the more than 8% plus of the popular vote that these two garnered to the 48% that the TMC secured, we discover that over 56% of Bengal's voters had decided, quite unambiguously, to stand up for 'secularism.'

This chapter highlights four distinct socio-political traditions that decided the fate of the 2021 elections and the first three explain how West Bengal halted the relentless march of the BJP's war chariot. The fourth factor, however, negated a lot of the gains and goodwill but also needs to be studied as it impacts elections and cannot be wished away.

These four may be summarised as:

- A largely-plural ethos that arose from centuries of coexistence and was also a necessity for 'holding the peace;'
- A clear, bold cultural rejection of the imported idea of 'Hindu-Hindi nationalism' that provoked the reassertion of Bengal's own deep-rooted love for a common language and civilisation—which was constantly branded as 'Bengali sub-nationalism;'
- The relatively less emphasis on caste, in general, and the abjuring of caste-based politics—except in a very few cases/areas, where some communities have been encouraged to raise 'caste' issues;
- The propensity towards sudden bouts of political violence that even the several thousand central armed forces posted from outside during elections could hardly stop.

An Essentially Secular Political Tradition

The thrust of the BJP's campaign, led directly by the Prime Minister and the home minister, was that West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee was appeasing Muslims and 'creating an Islamic State in districts adjacent to Muslim-majority Bangladesh by deliberately encouraging and settling illegal infiltrators.' The ECI, however, did not consider these statements to be communal enough to take punitive action. But what the BJP did not understand was that coexistence was a deep-rooted tradition in Bengal that was a Muslim-majority province before it was divided at the time of Independence. The last pre-Independence census of 1941 revealed that Muslims in India were in a substantial majority in

certain specific provinces like the Northwest Frontier, Baluchistan, Sind and in the Princely State of Kashmir. Matters were more complicated in Punjab where Muslims constituted 57.1% and in Bengal where they were 54.7%. Punjab was torn between two languages, Urdu and Punjabi, two cultures 'Islamic' and 'Indic' and Muslim landlords dominated and a visible bitterness at the mass level against Hindu 'traders.' On the other hand, a common language, similar culture and an emotional Bengali identity were strong binders in Bengal, though Hindu socio-economic predominance through the *zamindari* system and education/jobs was a big irritant among Muslims.

Soon after the Delhi Sultanate was established, it 'conquered' Bengal. Islamic rule, through several dynasties and regimes, which lasted for 550 years. Even so, Hindus could hold their heads high in the latter half of this period and though patronage-deprived Brahmins did complain at the time, historic bitterness was never so acute at the mass level. In fact, during the colonial period after 1757 Battle of Plassey, English-educated, upper caste Hindus actually lorded over the Muslim majority. What matters more is that both communities preferred 'to live and let live' and this was intrinsic to peace.

From the second decade of the twentieth century, however, Muslims and, thereafter, the 'depressed castes' embarked on their political consciousness and empowerment campaigns, and took up education and organised employment as well. They started challenging the entrenched class of upper caste Hindus. Between 1937 and 1947, the Provincial Assembly was controlled by the Muslim majority, especially as the scheduled castes supported them in many areas. The last three censuses of (undivided) Bengal in 1921, 1931 and 1941 revealed that Muslims were approximately 11% more than Hindus. Riots did take place at occasional intervals, ignited by political desperados and anti-socials, but both communities restored peace and amity and coexistence were surely the preferred options. So ambivalent was the issue of 'partition' that till even three months before Independence, no one really knew

for sure whether Bengal would be split or remain a united nation. Even the Muslim leadership and votes were split between those who emphasised the considerably tolerant Bengali ethos and the commonality based on language and culture, and those who upheld the Muslim-first identity propounded by Muhammad Ali Jinnah and his Muslim League. Efforts to keep Bengal as a separate, united Hindu-Muslim entity continued and Jinnah actually had to ignite his pre-planned riots, the Great Calcutta Killings, in August 1946 to ensure his partition plan succeeded.

The first twenty years of Congress rule in the new state of West Bengal (1947–67) were driven largely on Jawarharlal Nehru's insistence that the secular tradition of Bengal would ensure that bloody riots did not break out, as in Punjab. But when communal troublemakers did set off riots in certain pockets in both the Bengals, by 1950, some 25 lakh Hindus were uprooted in the East and they poured into West Bengal. They discovered that, unlike in Punjab, they were quite unwelcome and that there were no arrangements to rehabilitate them. Over the decades till 1975 or so, the influx from the East increased alarmingly but the Centre continued to be indifferent towards the Bengal refugees, while it was so munificent in Delhi and Punjab. The Communists soon jumped into the fray to take up the cause of West Bengal's refugees. Though they were not averse to violence, they ensured complete peace among the Hindus and Muslims, following the secular tradition of Bengal. The Congress and later the TMC continued this secular ethos and even as the 2021 elections were on, Nobel-laureate Amartya Sen insisted that this secular and tolerant tradition was much too deeply entrenched to be swayed by the BJP. In fact, traditional voters of the Left parties and Congress abandoned them, as they felt that only the aggressive TMC could stop the communal juggernaut of the BJP. The visible anti-incumbency 'wave' against TMC was superseded by the communal forces at any cost.

After the elections, the BJP blamed the Muslims of West Bengal for their defeat. Muslims count for 27–28% of the voters, but since only 75% of them voted, their share would not be more than 21%

of the total votes cast in the state. A part of this 21% must have gone into the 8.5% of votes procured by the Left and the Congress as they have a strong base among Muslims. If we use rough *pro rata* principles, the TMC could, at best, have garnered 17–18% of its 48% bloc from the Muslim community. The remaining 30% must have come from ‘secular’ Hindus—which is a fact that the BJP itself is also highlighting as a ‘betrayal.’ Therein lies the miracle of how the most powerful threat to plurality was defeated in Bengal. Community-wise polarisation just did not succeed in West Bengal, despite continued attempts and unheard of money power.

Was There Any ‘Bengali Sub-Nationalism?’

Mamata Banerjee was accused of unleashing ‘Bengali sub-nationalism’ to combat the BJP, but what the party refused to admit was that it was viewed by all as essentially a ‘Hindi influx’ from north and west India. The roots of the ‘Bengali sentiment’ lie deep in history and can be empathised with by the southern and eastern states of India that are conscious that they are not a part of the ‘Hindi and allied belt.’ Throughout history, Bengal had remained largely outside the pale and control of any regime from outside and even when the Delhi Sultanate brought it under its yoke in the early thirteenth century, it broke free under the ‘Bengal Sultans.’ The Mughals managed to subdue almost all of Bengal, but this Empire lasted only a hundred years at the most in Bengal. The point is that Bengal had remained historically and culturally distinct and it developed its own language and civilisation in its own manner. It absorbed only selected parts of the Sanskrit language and Brahminical culture, and later, of the Islamic civilian and the Persian language—crafting thereby its own local brands of Hinduism and Islam.

Under the British, it was the ‘Centre of India,’ until the capital was shifted from Calcutta (now Kolkata) to Delhi in 1911. Even during the struggle for Independence, C.R. Das and his disciple, Subhas Chandra Bose, constantly defied the Congress high command, with the full support of the people. In 1939, Bengal was aghast that the young Subhas Bose was ‘smoked out’ of the

Congress President's post by the pro-Gandhi lobby, even though he had won quite fairly. Later, Chief Minister B.C. Roy (1948–62) was constantly at loggerheads (though not at war) with Delhi on policy issues, economic biases against the state and over its neglect of the refugee problem. Nehru's patently-skewed railway Freight Equalisation Scheme, his Planning Commission's diktats and the Union government's licensing policy negated whatever locational advantage the state had in terms of access to coal and steel. The title of a well-analysed recent paper from Cornell University puts it so eloquently, 'Manufacturing Underdevelopment: India's Freight Equalisation Scheme, and the Long-run Effects of Distortions on the Geography of Production.'

In fact, Banerjee has been riding on this very perceptible historic anti-Centre tradition and is a beneficiary of it, rather than its creator. The Left took anti-Centre agitations to considerable heights and their thirty-four years were followed by ten years of TMC rule of taking up cudgels against Delhi. This has just received its endorsement for five more years and to flick it all off as TMC-provoked Bengali sub-nationalism is not factual. The voters rejected, quite convincingly, Modi's call to 'integrate' Bengal with the rest of India (whatever that means) and avail of the benefits of 'double engine development' with the same party ruling in Delhi and Kolkata. To a highly politically-conscious electorate, it was perceived as something that was halfway between a threat and a false allurements—one more of Narendra Modi's much promised economic wizardry.

Even during the 2021 elections, there was a strong subterranean feeling in West Bengal that the BJP was surely an external force. BJP's stars were all from the Hindi belt and everyone noticed how local BJP leaders were deliberately dwarfed, as the 'Hindi-Hindu' brigade took over. But when objected to, the BJP fed the national media that Banerjee was fomenting 'Bengali sub-nationalism.' This charge ignored the basic fact that West Bengal is one of the few states that has never encouraged any regionalism or linguistic chauvinism. It has roundly rejected parties that spoke

on parochial lines and had not permitted narrow-minded local 'senas' to grow. Despite its unemployment crisis, West Bengal has, quite consciously, no policy for reservation jobs for locals. Neither Banerjee nor earlier governments ever thought of imposing any compulsory quota of employment for those who speak Bangla (or Bengali). But there is no doubt that the local people are conscious and proud of their culture and attached to it.

The BJP's constant heckling of Bengali Muslims did not go well even with those who have reservations about the community, but it did attract Hindu fanatics and casteists. It is, nevertheless, undeniable that the latter are expanding their base in the state. But the BJP's unabashed attempts to utilise Bengal's icons for elections backfired as they had not a shred of respect for the principles they lived and died for. People whose leadership had battled Hindu orthodoxy and superstitions for two centuries cherished the values personified by stalwarts of enlightenment, like Ram Mohun Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo and Netaji Subhas Bose. They were quick to take offence at any slight to them and quite aghast when BJP leaders made repeated mistakes with facts, as they aired their very limited knowledge of their life and contribution.

Bengal's Lesser Emphasis on Caste

It was also observed that casteism is nowhere as prevalent in Bengal as it is reported to be in many other parts of India. No one generally asks even his nearest classmate or colleague what caste the person belongs to, and it is almost impossible to make out from the 'titles' or surnames his or her caste. Promotions and postings are not determined by caste and inter-caste marriages are a plenty. Bengal does not have any history of caste-based hatred in social life or of caste-centric violence or oppressive public conduct. But caste-based deprivation cannot, however, be brushed under the carpet. As we have seen, the upper caste *Bhadralok* had monopolised educational and emoluments opportunities and still dominate both fields. And, it is a fact that the scheduled caste (SC) population in present-day

West Bengal numbers 1.8 crore and is the second largest in India after Uttar Pradesh. In terms of percentage of scheduled castes to the whole population, the state is third, after Punjab and Himachal. Added to this is the fact that Bengal as a whole had a formidable number of Muslims who were converted from among the indigenous people, most of who are now considered Dalits. Conversions were not necessarily from formal Hinduism (as is claimed or believed, without historical evidence) but from different pre-Hindu local and folk religious cults. Yet, the sizeable percentage of scheduled caste Hindus and of local Muslims both surely indicate that 'depressed groups,' namely, the indigenous population constituted, without doubt, the overwhelming majority of the population of Bengal. Once democracy and franchise arrived (even partially) both Muslims and scheduled castes obviously attempted to convert their large numbers into more power.

The BJP's calculation in 2021 was to grab as much of the SC vote in West Bengal which was 23% of the total and influenced 127 seats out of 294. Had the party succeeded, the TMC could hardly have won. The BJP targeted the largest group of SCs, the Namasudras who are also known as Matuas as most, not all, believe in this specific reformist Vaishnava cult. This caste was the first to realise the advantage of numbers in a democracy, both before and after Independence and Partition. It did gain through political participation after the 1937 elections and after 1947, its leader was the only Hindu cabinet minister in the Muslim League government in Pakistan. But he soon became disillusioned with the idea of Pakistan and large numbers of Namasudras or Matuas started leaving East Pakistan for West Bengal. By the 1970s, the Matuas emerged as a formidable force. In recent times, it was the TMC that started consciously wooing them as a solid 'vote bank' and later, the BJP picked up this strategy. Not only did Prime Minister Modi campaign vigorously in the Matua belt but even during his visit to Bangladesh, he went all the way to Orakandi to televise and publicise his 'homage' to the original centre of the Matua cult. But the mistake that the BJP possibly made during the recent elections

was to overdo this casteist vote harvesting. Its ambiguous stance on conferring citizenship rights to those Matuas who do not possess proper documents may also have cost them seats.

The BJP was, however, more successful in wooing the next largest Dalit community, the Rajbongshis of North Bengal. The latter had started agitating from as early as 1891 for better social status, recognition and opportunities in a backward region. Its leaders have also realised after several decades of agitations that sectarian politics pay great returns. The Rajbongshis are now decisively in favour of the BJP and account for a substantial number of the 34 assembly seats (or segments) that the BJP captured during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. Some Gorkha political groups also veer towards the BJP. The TMC has now started a vigorous counter-campaign to win back the Rajbongshis who gave the BJP nine of the 11 seats dominated by this Dalit community. The BJP has even been instigating separation from West Bengal, reviving the original demand of the Rajbongshis even though it is fraught with dangerous consequences.

There are several other castes and communities that were given promises by the BJP and encouraged to make their presence felt during elections. Their casteist strategy caught the attention of the people and political analysts. It was not restricted to the SCs but also to other backward classes (OBCs). The Mahatos, a powerful caste of western Bengal, was also targeted by the BJP but this gambit did not succeed. In the two Medinipur districts, the BJP encouraged the Mahishyas, a conspicuously well-off community (like the Patels of Gujarat) to demand OBC status. Many found this quite unjustified and the community itself is sharply divided on the issue. The common Bengali, however, found this exercise of injecting casteism into politics across the board rather distasteful. They feared that the retrograde and toxic trends of north India would soon be sweeping Bengal which would turn the clock back on two centuries of social reform. There is a deep distaste among all educated and informed classes of West Bengal for the crude caste politics of the Hindi belt and the general alarm at BJP's unabashed caste arithmetic may also have helped Banerjee win.

Culture of Political Violence

Politics is serious business in Bengal and many considered imprisonment and death as medallions of honour. We may go back to the 1880s, when Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya planted the seeds of armed patriotic insurrection in his writings. His *Vande Mataram* ('I bow to thee, Oh Mother' or 'Long Live the Motherland') soon became the clarion call against 'invaders' and continues to be the national song of India. Bengal was profoundly influenced by romantic patriotism that swept so many generations of the youth, especially the educated ones, off their feet. They were also influenced by the violent path shown by European nationalists like the Irish Fenians, the Russian anarchists and the Italian revolutionaries. Thus, when the extremist trio of the Indian National Congress, Lala Lajpat Rai-Bal Gangadhar Tilak-Bipin Chandra Pal (Lal-Bal-Pal) preached their philosophy of patriotic terror, the youth of Bengal took it up very seriously and went to the extent of laying down their lives. A fact that we hardly mention is that the educated upper caste *Bhadralok* of the province were taking to arms for the first time—partly to live down the stigma of being weak or timid. Between 1907 and 1918, twenty-four young radicals laid down their lives in encounters with the British, but not before they annihilated seventy officials of the British Empire, including well-armed policemen.

Terror became a patriotic and political weapon, well romanticised in popular imagination. In 1930, callow young men shook the Raj when they raided the fortified Chittagong Armoury of the British, killing a large number (eighty-two) and losing twelve of their own. The reprisal that followed was terribly brutal but that did not stop the young brigade of Midnapore from killing three British district magistrates, one after the other, in 1931, 1932 and 1933, and losing their own lives soon thereafter. Even governors were not spared. In a reply to a question in the Rajya Sabha on 9 August 2019, the central government replied that of the total number of 585 freedom fighters deported to the Cellular Jail in the Andamans, 398 were

from Bengal, 95 from Punjab and the remaining 92 from all other provinces and states. This will indicate the degree of seriousness of politics in Bengal—to escape which, the British shifted their capital away from Calcutta to Delhi in 1911.

The cult of political violence developed and continued in Bengal, sadly enough, even after Independence. It began with the Communist-led Tebhaga movement of the impoverished peasantry in the 1946–48 period, with sharecroppers demanding a two-thirds share of harvested crops. The confrontation between the peasantry and land-owners, with the police stepping in to maintain law and order, was bloody and thousands were arrested. This was followed by a section of the Communists making an abortive bid at armed revolution in 1948–50. These outbursts often involved or provoked considerable violence but the British-trained police in Calcutta retaliated with equal fury. In vengeance, agitators set fire to public property and transport at will.

Yet, it was really Naxalism, born in Bengal in 1967, that gave a new lease of life to political violence and introduced the merciless politics of targeted annihilation. It went almost unchallenged till 1971 and Naxalite activists went about killing Left party supporters, policemen and whoever else they declared as ‘class enemies.’ Violence escalated as the Left parties soon started retaliating against their erstwhile colleagues in the Naxalite camp, directly or through the police. The Left held the levers of government for several months twice, in 1967 and in 1969, but it was Indira Gandhi’s handpicked leader, Siddhartha Shankar Ray, who began the first systematic and relentless process of elimination of Naxalite extremists. In 1971, he let loose a police force that was chafing for revenge after much senseless murder of their colleagues. The police swooped down on the Naxalites, often with support from the army, killing them quite remorselessly. They were aided by local strongmen, most of whom would later join Ray’s Congress. The latter reinforced the cult of violence—directed both at Naxalites and the Left parties—and introduced mayhem during the elections of 1972.

After five, often violent, years of Congress rule under Ray (1972–77), the Left Front came to power in 1977. Though it ruled quite stably for thirty-four years and controlled the police almost totally, violence continued unabated. Human rights activists have calculated that between 1977 and 2010, the Left parties also killed a substantial number and in their last decade in power they pounced mercilessly on the upcoming TMC. Banerjee emerged as the violent contender against Left violence and Partha Sarathi Banerjee describes it quite well, ‘The Congress did it earlier and the CPI(M) perfected it. Now, the Trinamool Congress is challenging... (and) this has led to a spiral of violence and bloodshed.’ In July 1993, when she was the state Youth Congress president, the Left Front’s police shot dead thirteen of her supporters in the heart of Kolkata. In 1997–98, she was smoked out by the leadership of the main Congress party that she had constantly accused of cowardly compromising with the Left. Her Trinamool Congress soon overshadowed the ‘original’ Congress, partly because of its capacity to face violence. The Marxist-led government came down heavily on a belligerent Mamata Banerjee and the scale of violence reached its peak in 2007 in Nandigram where Banerjee led a turbulent agitation against land acquisition. In March, the police killed fourteen protesters and injured many more. The Left was defeated at the hustings four years later.

The TMC came to power in 2011, but violence continued. In fact, the main allegation against it was that the party was hounding the supporters of both the Left parties and the Congress out of their homes. Many of them took shelter under the BJP, that then had little influence in Bengal—until it emerged as the saviour of all harassed political workers. It openly flaunted its strong ties with the central government that often-deployed central police forces to ‘protect’ its leaders in Bengal. This became an integral part of the party’s policy from 2016 after the TMC romped to power for its second tenure. All disgruntled and terrorised political persons from other parties gravitated to the BJP for protection against TMC musclemen. The BJP’s belligerence propelled it to become the most preferred Opposition group in the state. The immediate

dividends were clear when in the 2019 elections, it captured 18 of the 42 Lok Sabha seats in West Bengal.

Violence increased thereafter as the BJP smelt victory and soon continuous 'gang wars' between the two parties became common. The only difference this time is that the BJP has been more successful than earlier parties in publicising attacks on it and claiming victim status. In fact, in 2020, the TMC produced a list (to a BBC journalist) of 1,067 of its workers who were killed since the party was formed in 1998. Both parties are well armed and both keep complaining that the other attacked first though, of late, the national media appears to reflect the charges made by the BJP leadership more prominently. Union Home Minister Amit Shah concentrated a lot of his attention on West Bengal and kept threatening the police administration, especially officers of the Indian Police Service (IPS), of dire consequences. As human rights activists Sujato Bhadra and Purnendu Mondal say, every political party has blood on their hands, but the common man is hardly ever affected by such violence. The latter is almost always limited invariably to political workers or anti-socials, and collateral damage is rare. All parties have criminals and dangerous elements who gain 'respectability' by masquerading as political activists. This game of political violence in West Bengal is, however, one in which the BJP also participates quite effectively and is often on the offensive rather than being just defensive.

Now that we have traversed quite a lot of territory, we are in a better position to appreciate the four important socio-political traditions in Bengal, namely, its essentially plural ethos that held out against divisive forces; its capacity to retain its own cultural values when undermined by political values from 'outside;' its historical tradition of giving lower priority to the politics of caste and, sadly, its propensity towards sporadic bouts of political violence. It becomes somewhat easier to understand why and how Bengal defied all predictions and defeated the formidable challenge of the BJP in 2021 by rising above traditional political differences taking a strong united stand.

References

1. Ahamed, Sabir, and Md Zakaria Siddiqui. The Myth of Muslim Appeasement in West Bengal. *The Indian Express*, 20 Apr. 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/the-myth-of-muslim-appeasement-in-west-bengal-bengal-elections-bjp-7280522/>.
2. Anon. After Partition: Colony Politics and the Rise of Communism in Bengal. *HistoryExtra*, 11 Aug. 2017, <https://www.historyextra.com/period/20th-century/after-partition-colony-politics-and-the-rise-of-communism-in-bengal/>.
3. Anon. Calcutta in the 1950s and 1970s: What Made It the Hotbed of Rebellions? *Sahapedia*, <https://www.sahapedia.org/calcutta-1950s-and-1970s-what-made-it-hotbed-rebellions>. Accessed 29 Dec. 2021.
4. Anon. Mamata Slams BJP: You Have Insulted the Icons of Bengal. *The Indian Express*, 26 Jan. 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/kolkata/mamata-slams-bjp-you-have-insulted-the-icons-of-bengal-7161708/>.
5. Anon. Murder of Three Colonial British Officials in Successive Years, Midnapore, W. Bengal—Indian Patriots' Fury. *Navrang India*, Aug. 2018, <https://navrangindia.blogspot.com/2018/08/murder-of-three-colonial-british.html>.
6. Anon. Party, Politics and Political Power in Bengal. *Economic & Political Weekly*, Feb. 2011.
7. Anon. United Independent Bengal Movement. *Banglapedia*, https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/United_Independent_Bengal_Movement. Accessed 29 Dec. 2021.
8. Anon. West Bengal Elections 2021: Left Front and Congress Alliance Fail to Win Any Seats in the State. *News18*, 2 May 2021, <https://www.news18.com/news/politics/west-bengal-elections-2021-left-front-and-congress-alliance-fail-to-win-any-seats-in-the-state-3701060.html>.
9. Anon. West Bengal Elections 2021: Teli, Mahisya and the OBC Caste Gamble in Bengal. *The Financial Express*, 30 Mar. 2021, <https://www.financialexpress.com/india-news/west-bengal-elections-2021-teli-mahisya-and-the-obc-caste-gamble-in-bengal/2215865/>.
10. Bagchi, Suvojit. Bengal through the Decades: The More Things Change, Have They Stayed the Same? *Observer Research Foundation*, Apr. 2021.
11. Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar. Development, Differentiation and Caste: The Namasudra Movement in Bengal, (pp 90-119) in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, Abhijit Dasgupta & Willem van Schendel (Ed) *Bengal: Communities, Development and States*. Manohar Publishers. 1994.
12. Bandyopadhyay, Sekhar. The Story of an Aborted Revolution, *Journal of South Asian Development*, June 2008.
13. Barman, Abheek. Bengal Does Have Its Caste Divisions, but Only at the Subterranean Level. *The Economic Times*, 6 May 2016, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/blogs/folk-theorem/bengal-does-have-its-caste-divisions-but-only-at-the-subterranean-level/>.

14. Basu, Sibaji Pratim. West Bengal: The Food Movements of 1959 & 1966. Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, http://www.mcrg.ac.in/rls_pml/RLS_PM/RLS_PM_Abstracts/Sibaji.pdf. Accessed 29 Dec. 2021.
15. Bera, Sayantan. Field Report: A Groundswell of Anti-Incumbency in Mamata's Bengal. *Mint*, 23 Mar. 2021, <https://www.livemint.com/elections/assembly-elections/field-report-a-groundswell-of-anti-incumbency-in-mamata-s-bengal-11616488328088.html>.
16. Bhattacharjee, Dharitri. Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy's United Bengal Plan That Could Have Changed the Course of India's History. *The Wire*, 15 Aug. 2017, <https://thewire.in/government/gandhi-nehru-huseyn-suhrawardy-united-bengal-plan>.
17. Bhattacharyya, Dwaipayan. Making and Unmaking of Trinamul Congress. *Economic & Political Weekly*, Apr. 2004.
18. Chatterjee, Tanmay, and Pramod Giri. In North Bengal, Can the TMC Reverse the BJP's Edge? *Hindustan Times*, 10 Mar. 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/elections/west-bengal-assembly-election/in-north-bengal-can-the-tmc-reverse-the-bjp-s-edge-101615356448697.html>.
19. Choudhury, Sunetra. Bengal Has Been Committed to Secularism in a Way That's Remarkable: Amartya Sen. *Hindustan Times*, 16 Apr. 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/bengal-has-been-committed-to-secularism-in-a-way-that-s-quite-remarkable-amartya-sen-101618558274488.html>.
20. Chowdhury, Santanu. Fight for SC Vote in West Bengal: 23% of State Numbers, 127 Seats. *The Indian Express*, 31 Mar. 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/west-bengal-election-tmc-bjp-manifesto-scheduled-castes-reservation-politics-7251934/>.
21. Contributors to Wikimedia projects. Lal Bal Pal. Wikipedia, 22 Apr. 2007, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lal_Bal_Pal.
22. Contributors to Wikimedia projects. List of Largest Political Parties. Wikipedia, 30 Sept. 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_largest_political_parties.
23. Das, Jitendra Nath. The Backwardness of the Rajbansis and the Rajbansi Kshatriya Movement 1891-1926. Proceedings of the Indian History Congress, Jan. 2004.
24. Das, Madhuparna. Caste Was Never a Big Issue in Bengal Politics. This Assembly Election Has Changed That. *ThePrint*, 9 Apr. 2021, <https://theprint.in/politics/caste-was-never-a-big-issue-in-bengal-politics-this-assembly-election-has-changed-that/636390/>.
25. Dasgupta, Abhijit. Displacement and Exile: The State-Refugee Relations in India. Oxford University Press, 2016.
26. Firth, John, and Ernest Liu. Manufacturing Underdevelopment: India's Freight Equalisation Scheme, and the Long-Run Effects of Distortions on the Geography of Production. Working Paper Available at http://Barrett.Dyson.Cornell.Edu/NEUDC/Paper_316.Pdf, July 2018.
27. Francioni, Andrea. British Narratives of 'Terrorism' in India. The Colonial

- Discourse on Early Political Violence (1907-1918). European Social Science History Conference 2020, Mar. 2020.
28. Ghosh, Himadri. West Bengal's Landscape Is Shifting from 'Party Society' to 'Caste Politics'. *The Wire*, 12 Feb. 2021, <https://thewire.in/politics/west-bengals-landscape-shift-party-society-caste-politics>.
 29. Heehs, Peter. Foreign Influences on Bengali Revolutionary Terrorism 1902–1908. *Modern Asian Studies*, Cambridge Core, Nov. 2008, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/modern-asian-studies/article/abs/foreign-influences-on-bengali-revolutionary-terrorism-19021908/E9FDC55A529B498B3F33F720925E09F7>.
 30. Iyengar, Pashant. Statistical Afternotes: TMC May Have Won Bengal, but BJP Did Not Do Badly. *The Wire*, <https://thewire.in/politics/statistical-afternotes-tmc-may-have-won-bengal-but-bjp-did-not-do-badly>. Accessed 29 Dec. 2021.
 31. Kak Ramachandran, Smriti. Will Win over 200 Seats in West Bengal': Amit Shah. *Hindustan Times*, 28 Mar. 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/kolkata-news/will-win-over-200-seats-in-west-bengal-amit-shah-101616940283145.html>.
 32. Mathur, Aneesh, and Sanjay Sharma. Post-Poll Violence: SC Issues Notice to Centre, Bengal Govt after Fresh Plea. *India Today*, 1 July 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/bengal-post-poll-violence-sc-notice-centre-bengal-govt-fresh-plea-1821643-2021-07-01>.
 33. Mukerjee, Shikha. Deep Dive | The Long Trail of Political Violence in West Bengal - News Analysis News. *India Today*, 11 Dec. 2020, <https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/deep-dive-the-long-trail-of-political-violence-in-west-bengal-1748852-2020-12-11>.
 34. Mukherjee, Rudrangshu. Not Really Nehru, It Was Gandhi and Congress 'Right' Who Made Bose Resign as Party President. *ThePrint*, 30 Jan. 2021, <https://theprint.in/pageturner/excerpt/not-really-nehru-it-was-gandhi-and-congress-right-who-made-bose-resign-as-party-president/594191/>.
 35. Narayanan, Koushik. How Subhas Chandra Bose's 1939 Exit as Elected Congress Chief Culminated in Partition. *Republic World*, 21 Oct. 2020, <https://www.republicworld.com/opinions/blogs/netajis-grandnephew-claims-bose-exit-from-congress-in-1939-triggered.html>.
 36. Noorur Rahman, Md Shah. The NEHU Journal. Religious and Cultural Syncretism in Medieval Bengal, Jan. 2018.
 37. Press Trust of India. Congress-Left Tie up Will Be 'Game Changer' in 2021 West Bengal Polls, Says Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury. *Firstpost*, 13 Sept. 2020, <https://www.firstpost.com/politics/congress-left-tie-up-will-be-game-changer-in-2021-west-bengal-polls-says-adhir-ranjan-chowdhury-8813061.html>.
 38. Rahaman Sarkar, Alisha. Mamata Is Trying to Counter BJP with Bangla Nationalism but Are People Buying It? *The New Indian Express*, 22 June 2019, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2019/jun/22/mamata-is-trying-to-counter-bjp-with-bangla-nationalism-but-are-people-buying-it-1993856.html>.
 39. Rajaram, Prema. Why Left Believes It Can Defeat TMC in Bengal, CPM

- Leader Biman Bose Explains - Elections News. *India Today*, 5 Mar. 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/west-bengal-assembly-polls-2021/story/why-left-believes-it-can-defeat-tmc-in-bengal-cpm-leader-biman-bose-explains-1776141-2021-03-05>.
40. Ramaseshan, Radhika. It Was Largely Hubris That Led the BJP to Its Defeat in West Bengal. *Mint*, 2 May 2021, <https://www.livemint.com/opinion/online-views/it-was-largely-hubris-that-led-the-bjp-to-its-defeat-in-west-bengal-11619971288552.html>.
 41. Ranjan, Ashish. Mamata vs BJP: Who Had the Edge in Bengal's Close-Contest Seats? *India Today*, 5 May 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/story/west-bengal-2021-assembly-election-result-analysis-tmc-bjp-1799196-2021-05-05>.
 42. Roychowdhury, Adrija. Naxalbari: How a Peasant Uprising Triggered a Pan-India Political Movement. *The Indian Express*, 2 Nov. 2020, <https://indianexpress.com/article/research/51-years-of-naxalbari-how-a-peasant-uprising-triggered-a-pan-india-political-movement-5191046/>.
 43. Saran Agarwal, Praba, and Harshvardhan. 91 Years Ago, Chittagong Armoury Raid Shook the British Empire. *NewsClick*, 18 Apr. 2021, <https://www.newsclick.in/91-years-ago-chittagong-armoury-raid-shook-british-empire>.
 44. Scroll Staff. Modi Bangladesh Visit: PM Visits Temple in Orakandi in Reach out to Matua Community. *Scroll.in*, 27 Mar. 2021, <https://scroll.in/latest/990735/pm-modi-visits-temple-in-orakandi-in-bangladesh-in-reach-out-to-matua-community>.
 45. Sen, Dwaipayan. Memories of 1946 Great Calcutta Killings Can Help Us Understand Violence in Today's Bengal. *The Wire*, 2 Oct. 2018, <https://thewire.in/communalism/1946-great-calcutta-killings-west-bengal>.
 46. Shah, Palak. Satta Bazar Bets on BJP Forming the next Govts in Bengal, Assam & Puducherry. *The Hindu BusinessLine*, 18 Apr. 2021, <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/satta-bazar-bets-on-bjp-forming-the-next-govts-in-bengal-assam-puducherry/article34352362.ece>.
 47. Shakti Shekhar, Kumar. West Bengal Election Result 2021: BJP Lost but Made These Impressive Gains. *The Times of India*, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/west-bengal-election-result-2021-bjp-lost-but-made-made-these-impressive-gains/articleshow/82369089.cms>. Accessed 29 Dec. 2021.
 48. Siddiq, Abu B., and Ahsan Habib. The Formation of Bengal Civilization: A Glimpse on the Socio-Cultural Assimilations through Political Progressions in Bengal Delta. *International Journal of Social Political and Economic Research*, Sept. 2021.
 49. Sircar, Jawhar. Dr B.C. Roy and the First Decade of the Indian Federation. *The Wire*, 1 July 2021, <https://thewire.in/politics/bc-roy-first-decade-india-federalism-nehru-bengal>.
 50. Sircar, Jawhar. From Liberalism To Secularism, the Battle for Bengal Has Just Begun. *The Wire*, 28 Mar. 2021, <https://thewire.in/politics/west-bengal-assembly-elections-mamata-tmc-bjp-secularism>.

51. Suryesh, Saket. Subhas Chandra Bose's Struggle within Congress Was a Statement against the Highly Personalised High-Command Structure and Dictatorial Grip of Gandhi-Nehru. *OpIndia*, 27 Jan. 2020, <https://www.opindia.com/2020/01/subhas-chandra-bose-congress-party-jawaharlal-nehru-mahatma-gandhi-president/>.
52. Tewari, Ruhi, and Madhuparna Das. Who Are Rajbanshis, Caught in Shah-Mamata Scrap & Why They're Key for BJP in Assam, Bengal. *ThePrint*, 14 Apr. 2021, <https://theprint.in/politics/who-are-rajbanshis-caught-in-shah-mamata-scrap-why-theyre-key-for-bjp-in-assam-bengal/639069/>.
53. Umar Hayat, Syed, and Altaf Ullah. Re-Orientation of Muslim Politics in Bengal (1937-1947): Myth and Reality. *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan*, July 2019.
54. Verma, Rahul, and Ankita Barthwal. Polarisation, Anti-Incumbency, Turncoats: Did the BJP Overestimate Its Chances in Bengal? *India Today*, 3 May 2021, <https://www.indiatoday.in/amp/news-analysis/story/polarisation-anti-incumbency-turncoats-did-the-bjp-overestimate-its-chances-in-bengal-1798477-2021-05-03>.
55. Yadav, Yogendra. 2021 Election Has Ended the Bengal Exceptionalism. It's Now Seeing American-Style Management. *ThePrint*, 28 Apr. 2021, <https://theprint.in/opinion/2021-election-has-ended-the-bengal-exceptionalism-its-now-seeing-american-style-management/647599/>.

Endnotes

1. So determined were voters that they did not open up even during exit polls and not one pollster could predict correctly that TMC was heading for a landslide victory. The different projections they gave to the TMC out of 292 seats were: 152-164 according to ABP News-C Voter, 154-186 estimated by Ground Zero Research, 169-191 by Today's Chanakya, 164-176 by ETG Research, 130-146 by *India Today-People's Pulse* and so on.
2. In a letter dated 1 April 1948 to the chief minister of West Bengal, Nehru said, 'It is dangerous to encourage this exodus as this may lead to disastrous consequences.' A fortnight later, he was more explicit that, 'Hindus should not leave East Bengal. If they do so in very large numbers, they will suffer greatly and we might be wholly unable to make any arrangement.' Selected Works 1946-1964, Volume 6.
3. The CPI-M's mouthpiece, *Ganashakti*, claimed that 2,647 CPI-M workers were killed between 1977 and 2010 by lumpen elements of the Congress or by Naxalites.