

Major Issues Concerning Free and Fair Elections: The Case of West Bengal

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To move on, let us now take up the actual conduct of the elections in the state in 2021, in the light of the issues delineated by the Citizens' Commission on Elections. The 2019 Lok Sabha elections had been vitiated by unprecedented allegations of blatant partisanship against the then CEC, Sunil Arora. His conduct caused general and widespread alarm as the Commission appeared to tilt so dangerously in favour of the ruling party. Arora, however, denied all charges and stonewalled relevant queries, with undisguised hostility. Worried civil society groups and concerned citizens then launched an exercise to examine quite seriously the most critical areas that affect free and fair elections. It was then that the CCE was constituted after due deliberations.

In January 2021, the CCE published its first 'Expert Group Report on Electronic Voting Machines' (EVMs), primarily on the touchstone of whether and how far their use complied with 'democracy principles.' These insist on absolute transparency in facilitating the voter to exercise his or her choice and in ensuring that these selections are, indeed, reflected in the stored vote and counted as such—without the slightest deviation whatsoever. The report pointed to several inadequacies of EVMs as they operate at present and referred to domain experts who have clearly stated that the present 'quality assurance' and testing strategies of the ECI certainly do not rule out scope for mischief or manoeuvring of results. The report was discussed in details and, thereafter we summarised the CCE's recommendation—to redesign the paper trail machines for more transparent verifiability by voters and to

ensure that the voting machines are independently verifiable. The CCE then followed this up with its second report in March 2021, titled, 'An Inquiry into India's Election System.' By this time, the ECI had declared and commenced the process for conducting elections to the state assemblies of Tamil Nadu, Kerala, West Bengal and Assam as well as for the union territory of Puducherry. The group flagged concerns such as the exclusion of vulnerable groups from electoral rolls, money power in elections promoting an economic oligarchy and selective enforcement of the MCC. It reiterated that criminalisation of politics as well as fake news and the partisanship of the ECI were seriously damaging the efficacy and neutrality of the Commission.

More public papers were finalised by the CCE and these have covered almost every area and issue that concern the business of elections in India. While the CCE grouped its concerns under six topics, I have chosen to re-group them a bit and re-arrange their order—to serve the purpose of explaining the outcome of elections to the West Bengal legislative assembly in 2021. These six critical areas and issues are briefly discussed here:

- i. Electoral rolls, that often contain defects, leading to the significant exclusion of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups, and the danger of linking this database with others like the Aadhaar database;
- ii. Criminalisation of politics and its unchecked increase, a part of which is reflected in the number of MPs with declared criminal cases going up from 162 in 2009 to 185 in 2014 and to 233 in 2019;
- iii. Money power in elections and electoral bonds that deliberately encourage and legitimise opaqueness, 'big capital' and black money in politics—obviously for *quid pro* gains thereafter;
- iv. EVMs that appear vulnerable to dangers through 'doctoring,' which may critically affect the results;
- v. Debasing the ECI's constitutional autonomy, through

- biased decisions and selective enforcement of its MCC during conduct of elections;
- vi. Critical role of the media and the social media in influencing voters and the rampant use of fake news and other unethical practices.

Electoral Rolls

The purposeful defects in electoral rolls were not really raised as a major problem during the 2021 assembly elections in West Bengal. However, the state had a notorious history of 'rigged' electoral rolls in the past, especially during the first quarter of a century of the Left Front regime. Rolls were then entered and modified manually by government staff, most of whom were squarely in the Left camp. The complaint was that these manually prepared electoral rolls contained several names of dead, missing and bogus voters. These names were inserted or retained so that the Left could gain additional votes through proxies. During that period, impersonation was quite common and since Left supporters among government employees controlled both the electoral rolls and the administration of elections, they tilted the balance in favour of the Left Front. Based on complaints and several inquiries conducted, it was revealed that there were, indeed, reasons to worry. Along with rolls stuffed with their own supporters, there were serious charges that genuine voters, especially in localities and pockets that were known to be against the CPI(M) or the Left Front, were deliberately left out.

But even then, there were not too many allegations that the names of voters belonging to weaker, depressed or marginal castes or communities had been omitted intentionally. Since casteism is not so prevalent in West Bengal, caste and community did not matter so critically as in some other states. From 2009, electoral rolls have converted to electronic management and photo identity cards given to voters. In just a few years, rolls have been cleaned up substantially under intense public scrutiny and by matching the entries with electoral photo identity cards (EPICs). But absolute

defect-free perfection is hardly possible with defective humans in charge. A new worrisome issue is the linking of Aadhaar cards with electoral identity cards because while it does add a new dimension to the 'national identity card scheme,' it also permits ruling parties to dovetail data of those who benefited from their schemes. Once done, they could always approach them to vote for the ruling party for having conferred the benefits as a *quid pro quo*. In fact, in 2021, while no such complaints arose in West Bengal, the Madras High Court ordered the UIDAI that controls Aadhaar cards to hold an internal inquiry to find out how the Puducherry unit of the BJP got hold of voters' mobile phone numbers in the poll-bound union territory.

Criminalisation of Politics

This topic has been covered in an earlier chapter. It has been observed that all political parties in Bengal have enviable records in this respect and both the ruling Trinamool Congress and its prime opponent, the BJP, have been accused of harbouring criminals or anti-social elements. Both parties are supposed to offer them considerable immunity from police cases and punitive action. We may recall that the same charge was made non-stop against the Left Front in its heydays and, in fact, many individuals charged with criminal offenses simply moved away from under its wings to the TMC. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, numerous musclemen and anti-social elements who were sheltered by the Congress defected to the Left Front for protection. It is said that anti-socials have, with the passage of time, simply honed their skills from local-level extortion to well-organised 'syndicates' that cover specific operations. Over the last one year, however, many musclemen abandoned the TMC in favour of the BJP as they offered better economic and political prospects. Now, however, a large section is desperately trying to get back to the TMC. Though the ruling party surely fielded candidates with criminal backgrounds, as had all ruling parties in Bengal from 1947 onwards, other parties were not too far behind.

In fact, as a news item revealed, the BJP often had the maximum

number of candidates with a criminal past in certain phases of the elections in West Bengal. A report published by poll rights group Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) found that while as many as 34% of Trinamool Congress MLAs had 'serious criminal charges,' this percentage went up to 51% as far as the BJP was concerned. The kettle black could hardly acquire the right to call the chimney black—even if it is led by India's most powerful person and backed by a rather compliant section of the national media. In other phases, the ruling TMC is reported to have fielded more such candidates. In fact, National Election Watch has published the entire list of 528 candidates among the total of 2,132 who contested in the state with declared past or pending criminal cases. This number represents almost 20% of the total, but one may compare it with the national average of nearly 50% of the MPs elected in the new Lok Sabha of 2019 who declared their past or pending criminal records. This incidentally represents an increase of 44% in the number of MPs with declared criminal cases since 2009.

Money Power in Elections

The third major issue is 'big capital' supporting politics, but this is hardly relevant to parties like the TMC or even to several national parties like the CPI(M) that contested the state elections of 2021. It is, however, germane to the BJP which is ahead of both these parties insofar as political donations are concerned that are disclosed in official records. This came out quite sharply in a recent report of the Centre for Media Studies. It estimated that a mind-boggling total of some ₹60,000 crore may have been spent in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. The CMS report calibrated the BJP's outlay at close to ₹27,000 crore, that is, 45% of the total amount of ₹60,000 crore and this means that the party invested some ₹89 crore for each of its 303 victorious candidates. Even if the figures are difficult to prove and a lot of the estimates are rather generalised, the fact remains that in a thriving black market driven economy, it will always be impossible to calculate these numbers with exactitude. The 2019 Lok Sabha elections were certainly, and quite shockingly,

the costliest in the world. The fact that the CMS report that indicts the incumbent regime in New Delhi has not been challenged by it or its litigation-prone supporters and proxies, speaks volumes. The report further claims that this quantum of spending was more than double that of the 2014 elections, which itself was an all-time high. Jacking up poll expenditure to bizarre heights is one of Narendra Modi's salutary contribution to elections in India.

The sight of the Prime Minister-designate of India flying into Delhi in the private plane of a big Gujarati capitalist in May 2014 was not missed by many. It is, therefore, no coincidence that the very same person's wealth has grown from \$7.1 billion and the 11th rank among the richest Indians in 2014 to \$50 billion in 2020. It is also established Gautam Adani's 'wealth has increased the most in the whole world in 2021.' Adani has not challenged these reports as he had done for others in the past but, in all fairness, it would require more granular data, besides patient and thorough analysis to ascertain how much of the increase of his wealth is due to which factor. Adani is known to be a loyalist and a big financier of Modi, and it is generally assumed that proximity may have played a big role in his meteoric rise. We are, of course, more bothered about the BJP's resources not that of Adani's, Mukesh Ambani's or that of the Reddy mining barons of Ballari.

In contrast to these numbers, the latest declaration of the ECI, based on figures of its opaque Electoral Bonds Scheme, is that in 2019, the BJP received just ₹750 crore in donations from companies and individuals. This is still more than five times what the Congress garnered, which was ₹139 crore. One reason why the Trinamool Congress was so badly battered in Bengal in the 2019 elections could be that it received some miserable ₹8 crore in all. The ADR too released its latest report on the incomes by political parties for the financial year 2019–20, which states that the BJP's declared income was ₹3,623 crore and the next richest party was Congress which was way below it—with a total income of ₹682 crore. The Trinamool Congress's income was ₹144 crore. This says it all—what money power means in elections.

Returning to the assembly elections in Bengal, a news item had the following headline, 'Electoral Bond Sales Jumped by Nearly 16 Times During the 2021 elections to 4 states and one UT.' Sales of electoral bonds rose from ₹42.10 crore in January to ₹695.34 crore in April 2021 and the maximum amount of sales were in the authorised branches of the State Bank of India (SBI) in Kolkata. This reveals the importance of West Bengal at that juncture. After Kolkata the sale of electoral bonds were the highest from the SBI branches in Chennai, Thiruvananthapuram, Jaipur and Delhi. It is well known that the rich business community that has settled in Kolkata and controls the local economy (and beyond) has strong links with the last of the two cities mentioned. This community broke its historic and carefully maintained neutral stance and came out openly in support of the BJP. It is said that the community was assured that 'Ram's rule' would finally be implemented in West Bengal among the aggressive non-vegetarian people who worship Durga and Kali.

It is a lasting tragedy that certain judges of the Supreme Court and high courts have been more than indulgent to the regime that thrives on undemocratic and autocratic conduct, for various reasons. A prominent openly pro-Modi judge has also been constantly favouring a capitalist oligarch. Chief Justice S.A. Bobde's decision that electoral bonds were quite in order was a great disappointment and it encouraged dubious financiers to enrich their chosen parties and candidates. For the first time, the CEC (Sunil Arora, obviously) broke the ECI's long standing tradition of opposing the electoral bond system and actually supported Justice Bobde's order that this obtuse financing may continue as 'sufficient safeguards are there.'

As far as the TMC was concerned, electoral bonds were not a major source of financing, but like all ruling parties, it must have enjoyed the support of the local business community in 2019 and 2021. We do not have specific data on this, but we do know that there are no fabulously wealthy corporate houses in the state to patronise political parties. Nor can West Bengal offer anything

substantial by way of mining leases like some other states and frankly, since coal mining was nationalised half a century ago, there are no lucrative mining contracts to benefit private investors either. Where as, such projects that attract dubious finance hardly matter in Bengal, we should recall how mining 'dons' indicted by even the Supreme Court rubbed shoulders with the Prime Minister on a public dais in Karnataka in 2019. West Bengal's two other major industries, tea and jute, are constantly lurching from one crisis to another and are hardly capable of financing politicians in a big way. Nor does the state have any mega-scale infrastructure projects, which are mostly in the central government's fiefdom anyway, which big donors can milk and recoup their investments and more.

TMC leaders in the state are often accused of extracting 'cut money' from beneficiaries of government schemes and even the chief minister had to threaten her partymen to stop this practice. These amounts ranged from a few thousand rupees to, sometimes, to a few lakh rupees. This racket infuriated the voters before the elections. Ironically, the BJP that was steeped in big time funding elsewhere took the lead to raise the issue of 'corruption' in a major way. This hardly made any impact as the people were also amazed to see the flashy, long entourages of expensive high-end automobiles in which the BJP leaders travelled. The sheer money power of that party was an eyesore to many (and to the press) and many people jumped on to the bandwagon to make a bit of hay when the sun was so generous.

It was reported in March that Kolkata airport 'handled 140 chartered planes and helicopters' which was 'the highest number (ever in Bengal elections)' and that '9 out of 10 were hired by the BJP.' This was just at the start of elections and one can only guess how many hundred chartered planes and helicopters flew in and out of Kolkata and Bagdogra (Siliguri) airports over the next two months to ferry BJP leaders. Other studies were also made by the media which pointed to the unprecedented spending on air travel by the BJP leaders. This was a sight never seen before in the state's

history but what the Modi-Shah combine did not realise was that it was inadvertently helping Banerjee. She was converted from an 'autocrat' to an 'underdog'—who was being 'deserted by treacherous defectors and back-stabbers,' who had been bought over by money, the avarice of power and blackmail.

It may be interesting to view veteran journalist Nalini Singh's estimates of the BJP's poll expenditure in West Bengal only for political rallies. She said, 'The BJP's total outgo on the Battle of Bengal could have buzzed past ₹2,500 crore.' Though guesstimates, these numbers are the closest one can arrive at and the BJP has not denied them.

Electoral Voting Machines (EVMs)

As mentioned earlier, the first report of CCE released in January 2021, pointed out that:

- EVM voting does not comply with the essence of 'democracy principles' as the voter has no direct knowledge whether his/her vote is cast-as-intended; recorded-as-cast and counted-as-recorded;
- It is not guaranteed against hacking, tampering and spurious vote injections and unfit for democratic elections as there is no end-to-end (E2E) verifiability;
- Though VVPATs are installed with every EVM, they become meaningless if the paper slips are not counted and matched;
- The designs and the results of both software and hardware verification are not open to a full independent review and verifiable.
- The voter cannot verify the slip before the vote is cast.

Other reasons and lacunae were also pointed out and the CCE insisted on stringent pre-audit of the electronic vote count before the results are declared. The ECI, however, decided to ignore the entire report and its bias is evident from the affidavit filed in

the Supreme Court just before the 2019 elections. It opposed the Opposition's demand for greater transparency and the mandatory matching of VVPAT slips with the electronic votes counted as cast by the EVMs. The ECI made a palpably exaggerated statement before Chief Justice of India Ranjan Gogoi in 2019 that total verification of VVPAT paper trail slips with EVMs may delay election results by 5–6 days. Experts were convinced that the counting of paper slips (bearing only one name, unlike ballot papers) would not take more than 6–8 hours at the most. The Chief Justice did not order for a public demonstration that would have solved the issue forever and exposed CEC Arora, but ordered that checking of paper slips be increased from one polling station per constituency to five. Neither the Commission nor the court asked for this. However the BJP was apparently happy with the outcome. Counting of just five out of the 180–300 polling stations in an average assembly constituency meant that sampling would continue to be inadequate.

Even before the elections to the West Bengal legislative assembly were notified, Banerjee wrote to the ECI in March 2021, demanding 100% verification be made of the results arrived at by both EVMs and VVPAT machines. She pointed to the findings and recommendations of the CCE report on EVMs, but the ECI was vehement in its opposition to her proposal. It also refused to acknowledge the CCE's rather convincing report and took refuge behind the Supreme Court's last order dated 8 April 2019 of Chief Justice Gogoi decreeing that only five VVPAT slips be counted per assembly constituency—out of some 250. The TMC pointed out that this was meant primarily for the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, but the Commission interpreted it as unchangeable. This stubbornness obviously lends credence to the apprehension that there may be mismatches if both the EVMs and VVPATs are counted for each polling station.

The TMC also wrote to the ECI to increase the time for voters to check the little slip that was printed by the VVPAT machine from the present 7 seconds to 15 seconds. Banerjee explained to

the ECI that 7 seconds was too little a time for many voters to properly see the printed slip that moves automatically into a sealed box. Since the number of voters per polling station had been reduced from 1000–1200 or even more to just 800 or so (because of covid-19 restrictions), extra time was not only possible but also feasible. It would reassure voters by permitting them more time to check their candidate's name, but the ECI refused to agree with the suggestion. It pointed to a study that the Indian Statistical Institute is supposed to have done although this 'recommendation' is open to question. The ECI's early shots made it clear not only to the TMC but to other non-BJP opponents that it was in no mood to continue its long tradition of being gracious to disadvantaged Opposition parties.

The TMC then issued an all-out alert on EVMs and instructed its polling agents and others concerned check and recheck the machines to ensure that no mischief was possible by any pre-decided 'software' or bug. The district officers also became hypersensitive to this issue and checked and rechecked the machines, especially when they were handled by ECI-empanelled firms at various stages. In any case, except for a few stray complaints of malfunctioning of EVMs, the 2021 elections in West Bengal passed off without any major hitches.

ECI's Biased Conduct and Model Code of Conduct

As outlined in previous chapters, the CCE had voiced its concerns about the way the ECI was enforcing the MCC during the 2019 Lok Sabha elections as it was alarmingly skewed in favour of the ruling party. The ECI had then deliberately delayed the announcement of the election to enable the Prime Minister complete inaugurating a slew of projects. In 2021, the ECI's bias was equally clear when it announced its eight-stage election schedule for West Bengal. The same Commission decided that all of Tamil Nadu's 234 seats and Kerala's 140 seats could go to the elections in just one day but Bengal's 294 assembly seats required eight phases. This obviously helped the BJP that had

relatively fewer party workers to move from zone to zone. Besides, assembly constituencies for each phase appeared to be grouped around an airport or a helipad to favour those leaders who needed to fly in. The arrangement was especially convenient for the Prime Minister and the home minister for them to descend on a particular location to address voters of that phase of the elections. In previous elections, zones were selected for multiple phases keeping in mind the movement of armed police from district to district.

The CCE report had also pointed out the lack of consistency in the manner in which the ECI had enforced the MCC in 2019 and its partisan treatment of the ruling party's alleged transgressions. The EC who was to be the next CEC was made to quit the ECI, because he had dissented and stood his ground. This is very unfortunate as the ECI had been accorded special powers under Article 324 of the Constitution to ensure that it could conduct free and fair elections. During the 2021 elections to state assemblies, the ECI appeared to continue this record and its many acts of omission and commission quite undermined its neutrality.

To share an example, one may point to the Commission's hurried change of its old rule that required 'polling agents' to be necessarily appointed from among voters of his own polling station area. A local person would be more familiar with the locality and know a lot of voters, which would help him identify impersonators. The ECI suddenly changed this rule so that polling agents could be selected from any part of the constituency, which may cover even 250 polling stations, if not more. The Trinamool Congress subsequently publicised a phone conversation, allegedly between two top BJP leaders in which one urged the other to get the ECI to change the rule since the party did not have sufficient numbers of party workers at all the polling stations. The TMC's charge that the ECI had changed the rule at the BJP's request appears credible, as it had not consulted other parties.

Apart from these policy issues that affected the conduct of elections in West Bengal and elsewhere, constant irritants cropped

up between an openly biased ECI and political parties opposed to the BJP. There were repeated examples of violation of the MCC and the worst example of both sexism and offensive behaviour was made by Prime Minister Modi himself by calling out Mamata Banerjee, 'Didi-Ooo-Didi.' There was an uproar among women's groups and civil society organisations over this remark, but the ECI chose to remain silent. Similarly, Banerjee and Shah traded and matched each other in aggressive retorts, but while several incendiary statements made by the latter, hinting at one community, were let off by the Commission, Banerjee was punished for her appeal to ensure communalism was destroyed. Much more intemperate than both were the utterances made by the BJP's state president, Dilip Ghosh. He openly and abusively threatened to break the bones of his opponents, but managed to get away scot-free thanks to an indulgent ECI. But, as soon as Arora retired, the restructured Commission handed out a warning and penalise Ghosh.

We have referred to the history of political violence earlier. The ECI and the Amit Shah led home ministry used this ruse to flood the state with central forces which proved useful for escorting BJP leaders and even emboldened party workers to the hegemony of the TMC. Though central forces have often been utilised in under-policed West Bengal during past elections, what was distressing this time was the provocative and rather-colonial manner in which they were encouraged to behave. True, there were allegations of partiality against the state police, as during earlier regimes as well, but in the past the ECI was never accused of collaborating with the Centre in the states, which is not permitted under the Constitution. Almost one lakh central armed policemen were posted in the state during the elections, obviously with the concurrence of Shah, who also acted as if he was the BJP's battering ram. It is estimated that the total number of armed policemen of the state government does not exceed 80,000–85,000 and after deducting those on leave and on statutory 'guard duty' (not available for election duty), a maximum of 50,000–60,000 armed policemen could be deployed by the state for maintaining peace during elections in West Bengal.

The ECI was, therefore, running the state with far larger numbers and at one point, it was reported that some 1,30,000 central armed forces may have been posted in the state during the peak period.

The police are often overbearing, but what was blatant was when the ECI and the home ministry handpicked controversial IPS officers like Vivek Dubey from another state to be the Commission's Special Police Observer. Some of the central police forces acted as if they were a virtual 'occupation force.' This attitude became quite pronounced when, in violation of all existing orders and procedures, central forces did not tie up with local police forces to patrol areas jointly—even though they had no knowledge of the people or the topography of the areas. The consequence of such colonial-type overbearing conduct became evident when a section of the Central Industrial Security Force (CISF), with no experience of handling law and order, killed four voters by firing directly on their chests. This happened on 14 April 2021, in Sitalkuchi in Cooch Behar district of north Bengal. The ECI quickly despatched Dubey to prepare a report 'justifying what had happened,' but it could not find even a shred of evidence in the public domain to explain the incident. Local voters could not understand why four poor Muslim voters would attack central forces, as there was no evidence of what hurt they had inflicted to warrant death. When criticised, the Commission banned the entry of political leaders to the area. The BJP's state president justified the firing and the killings and said more should have been killed if required, while another senior BJP leader insisted that 'not four, but eight people should have been shot dead in Sitalkuchi.' The ECI's bias was evident when it permitted Banerjee's former minister-turned-opponent at Nandigram Suwendu Adhikari to claim that 'mini Pakistans' were being created, but booked Banerjee for an appeal to Muslims.

Critical Role of Media and Social Media

The last point is how the social media influenced voters and the manner in which mainstream mass media found it advantageous to

favour the ruling party in their coverage. In 2019, the ECI failed to respond to several violations of media guidelines during elections and took no action against NaMo TV, that continuously telecast content centred on the Prime Minister, even during periods when political publicity was banned before polling days. The Commission also failed to curb fake news, online and offline, before and during the 2019 elections.

In 2021, the ECI issued its MCC on 26 February, declaring: 'The party in power in the state and Centre should avoid issuing advertisements in electronic and print media highlighting the achievements of the government at the cost of public exchequer.' There was, however, no ban if the parties issued advertisements at their own cost on what their governments had done for the people and what they would do if elected. This ushered in a boom time for the print media and both the BJP and TMC gulped their age-old objections against certain newspapers and released political advertisements to all, as long as they had the reach. However, soon thereafter, the ECI had to invoke its special powers under Article 32 of the Constitution to ban all non-certified political advertisements in West Bengal and Assam on 3 April and 4 April, just before the first phase of elections—as there were too many complaints that these were misleading and offensive.

As far as the social and digital media were concerned, the battle began long before the elections were announced in West Bengal in 2021. *The Wire* published a report on how more than thirty propaganda-spewing websites and video channels had emerged between 2018 and 2020, revealing a long-term plan. The website's investigation found, 'These websites and channels produce unverified and biased content as well as fake news' and also that, 'Most are biased towards the Bharatiya Janata Party; and that, barring two, all produce content in Bengali.' These had a tremendous reach as they could be relayed on WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter. The BJP was far ahead of other parties in this regard, but it was also clear that all political parties relied more heavily on social media campaigns on this occasion. Several

reports also noted that all of them had increased their budget for the social media and many used video conferencing tools to reach out to larger audiences. 'It was reported that on 23 April, Modi held his last rally virtually via 200 LED screens placed in market towns across thirty-six constituencies for group viewing. Both the BJP and the TMC went all out on digital platforms and experts noted how expenditures on Facebook and Twitter reached an all-time high. Parties and candidates not only used their official pages, but numerous allied pages as well to constantly push their agenda.

It is, therefore, interesting to note the observations made by a private group based in Michigan that studied how the Twitter war was carried out during the Bengal elections. In brief, the report pointed out that:

- Mamata Banerjee remained the key focus but attacks on her were careful as her popularity was high and instead focused on the party's failures on Abhishek Banerjee, her nephew.
- The national leaders of the BJP had a larger footprint in terms of engagements compared to the state leaders.
- The Trinamool Congress appeared to have moved towards more social media engagement mainly from August 2019.
- BJP's social media engagements were more effective in the northern parts of the state, whereas the TMC did better in the southern parts.
- The CPI(M) and the Congress also relied on social media and the former focused more on the accounts of organisations of the youth than on individual student leaders.

This time, the social media wing of the Left produced a lot of doggerels, songs, memes and the like that were hilarious. But one of the mistakes that they did was to spend more time in lampooning Banerjee than in targeting the BJP. This did not go unnoticed by the people who stood behind her in this clearly binary contest.

Conclusion

What we can perhaps glean from the experience of the 2021 elections in West Bengal is that ‘ideas’ can really defeat more palpable ‘forces’ and ‘formations.’ The election results in the state—which could not be guessed by anyone until they were out—reveal the silent determination of the largest bloc of voters to act decisively. They must have decided at the grassroots level not to air their views too publicly—which permitted the BJP’s narrative that its victory was certain to continue to prevail and influence the national media. No field study or survey could capture even a whiff of the voters’ minds in any true sense, and this is a valuable lesson for political pundits and for the rest of India.

Obviously, people were apprehensive of the dominance of the central government-backed BJP or of Modi’s terrifying regime and the fact that they did not speak out too much in favour of Banerjee (but voted for her overwhelmingly) is also a revelation that surveys do not get the correct picture all the time. Not everyone in Bengal was sure that Banerjee would get away with her gambit this time and by remaining silent or even misleading pollsters, they were ensuring their own safety. This is what happens when voters feel elections are too well managed by ruthless electoral ‘war-machines,’ backed by unheard-of money power and force. Voters in West Bengal have also shown that to electoral autocrats that they cannot generate periodic consent at will.

Finally, this episode reveals that Modi is not invincible, not even when he puts in all he has. If activists in each state or region choose to look beyond the immediate electoral politics of the Prime Minister, they may be in a better position to re-examine and focus on socio-cultural traditions that militate against communal intolerance. After all, Indian civilisation has outlived merciless divisionists over centuries. In the imminent war to the finish, we may need to give more attention to the intangible bonds and local identities that have withstood violent attempts to homogenise and hegemonise.

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