Invented Tradition and the Politics of Legitimacy: Reinventing Bengali Identity in Contemporary West Bengal

Sunil Mahato

Junior Research fellow in Political Science, Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Vishwavidyalaya, Bilaspur(C.G),

sunilmahato2k23@gmail.com

ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
Research Paper **Accepted:** 27-02-2026 **Published:** 10-03-2026 **Keywords:** *Invented Tradition, Political Legitimacy, Bengali Identity, Sub-nationalism, Symbolic Politics, Cultural Nationalism*	This article examines the relationship between invented tradition and political legitimacy in contemporary West Bengal, focusing on the reinvention of Bengali identity within a competitive democratic framework. Drawing on Eric Hobsbawm's concept of "invented tradition," it argues that traditions are not merely inherited cultural continuities but are strategically reconstructed to consolidate authority, generate consent, and redefine the boundaries of political community. In the post-Left political landscape, rival parties selectively reinterpret historical memory, linguistic pride, religious symbolism, and regional icons to craft narratives of authenticity and moral credibility. These processes are situated within broader debates on sub-nationalism, populism, and symbolic power in India. The study conceptualizes identity as a dynamic and contested arena shaped by ideological transition, regional assertion, and the growing influence of Hindu nationalist discourse. Methodologically, it employs qualitative discourse analysis of political speeches, party documents, visual imagery, and policy narratives to trace how tradition is institutionalized and circulated. The findings demonstrate that invented tradition operates as a central mechanism of democratic legitimation, linking cultural reconstruction to electoral competition and the performative production of authority.

Introduction

In contemporary democratic politics, legitimacy is rarely sustained by institutional authority alone it is also constructed through symbolic narratives that bind political power to cultural memory. Across diverse political contexts, actors invoke history, tradition, and collective identity to stabilize authority and mobilize consent. In this regard, the concept of "invented tradition," formulated by Eric Hobsbawm, offers a critical lens for understanding how seemingly ancient cultural practices are consciously reconstructed to serve modern political objectives. Rather than emerging organically from the past, traditions often function as strategic instruments through which political communities imagine continuity and coherence.

This article examines how invented traditions operate within the competitive political landscape of contemporary West Bengal. Over the past decade, the state has witnessed a significant ideological transformation from prolonged Left Front dominance to a phase characterized by populist regional assertion and intensified national level intervention. Within this shifting terrain, Bengali identity has become a central site of contestation. Political parties seek to define, reinterpret, and institutionalize cultural symbols, historical figures, linguistic pride, and religious narratives in order to claim moral authority and electoral legitimacy. By focusing on the reinvention of Bengali identity, this study argues that legitimacy in West Bengal is not secured solely through governance performance or policy delivery. It is also produced through symbolic performance public rituals, commemorations, visual imagery, and discursive strategies that construct a persuasive narrative of cultural authenticity. Identity, therefore, emerges not as a static inheritance but as a dynamic political project shaped by competition, anxiety, and ideological repositioning.

The article proceeds by first outlining the theoretical foundations of invented tradition and political legitimacy, then analyzing empirical evidence from speeches, party documents, and cultural initiatives. In doing so, it contributes to broader debates on nationalism, subnationalism, and the performative dimensions of democratic politics in India.

Beyond electoral competition, the reinvention of Bengali identity must also be understood within the broader tension between regional distinctiveness and national integration. As political narratives at the national level increasingly emphasize cultural majoritarianism and civilizational unity, regional actors in West Bengal respond by foregrounding linguistic heritage, literary traditions, and historical memory as markers of distinctiveness. This dynamic produces a layered politics of belonging in which subnational identity does not simply oppose national identity but strategically negotiates with it. The resulting

discourse reveals how invented traditions function not only to mobilize voters but also to delineate symbolic boundaries- defining who belongs, who represents authenticity, and who embodies cultural betrayal.

Theoretical framework

This study develops an analytical framework that integrates the concept of invented tradition, theories of democratic legitimacy, and the notion of symbolic power to examine how Bengali identity is reconstructed in contemporary West Bengal. Rather than approaching identity as an inherited cultural essence, the framework treats it as a politically mediated and symbolically produced formation. By linking tradition to legitimacy and symbolic authority, the analysis highlights how democratic power is stabilized not only through institutions but also through cultural narration and performative enactment.

The concept of invented tradition, developed by Eric Hobsbawm, provides the central analytical foundation for this study. Hobsbawm argues that many practices presented as ancient and continuous are, in reality, modern constructions designed to establish symbolic links with a selectively interpreted past. These traditions rely on repetition, ritualization, and formal symbolism to create the appearance of historical continuity. They become especially significant during periods of rapid political and social transformation, when older sources of legitimacy weaken and new actors seek moral grounding. This perspective aligns with modernist theories of nationalism advanced by Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner, both of whom reject primordial understandings of identity. Anderson conceptualizes the nation as an imagined community sustained through shared narratives and mediated communication, while Gellner situates nationalism within the structural conditions of modernity. Together, these approaches emphasize that collective identity is politically produced rather than historically fixed.

To understand the political implications of invented tradition, it is necessary to engage with theories of legitimacy. Max Weber's typology of authority- traditional, charismatic, and legal-rational- remains foundational. Although modern democracies are formally grounded in legal-rational procedures, Weber stresses that authority ultimately depends on belief in its legitimacy. Constitutional rules and electoral mandates alone do not ensure durable consent. In contexts marked by ideological transition and political competition, legitimacy must be continuously enacted and symbolically reinforced. This condition gives rise to performative legitimacy, understood as the ongoing production of authority through ritual, discourse, and public representation. Appeals to tradition allow political actors to embed procedural authority within culturally resonant narratives, thereby transforming institutional power into moral credibility and emotional attachment.

The effectiveness of invented tradition also depends on symbolic power, a concept elaborated by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu argues that power operates through classification, specifically through the capacity to define what counts as legitimate culture and authentic identity. Symbolic power is most effective when its constructed character is concealed and accepted as natural. Cultural symbols function as forms of capital that can be accumulated and converted into political advantage. Through selective commemoration, linguistic assertion, and ritual performance, political actors shape perceptions of authenticity and draw boundaries between insiders and outsiders. Identity thus becomes a structured field of inclusion and exclusion, organized through the strategic mobilization of memory. In this way, invented tradition connects cultural symbolism to institutional authority and demonstrates that legitimacy in modern democracies is produced not only through law and procedure but also through the politics of meaning.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design to examine how invented traditions are constructed and mobilized in contemporary West Bengal to generate political legitimacy. Given the focus on discourse, symbolism, and identity formation, qualitative methods are most appropriate for capturing the interpretive and performative dimensions of political practice. Data are drawn from multiple sources to ensure triangulation. These include political speeches delivered during electoral campaigns, party manifestos, government policy documents related to cultural initiatives, public commemorations, and state-sponsored festivals. In addition, visual materials such as political posters, symbolic imagery, and media representations are examined to trace the circulation of cultural narratives. The study focuses on recurring symbolic themes, including historical memory, linguistic pride, religious references, and representations of regional heritage. The analytical method employed is qualitative discourse analysis. This approach examines how language, imagery, and narrative structures construct meanings of authenticity, continuity, and belonging. Rather than measuring frequency statistically, the analysis prioritizes interpretive depth, identifying patterns in how tradition is framed and institutionalized within political discourse. While the study does not incorporate survey-based or ethnographic data, its strength lies in its systematic examination of symbolic production at the elite and institutional levels. Future research may extend this analysis by exploring voter reception and grassroots interpretations of these narratives.

Historical Context: From Left Hegemony to Competitive Pluralism.

The analysis of identity politics and symbolic reconstruction applied in the modern West Bengal, it is imperative that the phenomenon is placed in the context of the specific political course of the region. The Left Front coalition, which included the Communist Party of India (CPI(M)) was in power in the state since 1977 until 2011. This is a 34-year term of the democratically elected administration of the communist party in India (and, indirectly, it is one of the longest-running democratically elected communist administrations in history). It was the permanence of Left rule, which thus determined not only the institutions of governance but also the ideological and symbolic outlines of the life of the people. In 1977, the Left Front came to power with the help of the Emergency period (1975 to 1977), which had caught popular anti-Congress feeling. Its initial legitimacy lay in the substantive land reforms especially Operation Barga that made sharecropters stronger, and the growth of decentralized rural administrative control by the three-level Panchayati Raj system. These actions put together a stable rural support base and institutionalised a party-society connection that maintained electoral pre-eminence over decades.

The Left developed a unique political culture that was based on secularism, mobilisation on the basis of classes, and intellectual modernity beyond policy efforts. Anti-communalism, labour rights, and progressive literary traditions were the focus of the public discourse. The identity of Bengals at this time was discussed in a rationalist and secular manner as being based on the heritage of the Bengal renaissance and anti-colonial movements. Even though religion did not exclude the world of politics, any blatant religious connotation was usually suppressed in the official political discourse. Nevertheless, in the mid-2000s, the Left started to lose its legitimacy due to structural problems. Industrial investment attempts resulted in controversial land acquisition policies, especially of Singur (2006) and Nandigram (2007). Violent confrontations and claims of coercive state action hurt the moral authority of the Left, particularly in the rural constituencies which had long been its main constituency. These incidences represented a decisive breaking point between the government and some parts of the civil society.

Political Shift After 2011: The 2011 election to the Legislative Assembly in West Bengal was a historic political change, as the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) led by Mamata Banerjee ousted the Left Front after a continuous thirty-four-year rule. This favor of electoral result meant more than the change of turnover; it presupposed a material change in style of politics and symbols orientation. The rhetoric of the AITC, exemplified by the slogan of the Ma, Mati, Manush (Mother, Soil, People) presaged emotive populism and a grassroots orientation which would not follow the ideological framing of the Left in terms of classes. The new government focused on welfare populism, close contact with the leader and

citizen, and the enhancement of regional cultural identity. The support of festivals, celebration of regional symbols, and the propagation of Bengali linguistic pride, through governmental programs, complemented welfare programs aimed at women and students, and the marginalized population.

At the same time, the state ideological environment was defined by the political situation on the national level. Following the 2014 general elections, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) significantly increased its presence in electoral West Bengal, especially in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. The rise of BJP presented an alternate narrative of Hindu nationalism and cultural majoritarianism, increasing the polarization of ideology. As a result, West Bengal became a central place of struggle between regional subnational politics and national politics of identity.

Emerging Ideological Contestation: Since 2011, West Bengal has moved from a relatively stable hegemonic order to a competitive pluralist system marked by sharp ideological rivalry. The AITC has emphasized Bengali subnational pride and regional distinctiveness, often framing political discourse around cultural autonomy within the Indian Union. The BJP, in contrast has advanced narratives linking Bengali identity to a broader Hindu civilizational framework, highlighting religious symbolism and national integration. The weakened Left continues to advocate secular and class-based politics, though its electoral base has substantially declined. This tripolar dynamic has reshaped political discourse. Identity has emerged as a central axis of mobilization, with debates over language, history, and religious practice acquiring electoral significance.

Transformation of the Symbolic Political Field: The shift of Left dominance to the competitive pluralism has radically changed the symbolic political domain of West Bengal. In the Left era, a fairly consistent ideological coherence and organizational discipline led to a more or less unified narrative of secular progressivism. That coherence has since the post 2011 era become dominated by competing symbolic projects. State-sponsored festivals, public celebrations and the cult of local icons have assumed greater political relevancy. Religious festivals like Durga Puja have become visible in political involvement and arguments about historical figures, and cultural stories have been heated. Spectacle, visual image and mediated communication are increasingly established as the means of enacting political legitimacy.

So, the shift between long Left to competitive pluralism has resulted in the conditions that support the reinvention of tradition. The weakened position of previous ideological unity has created room to rival appropriation to authenticity and belonging. The identity in this changed landscape does not shape up as a cultural heritage but a strategic tool that is mobilized in the struggle of political legitimacy.

Reinventing Bengali Identity: Mechanisms of Cultural Reconstruction

Historical Memory and Selective Commemoration: One of the most notable strategies in which the cultural reconstruction becomes achieved is a strategic reinterpretation of the historical memory. The contemporary agendas are often anchored in a supposedly unbroken past by political actors that refer to regional icons, reformers, and cultural figures. Nevertheless, these figures are seldom neutral when it comes to their choice, focus, or presentation.

The central figures of the historical imagination of Bengal include Rabindranath Tagore, Swami Vivekananda, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar. And yet not fixed are their symbolic connotations. These personalities are underlined by various political formations to fit the modern ideological requirements. Tagore can be called a universal humanist to underline pluralism and cultural sophistication, Vivekananda can be an Indian nationalist of the spiritual kind, Bose can be an anti-colonial patriot of the militant type, and Vidyasagar can be a rational nationalist of reformist rationality and social justice. Therefore, a single historical figure is transformed into a point of multiple interpretations. Official commemoration is a reaffirmation of this partial reinterpretation. Symbolic lineage is a constant reminder that is created by the process of naming of roads, institutions, welfare schemes, and public infrastructure after regional icons. Specific narratives are repeated as state-sponsored anniversaries, commemorative events, and official speeches and others are sidelined. With time, this repetition creates an edited group memory whereby some values seem to be inherent to Bengali identity. Notably, selective commemoration carries along with it strategy silences. Radical, subaltern, or dissenting branches of the Bengali political history get little presence in mainstream commemorative practice. Accordingly, the formation of memory is an exercise in the making of boundaries: it is what sorts out which past to remember, to foreground, and whose traces are fading away.

Language, Literature, and Cultural Pride: The language has remained one of the most salient markers of the Bengali cultural identity. In a federal system that formalizes the linguistic states, linguistic self-assertions gain cultural and political saliency. The uniqueness, antiqueness, and literary richness of the Bengali language has been repeatedly predicted by the rhetoric of politics in West Bengal, which further underlines it as a central point of communal identification. Even state-sponsored popular campaigns that promote the introduction of Bengali in bureaucratized and other educational settings add to the centralization of linguistic hegemony. The commemoration of the International Mother Language Day on 21 February, with a direct mention of the linguistic oppression of East Bengal (modern-day Bangladesh), symbolically reiterates the connection of the West Bengal with a broader transnational Bengali culture.

These celebrations present language as a place of sacrifice, resistance and continuity of civilization, rather than as a form of communication.

This symbolic assemblage is aggravated by literary and cultural festivals. The Kolkata international book fair, state sponsored literary festivals and others place Bengal as a center of intellectual life. Reading of poetry, theatrical performances, and musical shows contribute to the memory of the Bengal Renaissance but also create the impression of cultural dynamism today. The platforms are arenas where identity gets played, rejoiced, and reborn. At the same time, lingual assertion may overlap with the political struggle. In the times of acute rivalry, the safeguarding of Bengali language and culture is presented as a defensive move against the allegedly national homogenization of culture. Therefore, language acts as an encompassing signifier of the territorial belongingness as well as a boundary that separates the local and foreign cultural forces.

Religious Symbolism and Civilizational Narratives: Religious symbolism has become more of an issue in the sphere of identity reconstruction, though in complicated and even contradictory ways. In the past, West Bengal had a strong secular ethos that influenced the political culture of the state and was a result of the Left rule. However, in the modern era, religious images and visible rituals have taken on an increased relevance on the political spectrum. The most significant festival of the state, Durga Puja, is the embodiment of this change. Previously, a community-based religious and cultural event, it has now been a platform of political communication and exposure. The fact that Durga Puja is considered by the state as a part of the intangible cultural heritage confirms the fact that it has been more of a symbol of collective pride than a place of worshipping activity exclusively. Political leaders are involved in rituals in a visible way, hence, performing a kind of cultural belonging to the masses people.

At the same time, concurrent ideological rivalry is influenced by rival civilizational plots. Bengal syncretism is foreshadowed in one story of the coexistence of Hindus, Muslims, Christians and others. The other places Bengali identity in the greater Hindu civilization context, and regional pride is made in line with national Hindu majoritarianism. These stories do not just exist side by side, they seek to overtake each other. The bargaining with the national cultural politics is hence of central concern. Regional leadership usually constructs Bengali identity as separate but as the part of Indian nation-state. Conversely, political actors at the national scale might want to absorb the identity of the regions in a pan-Indian cultural discourse. It is the interaction of these positions that creates a dynamic symbolic environment where religious identity is being re-framed.

Visual and Ritual Performance: This process of identity reconstruction does not remain in discourse but is performed physically and ritually in the public space. Political campaigns, state functions and mass cultural events are spectacles in which belonging is theatricalised. Massive crowds show flags, colors, the portraits of leaders and historical heroes, and turn urban spaces into symbolic arenas The element of iconography is critical. Posters, banners, and digital media campaign use images of the regional heroes, maps of the undivided Bengal, motifs related to the folk culture, and depictions of religious deities. Complex ideological messages are transformed into simple visual codes through such imagery. Platform duplication, i.e. in the street corner and in social media, makes specific identity-authority correlations more normalized.

Symbolic performance is also institutionalized through state-sponsored ceremonies. Cultural programmes organized by the government and the issuance of welfare benefits on occasions of national events and celebrations that are leader-focused combine governance with the performance of rituals. The presence of the leader becomes interrelated with the cultural body of the area strengthening charismatic and performative legitimacy. These processes are enhanced through the emergence of digital communication. Short videos, graphic designs, and live-streamed rituals spread quickly, increasing the limits of symbolic performance beyond real meetings. The visual field is thereby a key place where the authenticity, tradition and political authority is engaged in staging and in constant negotiation.

Invented Tradition and the Production of Legitimacy:

Tradition as Moral Authorization: Eric Hobsbawm's notion of "invented tradition" emphasizes that modern political orders often construct ritualized continuity with a selective past in order to naturalize authority. The empirical evidence from West Bengal illustrates precisely this process. Historical figures, linguistic pride, religious festivals, and public memorials are invoked not simply to honor heritage but to embed contemporary political authority within a moral narrative of continuity.

When political leaders associate themselves with figures such as Rabindranath Tagore or Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, they symbolically position their governance within an esteemed lineage of cultural and nationalist virtue. This alignment produces what may be termed moral authorization: authority appears legitimate because it is framed as the custodian of an inherited civilizational mission. The past becomes a normative resource. Thus, Proposition One from the theoretical framework is affirmed: invented traditions operate as instruments that convert cultural memory into political legitimacy by embedding present authority within narratives of continuity.

Emotional Mobilization and Affective Politics: Beyond moral justification, invented tradition generates emotional attachment. Benedict Anderson's insight that nations are "imagined communities" underscores the affective dimension of belonging. Identity is sustained not solely by institutional arrangements but by shared sentiments pride, nostalgia, reverence, and collective memory.

Empirically, the public celebration of linguistic heritage, large-scale participation in festivals, and visually mediated rituals create shared emotional experiences. Durga Puja, book fairs, and commemorative anniversaries are not neutral events; they are affective performances that bind individuals to a symbolic community. Through repetition, these practices cultivate familiarity and emotional resonance. Affective politics becomes especially significant in competitive electoral environments. Emotional mobilization can consolidate loyalty beyond policy-based considerations. Welfare distribution ceremonies staged alongside cultural performances merge material benefit with symbolic belonging, reinforcing attachment to leadership. Political identity thus operates at both cognitive and emotional levels.

Boundary Construction: Insiders and Outsiders: Invented traditions also serve to delineate boundaries. Pierre Bourdieu's notion of symbolic power highlights how dominant actors define legitimate culture and, in doing so, establish hierarchies of belonging. In West Bengal, assertions of linguistic authenticity, cultural pride, and regional distinctiveness implicitly distinguish insiders from outsiders. The defense of Bengali language and heritage often functions as a marker of authenticity. Those who align with this cultural repertoire are positioned as legitimate members of the regional community. Conversely, perceived cultural homogenization or external ideological imposition may be framed as threats to authenticity. The boundary is not always explicitly exclusionary, but it shapes political discourse. This process becomes more pronounced when regional identity interacts with national political narratives. Competing political actors construct alternative definitions of who authentically represents Bengal. One narrative emphasizes plural, syncretic, and regionally distinctive traditions; another aligns regional identity within a broader civilizational or national framework. Each seeks to define the normative center of belonging.

Competing Narratives of Authenticity: In a pluralistic political field, authenticity is not monopolized by a single actor. Rather, it becomes the central terrain of contestation. Different parties claim to represent the 'true' essence of Bengali identity, but they foreground different historical references, religious symbols, and moral vocabularies.

Here, Bourdieu's concept of symbolic domination is instructive. Political actors attempt to universalize their particular interpretation of culture so that it appears natural and uncontested. When successful, their narrative becomes doxa taken-for-granted truth. When contested, the symbolic field remains fluid, generating intensified cultural competition. Proposition Four is therefore reinforced: in competitive democracies, invented traditions are pluralized and contested, producing rival claims to authenticity rather than a single hegemonic narrative.

Subnational and National Identity Claims: A distinctive feature of West Bengal's contemporary politics is the interaction between subnational and national identity claims. Regional pride coexists with participation in the broader Indian nation-state. The tension arises when national political narratives seek to subsume or redefine regional distinctiveness. Subnational identity is often articulated as culturally autonomous yet constitutionally embedded within the Indian Union. This framing asserts dignity without rejecting national belonging. However, when national actors promote a more centralized cultural narrative, regional elites may intensify symbolic emphasis on linguistic or historical uniqueness.

This interaction reveals the multilevel character of invented tradition. Identity is constructed simultaneously at regional and national scales. Political legitimacy depends on navigating both arenas: too much emphasis on regional exclusivity risks isolation, while excessive alignment with national narratives may dilute subnational authenticity.

The empirical findings thus refine the theoretical framework: invented traditions operate across nested political scales, mediating the relationship between local belonging and national integration.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the reinvention of Bengali identity in contemporary West Bengal is not a spontaneous cultural revival but a structured political practice embedded in democratic competition. Moving beyond the assumption that tradition is inherited and stable, the study has shown that tradition is selectively reconstructed, symbolically curated, and strategically mobilized to produce legitimacy. In a context that has shifted from prolonged Left hegemony to competitive pluralism, identity has become a central terrain of political contestation. Historical memory, linguistic pride, religious symbolism, and visual performance are continuously reinterpreted in order to authorize power, mobilize emotion, and define belonging.

At its core, the paper demonstrates that legitimacy in democratic systems cannot be reduced to electoral procedure alone. While constitutional frameworks and voting mechanisms provide formal authority,

durable legitimacy requires cultural resonance. Political actors therefore embed themselves within narratives of continuity, aligning governance with revered historical figures, collective memories, and ritual practices. This process transforms selective history into moral authorization and cultural authenticity into political capital. Tradition, in this sense, becomes a living instrument of rule rather than a passive inheritance.

Theoretical Contributions: This study makes three interconnected theoretical contributions. First, it extends Eric Hobsbawm's concept of invented tradition beyond regime stabilization to the arena of democratic competition, showing that in pluralist systems tradition becomes a contested resource through which rival actors construct competing claims to authenticity and legitimacy. Second, drawing on Pierre Bourdieu, it demonstrates that symbolic power in subnational politics operates through the classification of legitimate culture-via language, commemoration, and ritual-thereby shaping boundaries of belonging and defining who counts as an authentic insider. Third, it refines debates on multilevel identity by illustrating how subnational pride and national belonging interact dynamically: invented tradition mediates tensions between regional autonomy and national integration, revealing legitimacy in federal democracies as layered, negotiated, and symbolically produced.

Empirical Contributions: Empirically, the paper offers a new understanding of contemporary West Bengal. Rather than interpreting recent political developments solely through the lens of electoral arithmetic or welfare policy, it foregrounds the symbolic dimension of governance. The transition from decades of Left rule to a competitive multiparty environment has transformed the symbolic political field. Identity is no longer background context is a primary instrument of mobilization.

By, examining mechanisms such as selective commemoration of historical figures, institutional promotion of linguistic pride, public ritual participation, and digitally mediated imagery, the study highlights how culture and politics are deeply intertwined. The analysis demonstrates that contemporary West Bengal cannot be adequately understood without recognizing how political authority is staged, narrated, and visually performed. The reinvention of identity is not peripheral to governance-it is central to the production of consent and loyalty.

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