



Political Dynamics of Mamata Banerjee's Third Regime in West Bengal (2021–2026): A Critical Analysis

Rajkumar Mandal

Ph.D. Scholar, Atal Bihari Vajpae Vishwavidyalaya, Bilaspur, C.G., India

Dr. T.L. Mirjha

Research Guide, Atal Bihari Vajpae Vishwavidyalaya, Bilaspur, C.G., India

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19543456>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 27-03-2026

Published: 10-04-2026

Keywords:

West Bengal; Trinamool Congress; Mamata Banerjee; Khela Hobe; Lakshmir Bhandar; welfare populism; subnationalism; Hindutva; federalism; political style; gendered welfare; clientelism.

ABSTRACT

The third and arguably the most competitive polarisation of West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee (2021-2026) has played out in a context of heightened competitive polarisation, where the Trinamool Congress (TMC) has tried to at once defend a subnational political identity, stabilise an electorally decisive welfare coalition, and cope with changing centre-state frictions in the increasingly centralised federal The paper will include a critical, literature-based discussion of the politics of the third regime with specific focus on the mobilisation dynamic of Khela Hobe as a performative idiom of political contestation, the proliferation of gender-specific politics of cash transfer through Lakshmir Bhandar, and the general political environment created by the interaction of Bengali regionalism, the adaptive strategies of Hindutva, and the limitations of the subnational Its main claim is that the third regime should not be seen as a mere extension of the so-called welfarist populism, but rather as a conjunctural reaction to an unconventional configuration of forces, which combines a credible national party challenger with organisational ambition on the state level with an increased salience of identity boundaries (religious and regional) and the structural incentives of competitive subnational welfare regimes within the Indian Based on the peer-reviewed literature on the electoral turn in



West Bengal, populism as a political form, subnational welfare regimes, and the political economy of welfare delivery and clientelism, the study generalises the manner in which the third-term strategy of TMC has combined a symbolic boundary-making process with a welfare-mediated process of political incorporation. It concludes that the main political innovation of the regime is that it has consolidated a gendered welfarist relationship between the state and the citizen, and that the innovation also increases the problems of fiscal sustainability, institutional credibility and democratic accountability as the 2026 electoral horizon nears.

Introduction

The 2021 assembly election in West Bengal was broadly interpreted as a high-stakes battle over the definition of region and the viability of federal pluralism, through the prism of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) making great gains in the state during the 2019 general election (Chirakkara, 2022). It is in that conjuncture that the victory of the TMC was not only an incumbent victory but the beginning of a third regime that would deal with a qualitatively different strategic environment: a sustained national-party challenger, one that sought to reorganize the party system in the state, a redoubling of the symbolic contestation over religious and regional identity, and the increasing centrality of welfare politics as a distributive policy and as an elect. When the previous TMC decade can be defined as a post-Left transition in the rule of subnational countries, the third term is more reminiscent of a defensive project of consolidation, which tries to transform the energy of a high-voltage electoral mobilisation into a lasting governing equilibrium (Mahmood & Bhattacharya, 2025).

The paper is specifically on the 2021-2026 period and inquires how the third regime has handled the relationship that existed between mobilisation and governance. The analysis is based on the assumption that modern subnational incumbency is more and more constructed at the intersection of rhetoric and policy delivery instead of treating these two aspects of political action as distinct entities: the political style, identity framing, and programme design co-produce the longevity of a regime (Moffitt and Tormey, 2014; Mudde, 2004). Here the Khela Hobe dynamic is seen not so much as a slogan in itself as a political grammar in a nutshell that reconfigures the electoral struggle into an agonistic act of survival, based on a Bengali vernacular of struggle and popular sovereignty. Simultaneously, Lakshmir Bhandar is not only a welfare programme but a regime-creating tool that stabilises the household consumption and



restructures intra-household bargaining, thus sewing a gendered constituency to the state with the help of routinised cash transfer (Murmu et al., 2026; Kotiswaran, 2025).

Analytically, the third regime puts more theoretical questions about sub national welfare regimes within the federal system in India. It is reasonable to expect that state governments can be characterised by unique welfare structures based on the competition among parties and policy autonomy, which results in so-called subnational welfare regimes (Tillin, 2022). However, these types of regimes have multilevel restraints, such as constitutional power distributions and politically conditioned relations between the centre and states (Swenden et al., 2022). The third term of West Bengal therefore provides an educative example to look into how a regional party-based state government strategically merges identity politics with welfare provision in the tension of competing polarisation and centralizing federalism.

Literature Review

The literature that is relevant to the third TMC regime of West Bengal is clustered around five overlapping literatures, namely populism and political style; subnationalism and identity-making; welfare regime variation and gendered welfare; federalism and multilevel governance; and the political economy of welfare delivery, such as clientelism and local institutional mediation. Combined, these literatures imply that the management of both symbolic boundaries and distributive expectations at the same time becomes increasingly essential in the sustainability of regimes in competitive Indian states, particularly in situations where national parties aim to nationalise state arenas by polarising identities.

The former literature deals with populism as a conceptual category, and more importantly, as a performative form of rule with regard to the West Bengal case. This influential explanation of populism as a thin-centred ideology, the one that is structured around the moral antagonism between the pure people and the corrupt elite, as presented by Mudde (2004) is still handy in understanding how regimes can secure their democratic legitimacy by using simplified moral schemas. Nevertheless, Moffitt and Tormey (2014) suggest that a lot of modern populism should be considered as political style, which is characterized by repertoires of performance that form and maintain political relations. The implication of this shift to West Bengal is that, as politics, Khela Hobe cannot be reduced to the content of a programmatic policy, but an aestheticised mobilisation, which creates the people, opponent and stakes of contest in the terms of an idiom of game and fight, and therefore, translates the structural conflict into a popular story of democratic defence. The politics of the third regime can be read in this interpretive frame as the effort to transform the performative capital of electoral struggle into a governing legitimacy capable of resisting the further pressure of the challengers.



The second literature concentrates on subnationalism, political identity at the region and territorial solidarity in relation to welfare. The article by Singh (2015) in *World Politics* presents an effective theoretical case that the subnational identification can inspire the elites to give more attention to social policy and increase the welfare-producing capacities of the state. Though the comparative model provided by Singh is not focused on West Bengal in particular, its applicability is in its explanation of how territorial identity can be politically fruitful instead of being divisive in nature: subnationalism could give rise to solidaristic grounds of welfare provision and institutional experimentation. The identity-oriented analysis reveals that in the context of West Bengal, the current party competition is organized around a pro-Bengali discourse, which is contrasted with a pro-Hindu discourse of the BJP (Vincent, 2022). Chirakkara (2022) goes on to stress that the region was abnormally salient in the 2021 elections, which indicates that the legitimacy claims of the third regime cannot be discussed outside of a defensive regionalism being phrased against perceived expansionism on the part of the centre.

The third source deals with the welfare in the states of India and how competition between parties at the state level can determine distributive strategy. The argument by Tillin (2022) that India has unique subnational welfare regimes offers a structural perspective through which the case of West Bengal could be discussed instead of the personality-based ones. In case the state governments can make a real difference in the design and implementation of welfare, the third regime of TMC can be tackled as a particular welfare regime formation, with intense defamilialising overtures (in favor of women economic agency) and a politics of visible, claimable advantages. A case study of Lakshmir Bhandar, a gendered, unconditional cash transfer programme launched in 2021 that delivers the transfers through Direct Benefit Transfer to the bank account of women, is presented by Murmu et al. (2026) and is thus directly relevant. The analysis by Kotiswaran (2025) of a parallel women-targeted cash transfer experiment in Tamil Nadu as part of a larger post-2021 nationwide trend, assists in placing the gendered politics of the cash transfer in West Bengal within a broader Indian movement of acknowledging the unpaid and care labour of women via state mediated cash entitlements. The appraisal literature of Kanyashree (an earlier, though ongoing, manifestation of gender-targeted welfare in West Bengal) demonstrates that policies of long-horizon cash transfers can produce lasting effects of empowerment, which lends credibility to the hypothesis that gendered cash transfers become regime-stabilising institutions and not a one-off pre-election gift (Banerjee and Sen, 2024).

A fourth literature takes care of the federalism of India and multilevel governance dynamics in the context of political contestation. According to Swenden et al. (2022), centre-state relations in India can be characterized as the mixture of focusing on the constituent power, as well as multilevel governance, a



view that prefigures the constitutional power as well as the struggle over resources. This model is essential to the opposition-led states: the welfare regimes and identity claims are not in a vacuum but are predetermined by the fiscal, administrative, and political relations with the centre. The fact that Chirakkara (2022) focuses on the federal implications of the 2021 election highlights the fact that the third regime in West Bengal is partially justified as a defence of regional autonomy, although the practical management of the region often involves a negotiating or antagonistic relationship with central institutions.

One fifth literature is the political economy of welfare provision and institutional mediation of distributive politics, such as clientelism. The evidence presented by Mookherjee and Nath (2023) in their analysis of West Bengal rural local government suggests the seriousness of budgetary discretion and political incentives in influencing the targeting of benefits and makes idealised accounts of programmatic welfare more complex. The analytic implication is quite current, despite the fact that the dataset is older: welfare expansion is compatible with opportunistic mediation, and the reform of allocation rules does not necessarily exclude political manipulation. This aligns with the current studies on party regimes in West Bengal indicating the amalgamation of welfare transfers and incorporation of political power by local intermediaries and changing elite structures (Mahmood & Bhattacharya, 2025).

Methodology (Review Approach)

The study takes the form of a critical narrative review, together with an interpretive synthesis method, which aims to relate the available empirical evidence, in peer-reviewed literature, to a theoretically informed description of the regime processes. The review was framed in the 2021-2026 time horizon, although some pre-2021 scholarship was also used where needed to elucidate the structural conditions (centrestate relations and the politics of the welfare delivery) that define the possibilities of the third regime. Instead of a comprehensive coverage of all the streams of publications about West Bengal, analytical relevance to the central focus areas of the third regime, i.e., Khela Hobe mobilisation and political style, gendered welfare consolidation (Lakshmir Bhandar and continuing cash transfer politics), and the changing TMCBJP competitive environment were followed.

The evidence base comprises a total of fifteen peer-reviewed, DOI-indexed sources that were chosen on the basis of political science, comparative politics, gender and politics, and the sources with the focus on development-oriented political economy. The choice of these sources was made to balance between conceptual framing (populism, political style, welfare regimes, multilevel governance) and West Bengal-specific empirical studies (electoral and identity dynamics, elite composition of TMC, Hindutva



trajectory in Bengal, and scheme-level analysis of Lakshmir Bhandar). Considering the delays in publication, the review views the literature as a presentation of structured snapshots of changing dynamics; where the 20252026 political environment is addressed, the analysis clearly separates evidence-based assertions in the literature and tentative inferences based on the existing mechanisms in the literature.

Results and Synthesis

A synthesis based on the literature suggests that the third TMC regime is characterised by a strong connection of three governing imperatives; ontological security in the form of subnational identity, electoral security in form of welfare credibility, and institutional security in form of negotiating multilevel constraints. The most significant modification compared to the previous TMC terms is the height of perceived challenger threat post-2019, which presented the 2021 election as the struggle of region and federal pluralism, as opposed to the usual anti-incumbency management (Chirakkara, 2022). There, Khela Hobe can be interpreted as a politics of mobilisation that concentrates the self-representation of the regime as resilient, local, socially rooted, and at the same time the opponent as expansionism, as culturally dissonant. This mobilisation effect turns out to be politically consequential in the governance process since the popular identification with the regime remains alive, and it assists in transforming welfare delivery into a sustained demonstration of regime legitimacy as opposed to an administrative routine.

Domain of regime-making	Third-term shift (2021–2026)	Mechanism of political consolidation	Key peer-reviewed anchors
Mobilisation and political style	“Khela Hobe” operates as a performative idiom of competitive democracy and resilience, sustaining a politics of confrontation beyond the election moment	Populism-as-style: dramatization, moral boundary drawing, and the construction of an “insider people” against a delegitimised opponent	Moffitt and Tormey (2014); Mudde (2004); Chirakkara (2022)
Subnational identity and party competition	Pro-Bengali discourse is mobilised as a counter-weight to an expanding Hindutva repertoire, producing a two-pole identity contest in the party	Territorial solidarity and identity boundary making interact with competitive polarisation, shaping issue salience and coalition	Singh (2015); Vincent (2022); Chatterjee and Mahmood (2025)



Domain of regime-making		Mechanism of political consolidation	Key peer-reviewed anchors
	Third-term shift (2021–2026) system	formation	
Gendered welfare consolidation	Lakshmir Bhandar (initiated 2021) institutionalises unconditional cash transfers to women, with design attentive to caste-differentiated vulnerability and DBT infrastructure	Welfare as regime-institution: routinised benefits create entitlement and attribution, strengthening a gendered “Didi–state” relationship	Murmu et al. (2026); Tillin (2022); Kotiswaran (2025)
Welfare legacy and long-horizon empowerment	Continued salience of earlier gender-targeted transfers (for example, Kanyashree) provides a policy memory that normalises state-led investment in women’s agency	Policy durability and perceived effectiveness bolster trust and protect welfare politics from being dismissed as purely transactional	Banerjee and Sen (2024); Tillin (2022)
Governance constraints and vertical conflict	Welfare and identity strategies must operate within multilevel governance pressures and adversarial centre–state relations	Political resource struggles and constitutional authority interact; state autonomy is both claimed symbolically and negotiated institutionally	Swenden et al. (2022); Tillin (2022); Chirakkara (2022)
Local mediation and accountability risks	Welfare delivery remains vulnerable to intermediary politics and discretionary practices, limiting purely programmatic interpretations of redistribution	Clientelistic incentives can shape benefit distribution and perceptions, complicating democratic accountability	Mookherjee and Nath (2023); Mahmood and Bhattacharya (2025)

One of the key thematic conclusions is that the political style and welfare design of the third regime are reinforcing building blocks of regime stability. The scholarship of political style explains the importance of slogans and performative idioms: populism as style has to be based on the affect, spectacle and creation of relational proximity to the people, which in turn makes the delivery of welfare explicable as a



personal and moral commitment, instead of an impersonal state activity (Moffitt & Tormey, 2014; Mudde, 2004). The gendered politics of politics asceticism and the need to develop a Didi persona underpin the leadership style of Banerjee, which contributes to the explanation of how welfare is not simply distributed in West Bengal, but rather narrativised as the care and protection, which strengthens a personalistic, but democratically appealing, political relationship (Ray Chaudhury, 2022). In this respect, there is no distinction between Khela Hobe and gendered welfarism; they are the infrastructures of legitimacy, one figurative, and the other material.

The second important discovery relates to the third-term political economy of welfare, particularly, the entrenchment of gender-specific cash transfers as one of the most important political tools of the regime. Murmu et al. (2026) directly conceptualise Lakshmir Bhandar as a gender responsive, unconditional cash transfer program launched in 2021 that simply transfers money to women via bank accounts through DBT but scheme design distinguishes social groups in terms of caste stratified vulnerability. Their results at the district level indicate that the programme stabilises consumption and increases the involvement of women in household financial decision making, despite the fact that patriarchal norms limit the transformative power of women. This aligns with the general studies of women-focused cash transfer politics since 2021 in India, in which such programs are both marketed as empowerment and situated in the electoral campaigns (Kotiswaran, 2025). This change can be interpreted in welfare-regime terms as a defamilialising act acknowledging women as direct beneficiaries and political actors and altering the state-citizen interface in both normatively important and politically strategic ways (Tillin, 2022).

The third discovery is that the political space of the third regime is organised around an identity contest which can not be reduced to communal polarisation. According to Chirakkara (2022), region took charge of the 2021 election in a particular manner, and his analysis places it in the context of more general trends of mandates and federal contestation. The identity competition literature on the modern West Bengal implies a two-axis struggle: a pro-Bengali subnational politics versus a pro-Hindu mobilisation politics, which results in a political space in which peoplehood becomes simultaneously territorialised and moralised (Vincent, 2022). The extended course of Hindutva engagement with Bengal, such as organisational and ideological recalibration through elections, makes the story of straightforward outsider rejection more complex and the interplay between welfare, identity, and organisational structure more significant to the development of challenger capacity (Chatterjee & Mahmood, 2025).

A fourth result highlights the impact of multilevel governance pressures on defining what is politically viable to the third regime. Swenden et al. (2022) introduce a mixed framework of India, which takes both



constituent power and practicalities of the multilevel governance into consideration, and this viewpoint can be used to explain why regional electoral mandates do not necessarily translate into free policy autonomy. The argument of the subnational welfare regime of Tillin (2022) also suggests that welfare innovation is a fact but conditional, it needs administrative capacity and fiscal-political space. The policy of welfare expansion and identity defence of the third regime in West Bengal should be interpreted, then, as acting within a competitive vertical political economy, whereby central institutions and national political discourses can limit, delegitimise or compel the state-based re-calibration of state-level policies.

A fifth finding is related to intermediary politics and accountability risks inherent in welfare regimes. Strict political economy data on West Bengal indicates that distributive politics may be influenced by discretion, political payoffs, and the incentives of local politics, and refutes any presumption that a transition to rule-based budgeting yields an automatic improvement in pro-poor targeting (Mookherjee and Nath, 2023). Although the evidence is not limited to the third regime, it sheds light on an ongoing weakness: the fact that the longevity of a regime through welfare can not only be based on the design of the programmes but also on the credibility of the implementation and how the citizens feel fair. The analysis of the changing elite structure of the TMC and its dualist approach, including direct welfare transfers and investments associated with new commercial elites offered by Mahmood and Bhattacharya (2025), further indicates that welfare regimes may be compatible with, even facilitating, new local political economies that make it difficult to claim egalitarianism.

Conclusion

The third term of Mamata Banerjee in West Bengal (2021-2026) can be critically described as a phase of consolidation where political style, subnational identity, and gendered welfare delivery come to meet and generate a durable incumbency architecture at an increased competitive pressure. The Khela Hobe dynamic is a performative idiom of maintaining mobilisation and a governance that is an extension of democratic contestation and Lakshmir Bhandar institutionalises a gendered welfare relationship that chains women beneficiaries to the state using routinised cash entitlements. Consider the scholarship on populism as a political style, subnational welfare regimes, and multilevel governance, the third regime seems to be more a response to the structural incentives and threats, namely the changing presence of the BJP and the efforts of Hindutva to reposition itself in the political environment of Bengal.

Simultaneously, the essential tools of the regime create the dilemmas that have not been resolved yet politically and normatively. Gendered cash transfers can stabilize households and increase women agency, but it does not require structural changes and welfare-induced legitimacy may increase the



political costs of administrative failure. Identity polarisation can cement regimes but also increase democratic contestation and instability in institutions and intermediary politics and clientelism make pure programmatic interpretations of expansion of welfare difficult. By the time the third regime is properly evaluated in 2026, its legacy may be considered in part not by the mere presence of welfare schemes but by the ability to be incorporated into long-term capable-developing, by the ability to be institutionalized in a competitively federal political economy, and through institutions whose work is widely trusted.

References

- Banerjee, S., & Sen, G. (2024). Persistent effects of a conditional cash transfer: A case of empowering women through Kanyashree in India. *Journal of Population Economics*, 37, Article 66. doi:10.1007/s00148-024-01045-4
- Chatterjee, N., & Mahmood, Z. (2025). Relocating Hindutva in Bengal's political landscape. *Forum for Development Studies*, Advance online publication, 1–13. doi:10.1080/08039410.2025.2568375
- Chirakkara, V. K. (2022). Rethinking regional politics: Beyond the 2021 West Bengal elections. *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 7(3), 507–520. doi:10.1177/20578911221099076
- Jaede, R. (2020). The agonistic struggle between Trinamool Congress and a non-partisan protest alliance: West Bengal and its anti-CAA/NRC movement. *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, (24/25). doi:10.4000/samaj.6916
- Kotiswaran, P. (2025). Women's work, never done, now paid: Assessing Tamil Nadu's Urimai Thogai scheme. *World Development*, 190, 106947. doi:10.1016/j.worlddev.2025.106947
- Mahmood, Z., & Bhattacharya, S. (2025). The roots of a populist regime: Examining the Trinamool Congress in West Bengal. *Studies in Indian Politics*, 13(1), 23–40. doi:10.1177/23210230251324758
- Moffitt, B., & Tormey, S. (2014). Rethinking populism: Politics, mediatisation and political style. *Political Studies*, 62(2), 381–397. doi:10.1111/1467-9248.12032
- Mookherjee, D., & Nath, A. (2023). Clientelistic politics and pro-poor targeting: Rules versus discretionary budgets. *World Development*, 166, 106206. doi:10.1016/j.worlddev.2023.106206
- Mudde, C. (2004). The populist zeitgeist. *Government and Opposition*, 39(4), 541–563. doi:10.1111/j.1477-7053.2004.00135.x



Murmu, U., Datta, S. K., Pal, K., & Roy, P. (2026). Lakshmi Bhandar as a gendered welfare scheme: An analytical case study in Purulia district. *The Social Science Review: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 4(2), 57–63. doi:10.70096/tssr.260402011

Ray Chaudhury, P. (2022). The political asceticism of Mamata Banerjee: Female populist leadership in contemporary India. *Politics & Gender*, 18, 942–977. doi:10.1017/S1743923X21000209

Singh, P. (2015). Subnationalism and social development: A comparative analysis of Indian states. *World Politics*, 67(3), 506–562. doi:10.1017/S0043887115000131

Swenden, W., Saxena, R., & Sharma, C. K. (2022). Understanding multilevel dynamics in India: Constituent power and multilevel governance. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 10(1), 1–11. doi:10.1080/21622671.2021.1972830

Tillin, L. (2022). Does India have subnational welfare regimes? The role of state governments in shaping social policy. *Territory, Politics, Governance*, 10(1), 86–102. doi:10.1080/21622671.2021.1928541

Vincent, M. (2022). Hindus in India, Bengalis in Bengal: The role of religious and regional identities in West Bengal politics. *Contemporary South Asia*, 30(4), 534–550. doi:10.1080/09584935.2022.2110568