



Political Dynamics of Mamata Banerjee's Regimes in West Bengal (2016–2021)

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ABSTRACT

The following review paper is a critical examination of the political dynamics of the 2nd term Mamata Banerjee West Bengal government of May 2016-May 2021 a time of intense electoral competition, aggressive populism, and greater centre-state confrontation. The study uses solely peer-reviewed literature to bring together the available literature on the topic of electoral politics, governance strategies, welfare policies, opposition realignments, identity politics, and federal relations as a way of analyzing how Banerjee consolidated power and at the same time, experienced unprecedented challenges brought on by the Bharatiya Janata Party. The review notes how the West Bengal party system has been transformed into a two-party contest and how the dominance of the Left Front in the years has been deteriorated and that subnationalism has come up as a response to the Hindu majoritarian politics. It critically assesses the populist democratic style of leadership, gendered political performance and policy-based on welfare, which Banerjee utilizes, and their weaknesses in electoral integrity as well as governance. The paper contextualizes the experience of West Bengal in larger arguments of Indian federalism, democratic backsliding and regional opposition to centralization as well. On the whole, it is possible to say that the review suggests the Banerjee regime can be seen as a unique form of subnational populism that has transformed the politics of Bengal bringing up critical questions about the power of institutions, political



Introduction:

The second term of Mamata Banerjee as Chief Minister of West Bengal (27 May 2016 -4 May 2021) took place in the tumultuous political turmoil. Banerjee's All India Trinamool Congress (AITC or TMC) assumed power in 2011 when it overthrew the 34-year reign of the Left Front and made a power consolidation in 2016, effectively uncontested on the state-level. This was referred to as the Mama era as the previously powerful Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left and the Indian National Congress (INC) became sidelined. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in their turn, became the main opposition, bringing the new sphere of rivalry based on identity and ideology. It was a time of high electoral outcomes and aggressive governance, divisive policy discussions and heated opposition politics at the state and national levels. The scholarly accounts of the interpretations of such developments are critically reviewed with references to the interaction between electoral politics, governance strategy, policy activations, and the opposition forces in the West Bengal as proposed by Banerjee. It is based upon a combination of peer-reviewed studies, of both the political science and area studies, to assess the interaction of subnational identity and national politics, the rise of populist leadership, and the social divisions that characterized the politics of West Bengal under the second term of Banerjee.

The Politics of Election and the Emergence of a Bipolar Contest: The 2016 West Bengal Legislative Assembly election once more established the hegemony of TMC. The party of Banerjee secured 211 out of the 294 seats with almost 45 percent of the votes, which were even higher than the best results of the Left Front. In contrast, Left-Congress alliance controlled about 76 seats, and BJP only 3 seats. Her image as the undisputed mass leader of the state was strengthened by Banerjee sweeping the board in 2016, fueled by populist games, personal charisma, and by 2016 she seemed to be the undisputed ruler of the state. According to the scholars, the first half of the second term of Banerjee was marked by a more confident ruling party with TMC displaying an increasing sense of confidence and, it can be argued, complacency regarding its political dominance. This was a turning point in the panchayat (local body) elections held in 2018. The TMC won an extremely vast amount of seats, yet the manner in which it did so brought about a controversial and backlash. The 2018 rural polls in the country recorded the highest levels of electoral violence and intimidation by the ruling party cadres. Opposition candidates in at least 40-45% of the local constituencies were not even allowed to file nominations against them because of coercion. This irrational display of strength (as one of the analyses called it) hurt the democratic credentials of Banerjee, and damaged the image of the leader considerably. The bully-like nature of the tactics by the TMC was later to be legally disputed, but at the same time that the party successfully



fought off the judicial battles to have the results upheld, it took a political price. Essentially, Banerjee had just scored a self-goal - a blow at himself which revitalized a downhearted opposition. Importantly, it was the BJP that took advantage of this opportunity and not the Left or Congress.

The 2019 Parliamentary (lok sabha) elections proved the BJP dramatic rise in electoral politics of West Bengal. The BJP also penetrated a state where it traditionally had been an outsider on a nationwide wave of Hindu national pride under Prime Minister Narendra Modi. The BJP has increased its seat count in Bengal in the parliament by 18 seats in 2019 (up to 42 seats) compared to 2 seats in 2014, making it within reach of the 22 seats of TMC. Its share in votes increased to an anticipated level of 40.7, basically matching the TMC (43 percent). This act broke the long held stereotype of the Bengal immunity against Hindutva politics. Analysts put part of the gains to a drift of the Left wing voters to the BJP. With the CPI(M) and its supporters dwindling, their former Left supporters especially among Hindu voters moved to the BJP as the plausible anti-TMC political force. This is described by Nath and Chowdhury (2019) as a component of an ongoing trend of religious polarisation in post-Left Bengal, which during the Left rule had witnessed a low number of communal conflicts. The identification of voting blocs along identity, they say, is a developmental change in the polity of Bengal unlike the class-based mobilization in the Left era. There were a few incidents of communal tension later in the 2010s: according to studies, incidences of Hindu-Muslim conflict in Bengal had steadily increased over these years, indicating that BJP hard rhetoric worked a bit. Her critics disparagingly described Banerjee as being of Muslim appeasement by the title of Mumtaz Begum, although she attempted to walk the fine line between secularism and Hindu demonstrations of religion (such as reciting Sanskrit Chandi mantras in public). The BJP, in its turn, appealed to Hindus strategically with the agenda of infiltration threat and citizenship tests (NRC) to weed out the illegal immigrants and this appeal resonated particularly with a group of Bengali Hindus and refugees.

Nevertheless, the 2021 West Bengal Assembly election witnessed a spectacular comeback of Mamata Banerjee who won a landslide re-election in her third term. Contrary to a majority of the pre-poll forecasts of a close call, TMC took 215 seats (in a contested 292) with almost 48 percent of the votes, and BJP took 77 seats with about 38. The state legislature was, on the first occasion in decades, left without the left or Congress in office - and underlines that West Bengal had virtually deteriorated into a bipolar fight between the TMC and BJP. The 2021 election was reportedly an epic battle, that was closely observed and actively battled in eight phases. It was a high-stakes and high rhetoric campaign, with Modi and Amit Shah on the offensive, and Banerjee responding with angry personal appeals, even giving



rallies in a wheelchair following an alleged attack. BJP made changes its slogan to Poriborton (change), and TMC responded with a scream of Bengali pride - Bangla nijer meye ke chai (Bengal wants its own daughter) - making a clear identification of Banerjee as the native Didi (elder sister) who withholds the identity of the state against the forces of outsiders. Regional subnationalism was therefore a main policy point of the TMC policy and a rivalry between the Bengali linguistic-cultural identity and the BJP nationalist policy with its pan-Indian (Hindi-Hindu) policy. According to Chirakkara (2022), the question of region took over the 2021 West Bengal elections, unlike other recent state elections in modern times. The victory of Banerjee in 2021 was universally acclaimed as an effective defense of regional autonomy, the federal spirit in India against the BJP-led centralizing agenda. Criticism, however, is encouraged by Chirakkara: he claims that the result, considered in relation to other state elections, and the 2019 general election, points to a more profound process of neutralization of regional politics and federal organization - to a state in which state demands are more and more engulfed in the larger BJP paradigm, to a state of devolved rivalry. That is to say that a decisive victory by a regional party such as the TMC might not actually transform the growing footprint of the BJP national project, rather, it cuts a negotiated niche in it. However, the 2021 Banerjee profile because of the Bengal verdict is indisputably an increase in his national profile. It gave Banerjee a third term with an overwhelming majority mandate and offered her one of the star contenders to the BJP in the national stage. The speculative discourses of a possible federal front organized by the anti-BJP regional parties later tended to focus on Banerjee as a leader, highlighting the influence of the political situation in West Bengal across the country (Vaishnav & Hintson, 2021).

Governance Strategies and Populist Leadership: The key to the success of Banerjee was a unique approach to governance that combined populist welfare policies, administrative centralization and a well-developed personal image. Banerjee created the image of the constantly available, amiable leader - affectionately referred to as Didi - who would personally know the complaints of people. Another notable feature about her leadership is what Ray Chaudhury (2022) refers to as political asceticism. Banerjee, who was raised in a long-standing political culture dominated by men, constructed herself as a no frills self-sacrificing person - dressed in plain white sarees and cheap rubber sandals, who could not afford to indulge in luxury. This act of style was a declaration of innocence and simplicity, which appealed to the conventional demands against the norms of gender leadership. Nativist rhetoric and religious iconography were also a part of her populist self-fashioning. Banerjee also used symbols of the Bengali culture - chanting hymns of goddess Durga, displaying the heritage of Rabindranath Tagore - to support her identification with the majority of Bengali Hindus, but at the same time, she preached the idea of



inclusive secularism. These balancing acts are just an illustration of how female populist leaders need to adopt the traditional ways of exercising power to achieve legitimacy in the androcentric political environment. The way Banerjee has acted like a person of piety and a mother (she regularly models herself as a motherly guardian of the people) has been part of her mass appeal. Meanwhile, Banerjee also concentrated power in her hands on an unprecedented level. As critics observe, she and a small coterie closely guarded some of the major decisions in her administration and there was minimal institutional delegation. The party system was prone to lose its identity to the state so that a tradition of the party-society continued to thrive in Bengal in new forms. In fact, a single legacy of the Left Front was the prevalence of the ruling party in every domain of the public life - what Subhasish Ray (2020) describes as the close politics-administration interface in West Bengal. Under the Left, the penetration of cadres over decades had formed a monolithic apparatus of party-state. The era which Banerjee inherited shared some of these institutional dynamics though, as the Left could no longer survive, the bureaucracy became more unbound at least, at first, without being under party control and this created tensions and realignments in the governance practices (Ray, 2020). Banerjee changed many officials to stamp authority and tended to go around local councils and instead deliver schemes through the bureaucracy or his cronies. This strategy was accused of authoritarian populism: she defended the poor on rhetoric, but decisions were extremely top-down.

The government of Banerjee is most well-known policy-wise through its large welfare programs and developmental populism. In 2016-2021, the TMC regime implemented and proliferated a myriad of programs targeting women, youth, and poor people. The signature initiatives were Kanyashree Prakalpa (cash transfers and scholarships to ensure that girls remain in school and do not marry off early), Rupashree (financial assistance to poor households when a daughter gets married), Sabooj Sathi (school going children getting bicycles), Khadyasathi (rationed food grains to 90% of households at subsidized prices) and swasthya Sathi (basic health insurance to all families). These initiatives brought Banerjee popularity not only in the rural and semi-urban Bengal, but the Kanyashree initiative was even a winner in a United Nations public service award on empowering girls. The extent of welfare coverage of Bengal under TMC has been reflected in survey statistics: as of 2021, more than 90 percent of households stated that they received one or more government subsidies indicating a comprehensive populist bloc of beneficiaries that cuts across caste and religion (Sahoo and Jha, 2021). This sort of populist welfare transfer has made TMC a mainstay of resilience in that it directly established a patronage relationship between Banerjee and the millions of people around the country. According to Chatterjee and Mahmood (2025), Banerjee has at its core used welfare politics to prevent the spread of the BJP in Bengal because



these material gains falsify the attractiveness of the BJP ideology. The welfare populism of the TMC is usually juxtaposed with the BJP populism that was more identity-based; in West Bengal the two populism forms came into direct confrontation. It is indicated by the facts of 2021 that the politics of Banerjee was "delivery-based politics," which out-competed the ideology-based politics of the BJP among a big part of the voters - particularly the poor and women, who were the main focus of her base. As an example, it was found that after the polls, TMC received most of the votes of women, which was helped by the schemes to support the welfare and safety of women (Vaishnav & Hintson, 2021). During the campaign, Banerjee astutely repositioned herself as the daughter of Bengal, as a play on gender solidarity and positioning the race as a battle between a home grown woman leader and foreign male titans. This gendered plea, combined with visual propaganda on social media which portrayed Banerjee as a battered but undefeated woman (the image of a wheelchair) strengthened her populist message of heroic struggle on behalf of the *maa, mati, manush* (mother, earth, people) of Bengal.

Meanwhile, observers have criticized elements to Banerjee governance. The effects of policy in development were both positive and negative. Although welfare schemes have positively affected some human development indicators (e.g. female school attendance increased under Kanyashree), West Bengal was performing poorly on economic development and job creation compared to the rest of the country at this time. The inability of the state to actively pursue industrial investment, which Banerjee pursued afterwards when the land grabbing in Singur was agitated against, resulted in a small number of large industries establishing themselves in 2016-2021, with the already established ones (jute mills and tea gardens) underperforming. As a result, the unemployment issue continued to haunt, and most educated youths were willing to embrace the promise of change by the BJP in the hope of getting a better deal. Moreover, there were corruption claims that afflicted the TMC rule. The scandal (although uncovered earlier) like the Saradha chit fund fraud kept bedeviling TMC leaders and a systemic culture of small scale graft called syndicate raj - in which TMC cartels were alleged to command contracts and take bribes in real estate and government projects - undermined the reformist TMC image. Also revealed by the 2018 panchayat excesses was the issue of intra-party discipline as most local TMC bosses were virtual warlords. Banerjee made some corrective actions after 2019, such as bringing in election strategist Prashant Kishor to professionalize her campaign and introducing outreach measures, such as a public grievances redressal platform called Didi Ke Bolo (Tell Didi) to reach out to disengaged citizens. She also changed party leadership every now and then, bringing younger faces (her nephew, Abhishek Banerjee was made the national general secretary of TMC) to indicate freshness. Such changes alongside



sustained welfare provision must have provided TMC with a way back to the form by 2021 following the 2019 blowback.

Dynamics of opposition and identity politics:

It was a personal contest pitting Banerjee and the BJP as well as a repositioning of social blocs in the political drama of 2016-2021 in West Bengal. As noted, with the fall of the old Left-Congress opposition a vacuum was created which the BJP found easy to fill. The BJP also consciously attempted to unify a new Hindu vote block in Bengal which was always known as state that was characterized by disaggregated caste formations and a composite culture. One of the BJP plans was to organize the non elite Hindu social groups such as Dalits, tribal groups, who felt sidelined by TMC dominated Muslim inclusive politics. This can be illustrated by the emergence of the Matua as an electoral force. The Matuas - low-caste Hindu refugees of East Pakistan/Bangladesh (Namasudras) had been wooed by Banerjee (she appointed Matua leaders to ministerial posts and provided educational institutions with financial aid). But it was the promise of citizenship rights to this community in the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) that pointedly sought to address the long-term security issue of this community regarding refugee status. Sinharay (2022) records the politicization of the founders in the Matua sect over the recent years, making the Matua a politically active and important electoral group. TMC, as well as BJP, was fighting to conform to the feelings of the Matuas. A Constituency dominated by Matua community (Bongaon) in the 2019 Lok Sabha poll shifted to the BJP, which shows the central role of the community. In response, Banerjee launched a very vocal campaign against the implementation of NRC/CAA in West Bengal, attacking on behalf of all Bengalis (Hindu refugees and Muslims as well) the divisive outsider policy of the BJP. This marked the beginning of an antagonistic debate; Bengali subnationalism vs. Hindu nationalism. Vincent (2022) presents a very valuable point of view on this conflict of identity. According to a qualitative research of the multi-ethnic organizations, Vincent concludes that although a strong Hindu identity is a precondition of the voter going towards Hindutva ideas, a strong Bengali identity is a stronger determinant of political choice in West Bengal. The people of Bengali origin have both. This was shown by the 2021 election, where the districts that had the greatest sense of Bengali cultural pride swung to TMC decisively, which soaked BJP religious polarization to a degree. However, there is no doubt that identity politics has become more intense. Nath and Chowdhury (2019) caution that communal polarization, which was confined in Bengal previously, has been transferred into the visible sphere of politics, and invented traditions, rumors, and divisions are driven by it. The minority Muslims



(approximately 27 percent of the state) continued to be mostly in support of Banerjee and her TMC when they perceived it as a barrier to the majoritarian politics. The Hindutva movement led by the BJP that featured renowned religious rallies and Jai Shri Ram slogans as its rallying cry tended to other those who were not Hindus; this also influenced Muslims to align to TMC in 2019 and 2021. Though there were some dissatisfaction among Muslims in Muslim-majority districts in 2021 due to local TMC feuds, Banerjee party secured an estimated 70 percent or more of the Muslim vote - a near bloc vote which neutralized BJP gains in some Hindu quarters.

The residual Left Front and Congress tried to run a joint front (with a new Muslim-centric party, ISF) in the 2021 election but they lost all seats. This was a historic Left wipeout, which indicated that the politics of West Bengal was permanently exposed to a new bipolar paradigm. This, some commentators call the ultimate act of Tory politics, in which the idioms of class struggle are replaced by the idioms of populism, identity, and personality based mobilization. The rise of Banerjee himself West Bengal is no exception, and the shift in the political landscape throughout the years reflects the change in Banerjee as a political figure. Her regimes have alternated between left-wing economics (welfare distributions, rural jobs programs) and right-of-center politics (aggressive police response to armed rebels, personality cult politics), which are difficult to sort on the traditional dichotomy. This fluid populism has been both a two-sided sword, enabling Banerjee to cut across social divides (cutting across caste and to an extent, religion, through their recourse to Bengali identity), but it also has the drawback that government turns into a personality cult. Critics tell against her government of not having institutional reforms and being dependent on patronage networks to stay afloat. Indeed, this was the case as Banerjee gained more popularity and was accused of nepotism and dynastic ambition - particularly, her raising her nephew to party prominence, to which BJP leaders capitalized to take her down (making her look like Pishi - aunt - promoting her family). The skill of Banerjee to resist such attacks and to save the trust of masses was greatly contributed by her credibility which took decades of street politics and activism to earn it. Despite the massive election machinery of the BJP party, personal connection to the electorate, mainly in village regions, and among women, made the difference in the favour of Banerjee.

Centre-State Relations: and National Implications:

One point of interest in 2016-2021 was that relations between West Bengal and the Union government led by the BJP took a combative turn in terms of centre-state relations. One of the strongest critics of the BJP on the national stage was Banerjee, who was an ally of the BJP in the late 1990s. Policy disputes were common, whether it was demonetisation in 2016 (which Banerjee loudly criticised as anti-poor) or



the rollout of the Goods and Services Tax (she objected to the central government encroaching on the fiscal autonomy of the states) and most notoriously, the CAA/NRC in 2019-20. There were enormous demonstrations in West Bengal against the Citizenship Amendment Act and the proposed National Register of Citizens. According to the ethnographic work by Riccardo Jaede (2020) about the anti-CAA/NRC movement in Bengal, there was a complex dynamic: it has started as an anti-partisan, grassroots turnout of Muslim organizations and left-liberal ones that managed to sway the masses and, although the state government, impose its agenda on it. First, the movement of protest was sensed when Banerjee TMC attempted to take over the protest and lead it. She held her rallies and sat at a dharna (sit-in) against CAA, projecting the image of the minority rights activist. But Jaede adds that the state government by assuming the leadership became a subject to the demands of the movement. Banerjee was forced to make a blanket assurance that NRC would by no means be permitted in Bengal and that the implementation of CAA would be frustrated - in effect putting the machine of the state on the side of the protesters. In this episode, Banerjee displayed her political prowess to co-opt dissent: she found herself on the same side as a potentially anti-incumbent protest, but at the same time, she made sure that it was her administration that fulfilled the goals of the protesters and not her own, something that is easy said than done. The battle with the Centre over CAA/NRC added to the depiction of Banerjee about BJP as an authoritarian party that violates the inclusive social fabric of Bengal. It Deeply embedded her personal caste with Modi and Shah, with Banerjee regularly causing scenes, be it her dramatic refusal to attend some federal meetings, or her demonstrations in Delhi, or the CBI (federal investigative agency) trying to interrogate officials of the TMC, which she branded as political revenge.

This stage has been described by scholars as a period of combative federalism. The relations between the centre-state and the others remained on the margin of open confrontation unlike cooperative or even competitive federalism. The acrimony in the 2021 election campaign and its aftermath did not find a new level. Not only did Banerjee accuse central agencies of harassing her party but she even went on a rampage and even demanded the ousting of the Governor of the state (a central appointee) on grounds of being a BJP agent. BJP central leaders, in their turn, often implied the imposition of President's Rule (central takeover) in Bengal on the law-and-order matters. Following the TMC's victory in 2021, claims of post-poll violence (TMC and BJP workers fighting each other) had turned into another point of contention: the BJP said its supporters were being attacked by Banerjee cadres, and Banerjee said that this was being politicised. The Union Home Ministry went to the extent of dispatching investigative teams to examine violence in Bengal which was an interference in the issues of a state. According to Verma (2021), these episodes highlight a new path of Indian federalism which comes out of Bengal - a



very combative position of a state government towards the Union, stretching the bounds of the federal system. The defiance of Banerjee - at war with the federal government and its institutions virtually so - brought a new twist to Indian politics of opposition. It showed that strong regional leaders were able to mobilize subnationalist feelings against the BJP juggernaut, at a minimum at their own states. The national picture of the 2016-21 processes in West Bengal is a decentralized threat of majoritarian politics: even though the BJP has taken control of most of India, the state of Bengal (and others to a limited extent) have demonstrated that strong regional identities and welfare-based populism can serve as a counter to the full homogenization of Indian politics under a single party. With that said, the case of Bengal also leaves one wondering the sustainability of this model. According to Chirakkara (2022), the verdict in Bengal is being celebrated as a triumph of federalism, which overlooks the fact that the BJP is still a strong contender in the state (with a majority of the vote at more than 38%), and that forces of homogenizing national politics are not disappearing. The politics of West Bengal, however, is at an intersection point of optimism and pessimism: It provides a model of a pluralist opposition that could be built by a regional populist, yet, also, it demonstrates how weak such opposition could be upon socio-economic fault lines and the scale of BJP organization.

Conclusion:

The 2016-2021 in West Bengal was a kind of mini-India, which reflected the changing political fault lines within the country. The state under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee was characterized with a mixture of populist politics and cut-throat campaigns that transformed the state party system and echoed across the country. The academic works that have been analyzed offer an analytical approach to these developments. Using expansive welfare populism and subnational pride Banerjee regime built an emotional connection with the voters, and is a strong example of how a female populist leader can redefine traditional leadership paradigms. It was an effective way to keep the BJP at bay - as seen in 2021 - building an alternate narrative of Hindutva based on regional identity and regional inclusive development. However, the unification of the identity politics (Hindu vs. Bengali, insider vs. outsider) also signaled the departure out of the past of West Bengal and was pregnant with the cleavage of societies. The death of the Left Front and the emergence of a bipolar TMC-BJP competition marked a structural overhaul in which ideology was replaced by personality-based populism and communal calculations. The internal politics of the TMC - its individualism, and, in some cases, coercive party politics - also caused concern over the topic of democratic government, despite its success in achieving real social good through its welfare programmes. At the same time, the aggressive nature of the challenge

by Banerjee to the central leadership of the BJP, accentuated the nature of tension in the federal covenant of India, where state politics may not only influence but also be influenced by heavier authoritarian tendencies. Overall, the second term government of Mamata Banerjee has shown the effectiveness and the traps of populist subnational politics. It defined once again the significance of the regional ethnic political cultures in the Indian democracy - that a shrewd regional player with a ground-level credibility can still emerge successfully through the appeal to historical identity and welfare politics, despite the overwhelming national party. Meanwhile, the experience of West Bengal is a lesson in the potential weakness of such government: to keep a popular coalition that is broad-based, the government has to walk a fine line between communal tension, intra-party control and performance legitimacy. By 2021, Banerjee had succeeded and her model of governance, a remarkable mash-up of "Didi"-style welfarism and Bengali nationalism, had prevented the Hindu nationalist "wave" at the borders of West Bengal. It is yet to be seen whether this will be a temporary stumbling block or the more permanent alternative avenue of Indian politics. What is more obvious is that the politics of West Bengal that Banerjee has been involved in has left a distinctive mark on the discourse of Indian democracy that has depicted the ongoing struggle between a pluralist regional politics and an expansionist centralizing power at a converging point in the Indian politics.

Figure 1: Key Electoral Outcomes in West Bengal, 2016–2021

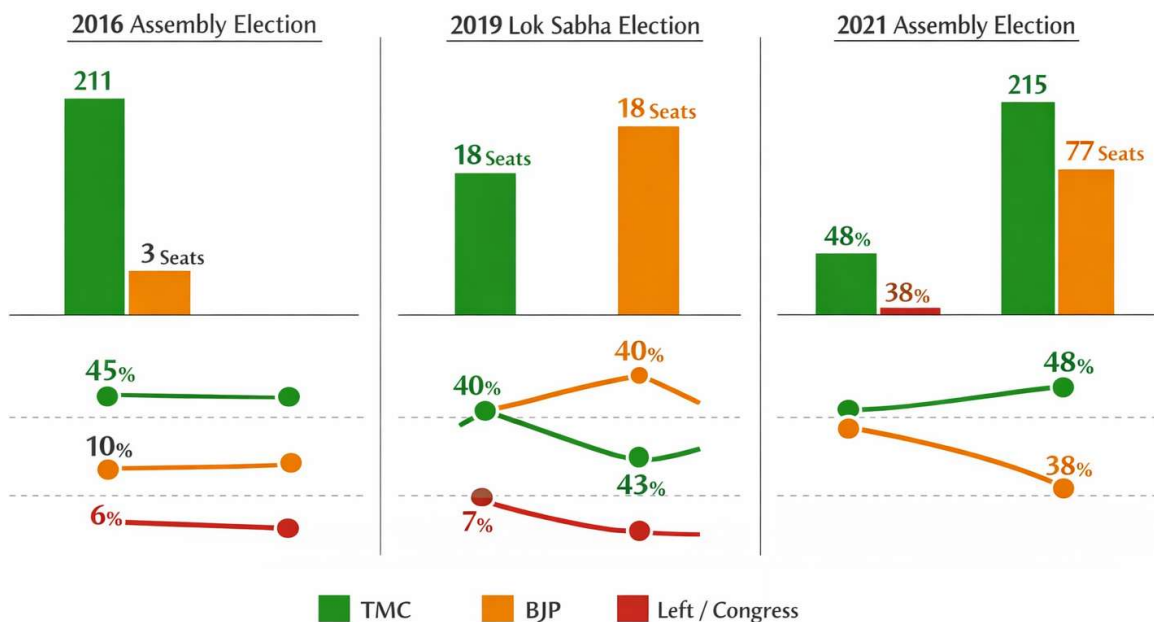




Figure 1: Key Electoral Outcomes in West Bengal, 2016–2021. *This figure charts the seat counts and vote shares of major parties in the 2016 Assembly election, 2019 Lok Sabha election (West Bengal segment), and 2021 Assembly election. The data highlight the BJP’s surge between 2016 and 2019, and the TMC’s resilient comeback in 2021 (Left and Congress virtually eliminated by then). TMC’s vote share (in green) rose from ~45% in 2016 to ~48% in 2021, with a dip to ~43% in 2019; BJP’s vote share (in saffron) jumped from ~10% in 2016 to ~40% in 2019, then slightly declined to ~38% in 2021. Seat tallies show TMC’s dominance in 2016 (211/294 seats) and 2021 (215/292 seats) and the BJP’s dramatic increase from 3 seats in 2016 to 18 (of 42 Bengal Lok Sabha seats) in 2019 and 77 assembly seats in 2021. The figure underscores the swift bipolarization of Bengal’s party system during this period.*

Table 1: Selected Scholarly Analyses of West Bengal’s Political Dynamics (2016–2021). *This table summarizes key peer-reviewed studies that inform a critical understanding of Mamata Banerjee’s second-term regime. It outlines each study’s focus and main findings.*

Study (Author, Year)	Focus	Key Insights
Bardhan et al. (2012)	Left Front’s 2011 defeat – causes	Left’s decline due to stagnant governance and inability to adapt to new aspirations, creating space for TMC’s populism. Identifies <i>excessive pragmatism</i> and weakened grassroots connect as factors in Left’s fall.
Bhattacharya (2021)	TMC under Mamata 2011–21 (“Paxrivartan”)	Banerjee’s populist regime initially swept away opposition; overreach in 2018 local polls (violence against opposition) backfired, reviving the opposition (especially BJP). Highlights the irony that a leader who promised change ended up adopting coercive tactics, hurting her image.
Chatterjee & Mahmood (2025)	Hindutva vs. subnationalism in Bengal	West Bengal remained resistant to BJP’s Hindutva due to TMC’s populist welfare programs and Bengali cultural nationalism anchoring TMC’s support. Distinguishes <i>political Hindutva</i> (electoral BJP) from <i>cultural Hindutva</i> (RSS grassroots work); notes that even when BJP falters electorally, Hindutva’s socio-cultural spread (through festivals, schools, etc.) continues, albeit Bengal’s regional identity blunts its political growth.



Study (Author, Year)	Focus	Key Insights
Chirakkara (2022)	2021 election & implications for federalism	Regional identity was central to 2021 outcome; TMC's win seen as defense of federalism. Argues that a pattern of BJP's dominance has led to a " <i>neutralization</i> " of truly autonomous regional politics – state mandates become about negotiating space within an expansionist national regime, rather than fundamentally challenging it. Suggests Bengal's verdict highlights problems in India's federal structure, where even regional victories must be understood in the broader context of BJP's national predominance.
Hussain & Mir (2024)	Contemporary party dynamics in West Bengal	Provides an overview of West Bengal's political evolution into a TMC-BJP dominated system. Emphasizes the <i>cultural-historical roots</i> of Bengal's politics and notes a gap in literature on integrating governance outcomes with political analysis. Calls for holistic study of how TMC's decisions on decentralization and policy reforms have shaped development – indicating that beyond headlines of elections, the nature of governance under Banerjee deserves scholarly attention.
Jaede (2020)	Anti-CAA/NRC protests (2018–2020)	Ethnographic account of citizenship protests in Bengal. Finds that a marginal civil society alliance (leftists + Muslim orgs) set the agenda against NRC/CAA, which the TMC co-opted. Banerjee's government <i>hijacked</i> the movement to lead it, but in doing so had to accede to the movement's core demands (rejecting NRC, etc.), demonstrating an unusual state–movement interplay. Concludes that the protest alliance, though fragmented, forged a symbolic unity (a "moral community") that momentarily transcended political divides – and that the TMC's patronage politics had to adjust to this grassroots pressure.
Mahmood & Bhattacharya	Socio-economic profile of TMC's	Analyses the background of TMC's political elite by compiling data on candidates' caste, wealth, education. Indicates that



Study (Author, Year)	Focus	Key Insights
(2025)	regime	despite TMC’s pro-poor rhetoric, many of its legislators come from relatively privileged backgrounds (e.g., notable number of businesspersons and landowners), reflecting a “populist regime” rooted not in grassroots cadres alone but also in patronage of local elites. This speaks to the franchise-style politics of TMC – accommodating powerful local actors under a populist umbrella – and raises questions about internal power structures and policy priorities (e.g., land reforms stalled under TMC despite Left’s legacy).
Nath & Chowdhury (2019)	Communal polarization in post-Left era	Argues that West Bengal has seen the rise of identity-based politics since the Left’s exit, part of a wider national trend. Uses case studies of local riots to show how communal cleavages are being deliberately constructed (“manufactured”) through rumor and revivalist tactics. Highlights that under Left rule, communal incidents were low, but after 2011, instances of religious tensions have grown – indicating an erosion of Bengal’s exceptional communal harmony. Suggests that the Left’s organizational weakening removed a buffer that once curbed communal forces, thereby enabling the BJP’s Hindu nationalist mobilization and a counter-reactive Muslim consolidation.
Ray Chaudhury (2022)	Mamata Banerjee’s populist gendered leadership	Examines Banerjee’s leadership through a gender lens. Shows how Mamata Banerjee navigates the “ precarious balancing act ” of a female populist in a male-dominated sphere by adopting what is termed <i>political asceticism</i> . She projects herself as a pious, self-abnegating leader (“ordinary” lifestyle, religious devotion) to align with traditional expectations, while wielding charisma and emotional mass appeal. The article finds that Banerjee’s self-representation as a sacrificial, maternal figure (‘ Didi ’) has been effective in redrawing leadership norms in Bengal, though not without contestation (rivals label



Study (Author, Year)	Focus	Key Insights
		her autocratic or question her authenticity). Concludes that Banerjee’s case broadens understanding of how gender and populism interact – her performance simultaneously challenges and conforms to societal norms, helping her mobilize women and lower-class voters.
Sahoo & Jha (2021) (ORF)	2021 election themes and strategies	Though a policy paper (not academic journal), their study identifies key themes in the 2021 Bengal election: subnationalism vs. Hindutva , the impact of welfare schemes (e.g., TMC’s “ Duare Sarkar ” doorstep service campaign that delivered benefits to neighborhoods), organizational strength (TMC’s booth-level network vs. BJP’s cadre influx from RSS), and the role of political violence. They argue that Banerjee’s deft combination of identity narrative (“Bengali pride”) and last-mile welfare delivery built a formidable electoral firewall. The BJP’s campaign, while robust, was hurt by outsider perception and failure to offer a local face. Also notes that the Election Commission’s conduct (staggering polls in 8 phases) and the COVID-19 context became politicized issues. Overall, portrays the Bengal contest as setting a template for how regional forces can halt the BJP, via a mix of administrative populism and cultural assertion.
Sinharay (2022)	Caste and religion – Matua community	Focuses on the Matua sect (lower-caste Hindu refugees) to illustrate the “ politics of belonging ” in Bengal. Describes how the Matua community’s religious icons were elevated into symbols of Dalit assertion, and how this group emerged as a swing vote bank courted by all parties. Finds that the Matua vote became crucial after decades of marginality – they leaned towards BJP in 2019 due to CAA promises, though the community’s support is fluid and also tied to local patronage by TMC. This study underscores the entry of caste dynamics



Study (Author, Year)	Focus	Key Insights
		(long muted in Bengal) into electoral politics, as parties construct new social coalitions. It also reflects how identity politics in Bengal is multi-layered: not just Hindu vs. Muslim, but also internal cleavages like caste among Hindus (Namasudras seeking recognition) have come to the fore.
Vincent (2022)	Interaction of regional and religious identity	Uses survey and qualitative data to analyze how Bengali regional identity interacts with Hindu religious identity in shaping political attitudes. Concludes that identification with Bengali identity tends to override religious identity when the two come into conflict in political context. Thus, a Hindu voter strongly proud of Bengali culture is more likely to support TMC's regionalist appeal, even if they also have a Hindu identity – whereas a Hindu voter with weak Bengali identification is more susceptible to BJP's pan-Hindu appeal. This finding illuminates why the BJP, despite high Hindu mobilization, did not sweep Bengal: the <i>pull of Bengali nationalism</i> proved stronger for many. Vincent's work thereby validates Banerjee's strategic emphasis on language and culture. It suggests that West Bengal represents a unique case where subnational identity can act as a break on religious majoritarianism , a dynamic of interest for comparative politics and theories of ethnic voting.

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