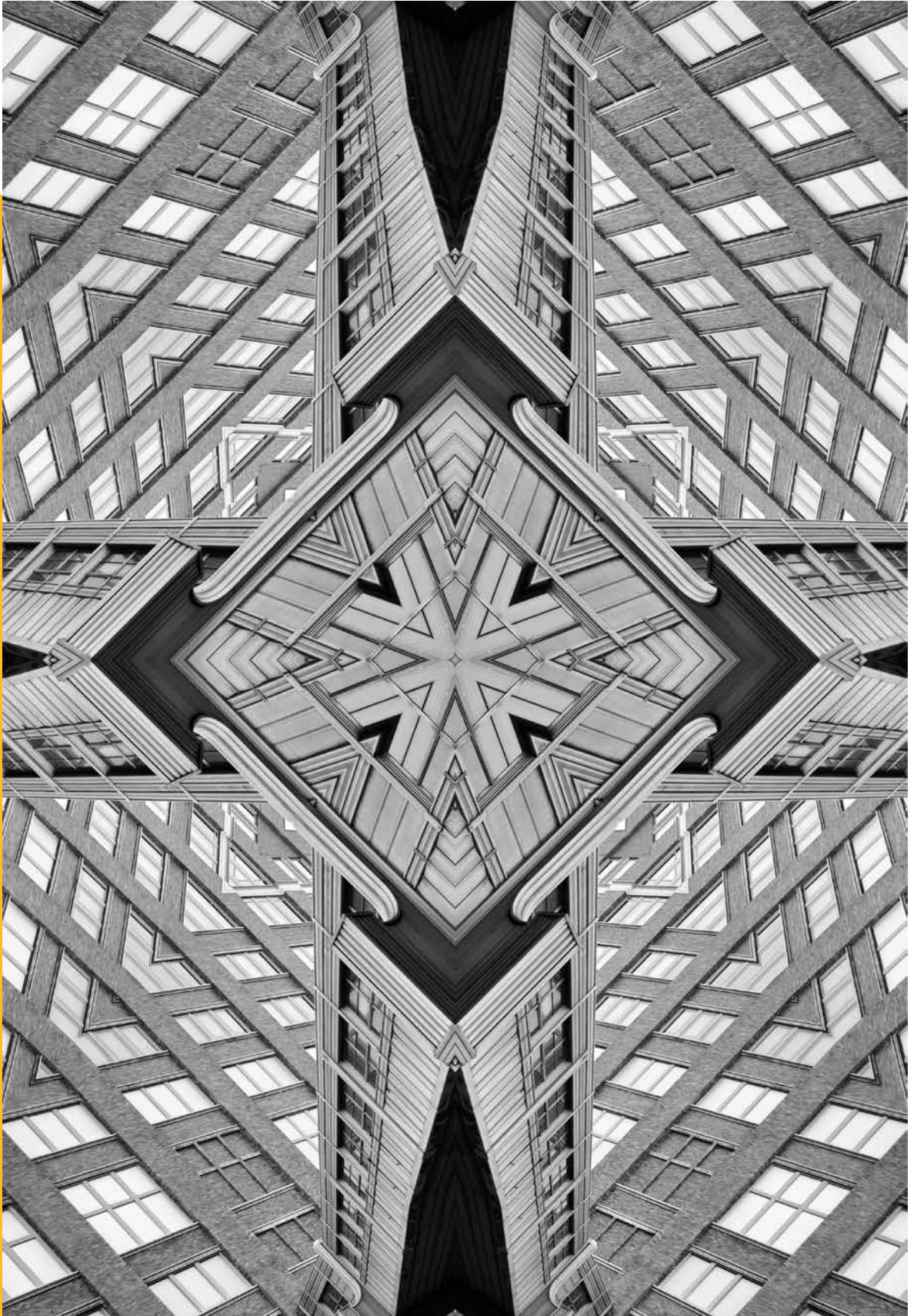


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Bengal through the Decades: The More Things Change, Have They Stayed the Same?

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Abstract

West Bengal is conducting a massive, potentially historic eight-phase state legislative assembly election between March and April 2021. This paper gives a historical account of the different factors that are influencing the conduct of the elections, including the economic challenges facing the state, unabated political violence, and the plight of religious minorities. It also examines so-called ‘Hindu nationalist’ and ‘Bengali sub-nationalist’ sentiments—how they have overlapped and decoupled across the past centuries, and the roots of the current acutely hostile electoral politics. The paper is an examination of West Bengal’s past, rather than a forecast of the possible outcomes of the legislative assembly elections.

The 2021 West Bengal Legislative Assembly election is expected to be the state’s most historic polls since 1951-52, when the first state election was conducted. This paper examines the issues that matter the most in the 2021 election—in the context of its past—focusing on the unprecedented rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) over the last decade. It finds that the fundamental issues are the same as those that influenced the first polls 70 years ago.

In the 1951-52 elections, the Indian National Congress (INC) scored a clear victory with 150 of 238 seats; the Left bloc and the Right alliance battled for the runner-up position. From the Right bloc, the All India Bharatiya Jan Sangh (BJS) and Akhil Bharatiya Hindu Mahasabha (HMS) got 13 seats—a performance that the Hindu Right failed to repeat over the next seven decades. The Left, led by the Communist Party of India (CPI), bagged 41 seats and emerged as the “main opposition party,” its leader Jyoti Basu becoming the Opposition leader.¹

The 1951-52 election charted the course of post-Independence politics in West Bengal as it began a 16-year run for Congress,^a which confronted post-Partition crises such as communal tension and food shortages. The Left continued to gain momentum and the Right was marginalised: in 1957, both BJS and HMS failed to win even one seat, as the combined Left bloc, the United Left Election Committee, won 85 of the 252 seats. Thereafter, the centrist Congress and the Left controlled electoral politics in West Bengal. Even in 2016, the Right only won three out of 294 seats.

It was only in the 2019 Lok Sabha election that the Hindu Right could take a lead, winning 121 of 294 Assembly segments.^b It was the best performance of the Right parties before or after India’s independence in either divided or undivided Bengal.

a Congress in West Bengal was led at the time by Bidhan Chandra Roy (who served as Chief Minister from 1950-62 and a favourite across party lines) and Atulya Ghosh (CM for 1950-58 and 1960-62).

b Assembly segments are basically Assembly seats in Lok Sabha polls. But this paper uses the term “segments” to indicate that it is not a Vidhan Sabha election when seats are mentioned.

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Before 1947, West Bengal was a segment of united Bengal, and its people wanted their separate state. Bengal's dream was foiled by central Congress, backed by Hindu nationalists, around the time of Independence. The strongest critics of this M.K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru-led Congress, such as Chittaranjan Das, Sarat Chandra Bose, and Netaji Subhas Bose, were thus regarded as heroes in Bengal in the early 20th century. Kolkata's reluctance to accept Delhi—the Centre—was rooted in an understanding that its homegrown stalwarts were being marginalised by the national heroes. Bengal, with Maharashtra and Madras, resented the loss of their former pre-eminence or joined with no more than lukewarm enthusiasm in some of Gandhi's most idiosyncratic causes, such as hand-spinning.² Despite Bose having been elected legitimately, in his bid for a second term as Congress president on 29 January 1939, Gandhi persuaded “13 of the 15 members of the Congress Working Committee to resign rather than work with Bose.”³ The national Congress' machinations became a key point of contention for Bengal. The consequent rift in the Centre-state relationship continued to grow and has informed much of contemporary Bengal's political narrative. As historian Percival Spear notes, “Bose never recovered his position in the Congress, and with him Bengal.” Even in 2021, the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) and the BJP are seen as competing for Bose's legacy.

Economic Debilitation

In *The Agony of West Bengal* (1971), his seminal book on the collapse of Bengal's economy, journalist Ranajit Roy illustrated how the Congress government at the Centre debilitated West Bengal's economy between 1947 and 1966, when it governed both the state and the Centre. The process, Roy claimed, started “on the very first day after Independence,” when the Centre “on the stroke of 12 o'clock the previous night, slashed the state's share of the jute export duty,” the main cash crop of Bengal.

Congress was blatant with its policy to turn east India, Bengal specifically, into a labour hub, downgrading its importance as an industrial core. The policies were so damaging that even Congress' Chief Minister of West Bengal, Bidhan Chandra Roy, a family friend of Nehru and personal doctor of both Gandhi and Nehru, systematically objected to the Centre's economic plan in the state. Bengal bore the first brunt of the Centre's “vacillating policies,” evident in the grants approved for refugees from east Pakistan.

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“Do you realize that this sum is ‘insignificant’ compared to what has been spent for refugees from West Pakistan?” Roy wrote to Nehru on 2 December 1949.⁴ In the same letter, Roy noted that in March 1948, Bengal’s share of the income-tax receipts had been reduced “from 20% to 12%” and “distributed to other provinces. This, despite Bengal and Bombay “contributing almost the same amount towards the Income-Tax Pool.”⁵ Roy’s letter highlighted how West Bengal was dealt a blow on the night of 14-15 August 1947, as the “divisible pool of the income tax reduced from 20 per cent to 12 per cent while Bombay’s share was pushed up from 20 per cent to 21 per cent and composite Madras State’s from 15 percent to 18 per cent.”⁶ The same night, the Centre “slashed [the] state’s share of the jute export duty.”⁷

In a dozen such mails exchanged between Roy and Nehru over a decade, the former chronicles the economic deprivation meted out to Bengal and how it enhanced the state’s agony. Neither Nehru nor Sardar Patel (who also exchanged letters with Bidhan Roy around the time) challenged these allegations. In one such letter to Patel (dated 30 December 1949), Roy narrated the problem of West Bengal, which remains just as true in 2021 as it was a year after the Independence: “... the main trouble with the people of Bengal has been (a) Want of food, (b) Want of employment (c) Want of land in which they, particularly the refugees, could settle themselves.”⁸ Two decades later, journalist Ranajit Roy would pick up where Chief Minister Bidhan Roy had hit a roadblock, providing further descriptions of how the INC had damaged Bengal’s economy.

According to the Central government’s “Statistical Abstract India 1952-53,” Bengal had “a larger number of registered factories than Maharashtra and Gujarat combined (bilingual Bombay State).”⁹ and India’s Census of Manufacturing Industries (1951) stated, “West Bengal

“In the 2021 West Bengal election, the fundamental issues are the same as those that influenced the first polls 70 years ago.”

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had the highest number of registered factories – 1493.”¹⁰ Yet, a 1969 Industrial Licensing Policy Committee report indicates that during 1956-57, Maharashtra received 2,741 licences to set up factories, while West Bengal only received 1,649.¹¹ The Centre’s reluctance to allow Bengal to set up factories, slashing taxes and preventing the state from imposing road taxes (Octroi) despite its huge trading market, while granting this facility to Mumbai and Delhi, are only a few of the many Congress policies that caused the destabilisation of industries in east India. Further, in the first four Five-Year Plans, Bengal’s share was reduced while the combined share for Maharashtra and Gujarat was increased.¹²

The biggest blow was the equalisation of freight on iron and steel in 1956. As Roy noted, “The railways own internal rates, calculated per tonne-kilometre are Rs 30 for a tonne of steel from Jamshedpur to Howrah. And Rs.120 for a tonne from Jamshedpur to Bombay, that is, Rs 150 for these two tonnes of steel. Under the Centre’s new policy, the Calcutta user is made to pay Rs 75 and the Bombay user also Rs 75.”¹³ Thus, Bengal lost the price advantage owing to its location. Since the formula was nearly the same while calculating coal tariff, coal-producing states such as Bihar and Bengal lost their competitive advantage.

The impact of these policy changes was seen within a decade. “In 1947, West Bengal accounted for about 27% of the gross industrial output,” which dropped to 17.20 percent in 1960-61.¹⁴ In terms of per capita income, Bengal slipped from the first position to the eighth by 1966. Its literacy rates dropped, too. A homegrown industrialist, B.M. Birla, in his comments at the Delhi Press Club in July 1970, noted that the Government of India was “mainly responsible for the lack of growth of industries in West Bengal”¹⁵—a rare observation for an industry leader.

In the ongoing 2021 elections, while the BJP has highlighted the “flight of capital” from Bengal during the time of the Naxal Movement (1960s and 70s), the Left’s rule (1977–2011)^c and the AITC’s failure to develop an industry-friendly environment, it has failed to mention the role of Congress in debilitating the state’s economy. What the BJP has noted is that the state’s contribution to India’s growth has dipped consistently over the last 50 years.

The loss of capital in Bengal can be attributed to certain detrimental policies that have been implemented over the decades—something that was not under the control of the Left, which was the Opposition in the

c The reasons being lawlessness and militant trade unionism.

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State and had no presence at the Centre. Indeed, Jyoti Basu and the Left targeted the Congress for decades precisely for this reason, often using only two words in their criticism: “*Kendrer Bonchona*” (Centre’s Deprivationist Policies). This sustained drain of resources from the state—first by the British¹⁶ and then by a Central party—had its impact on the politics of Bengal.

In light of the BJP’s—and earlier, the AITC’s—allegations against the Left, the latter’s role in further stimulating capital flight from Bengal must also be examined. Ajoy Mukherjee, the first non-Congress chief minister of Bengal (1967), was sworn in thrice in the position between 1967 and 1971. Despite being backed by the Communists, Mukherjee cited the Left’s anti-industry position for his resignation, singling out the Left’s continuous and sustained attacks on “small and medium industries.” In a statement made on 2 October 1967, only seven months after he took office, Mukherjee wrote, “Owing to Communists role, 60-70 thousand people are jobless. Uncountable number of small and medium industries ... are about to disappear.”¹⁷ He blamed the Communists, who were co-governing the state with his Bangla Congress, for two types of violence. One, engaging in *gherao*, applying force and adopting other uncivilised policies to ruin Bengal’s industrial resources, under the pretext of “industrial disputes.”¹⁸ Two, attempting to snatch the farm produce of landowners.¹⁹ A month and a half later, Mukherjee resigned.

Thus, both Congress and the Left contributed to the resource-drain in Bengal, which had a profound impact on state politics and eventually caused the focus to shift to winning votes by running populist forms of government due to lack of jobs in the formal sector. The refugee-influx-driven abrupt growth in population and policy-driven resource drain led to small holding of land, encouraged by both Congress and the Left, making it increasingly difficult to acquire land for any project.

It is noteworthy that Kolkata, being the central city of the east and central India, receives high numbers of migrants from many states in the region. The pressure on land has heightened exponentially. When Bengal is compared with states such as Gujarat in their respective capacities to draw investments, observers often forget that Gujarat is about 2.5 times the size of Bengal, with little over half of Bengal’s population. Bengal’s density of population is highest only after Bihar (amongst states with 100 million people), making it impossible to acquire land without acrimony. Former chief minister of the state, Buddhadeb

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Bhattacharjee, made one serious attempt to acquire land for industry but failed. Being still an agrarian economy, Bengal has many more people living and surviving on tiny land parcels, compared to states such as Punjab, Gujarat or Haryana. Moreover, a systematic opposition to investments has further stymied the state's economic growth. The CPI-M-led Left, too, attempted to import investments towards the last years of its tenure but multiple ailments—including a three-decade old anti-incumbency—destabilised the government.

Mamata Banerjee rose to prominence on the back of a land movement that has a long legacy in Bengal—especially south Bengal, where the AITC is still strong. She refused to nudge the status quo and acquire land for industry, and her strong anti-industry stance slowly removed the last vestiges of an industry-centric growth in the state. After coming to power, the AITC government declared that “under no circumstances will the government acquire land for

the industry.”²⁰ Banerjee was also aware of the nature of landholding in Bengal and how difficult it is to negotiate with a few dozen families to acquire even half an acre of land. The AITC has never tried to acquire land for industry, nor was it ever serious about connecting with big business, given its Left politics.

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Famine and Food Shortage

Post-Independence Bengal's politics has been substantially shaped by two famines (1770s and 1943) and food shortages. It is deeply entrenched in British land and land-revenue policies, as Partha Chatterjee notes in his essay, “Agrarian Structure in Pre-Partition in Bengal.”

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“We must begin with a consideration of the conditions imposed on Bengal’s agrarian economy by the fact of colonialism. The primary and abiding interest of the colonial government in the agriculture of Bengal ... was the extraction of a part of the surplus in the form of land revenue.” In 1901, British journalist William Digby wrote, “[T]ime was not more distant than a century and a half ago, when Bengal was much more wealthy than was Britain.”

The roadblocks to business in the state can be traced all the way back to the Famine of 1943, engineered by the British and the “commercial agents, backed by governmental authority and martial force, never ceased scouring the countryside for rice under various rubrics of war-time authority” disrupting “long-established trade relations, and fuel a thriving black market.”²¹ Thereafter, Congress continued the plunder, advised by its coterie of business leaders. Eventually, Bengal developed an aversion to “commercial agents,” the traders and the brokers, and an apprehension about Delhi-centric parties. Bengal’s aversion continued to grow in the years following India’s Independence, steered by the memory of food shortages during the famines. It gave the Left leverage to lead massive movements (1959, 1966) centred around the fear of food shortage.

In the post-Independence period, a succession of chief ministers spent time and energy to streamline the food policy, as it became the main theme of social and political upheavals. A policy of land reform across the country and the state was initiated to offset any risk of food shortage and to provide reasonable livelihood options, as indicated in the Bengal government paper, *Beneficiaries of Land Reform* (2003). Both Congress and the Left acquired land, turned big land parcels to smaller ones, and distributed them—often without the official papers required to establish land rights—to ensure that small farming families, marginal farmers, and landless farm workers managed to survive on their own as famine remained in the public memory.

The Chinese Influence

By the early 1950s, China’s Mao Zedong had become a global star, following the Chinese Revolution and his land-reform programme. In *A History of the Modern Chinese Revolution*, historian Ho Kan-Chih notes that “the people’s revolutionary war had been completed” by the early 1950 “and the poor peasants’ lack of land and shortage of means of production” led to the government promulgating “the Agrarian Reform Law” on 30 June 1950. By the end of 1952, China had completed its land reform, except in the areas inhabited by its ethnic minority.

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Sitting in Kolkata or Siliguri-Darjeeling, hit by acute food shortage and police excess, without much of a direction, nothing could have inspired the Bengali youth more than the success story in China, not too far from the northern borders of Bengal. China, for its part, lauded Bengal's peasant movement "through editorials in the People's Daily and Radio Peking broadcasts" while criticising the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M) for aligning with United Front governments of 1967.²²

However, then Indian Administrative Service (IAS) officer, D. Bandyopadhyay, who had joined the service in 1955, noted that the situation in the quasi-Communist Bengal was similar to the one in Communist China. Bandyopadhyay, who later served as a Rajya Sabha MP of the AITC, was one of the key officers of the Communist-led government from 1960s to 1980s and stood at the forefront of Operation Barga in Bengal—an exercise to record the names of the sharecroppers and ensure their legal rights to produce. In his memoir, *Land, Labour and Governance*, he observes, "In land scarce, labour abundant economy with a high degree of concentration of landownership and inegalitarian distribution of productive assets, fundamental structural change in the form of radical land reform provides the only sure and swift method of reducing rural poverty." Bengal vested "1.17 millions of agricultural land" till 2007, which was the highest in the country, noted Bandyopadhyay.

Bandyopadhyay also argued that his immediate superior, Land and Land Revenue Minister of Bengal (1967) Hare Krishna Konar, was a "charismatic and intrepid CPI-M peasant leader," who was too much of a radical even for the Marxists and was on the point of being thrown out of the party for having clandestinely met Ho Chi Minh and the top Chinese leadership soon after the Communist Party of India split. Konar was "an admirer of Mao Zedong's tactics and strategies of mobilising the peasantry for revolutionary purposes – a political line quite different from the classical Marxist route of industrial proletarian revolution."

Hit by acute food shortage and police excesses, without much of a direction, nothing could have inspired the Bengali youth more than the success story of China's land reform.

The American Influence

Around this time, in the 1940s, an American agricultural-economist embarked on his mission of re-shaping the land policies, mainly in countries where Mao's land policy has had an impact. Wolf Isaac Ladejinsky, a Jewish-Russian immigrant economist in the US who lost his family estate to the Bolsheviks, had dedicated his life to stopping the march of Communism. Soon after the Chinese Revolution, Ladejinsky went on an India tour in 1952 and "red flagged" the rise of Communism in India.

In his "Selected Papers of Wolf Ladejinsky: Agrarian Reform as Unfinished Business," Ladejinsky noted that despite legislations in the states, Communism could not be thwarted in India unless the exploitation of the peasants was stopped. During his 1952 trip, he asked one of the peasants in Tanjore district, "What would you do if the landlord were to refuse to accept this particular rental as ordained by the state legislature? To whom would you go for redress?" The reply was simple. "I would go to the Red Flag Association."^d It confirmed Ladejinsky's belief that the problem of unemployed landless peasants—a problem that remains today, in 2021—would lead the country to Communism. While India did not move towards Communism, Bengal did, possibly because the land movements were solidly entrenched in the system by the time Ladejinsky visited Bengal.^e

However, the ideology suffered a rift in Bengal: Konar shunned violence and appealed to Charu Majumdar, who led the armed left-wing Naxalite Movement, "to postpone the militant movement in north

d No mention in Ladejinsky's papers about any particular party referred to as the Red Flag Association, only that it was a Communist party with a "membership of about 200,000" in Madras and Tanjore that "everybody knows." An e-document of CPI-M noted that from the 1940s, in parts of east Tanjore (later Thanjavur), a movement was "led by the Kisan Sabha, the Agricultural Workers' Association and the Communist Party of India—and, after 1964, by the Communist Party of India (Marxist)."

e Buoyed by his success in Japan and in parts of east and south Asia, where he convinced the leadership that peasant participation in politics and a successful top-down, government-controlled and legislated land reform can throw a spanner in the Mao-esque uncontrolled, bottom-up land acquisition drive that threatened to dismantle the existing ruling class, Ladejinsky returned to India on a World Bank project in 1964 and canvassed for government-controlled land reform replacing forceful land acquisition. It is not clear when the economist visited Bengal for the first time and also whether he interacted with the Congress and Communist leaders in charge of land reform in the state to tell them about America's concern related to the land question in India; but he definitely visited Calcutta in the August of 1971 as he penned an eye-witness account of the influx of 6 million refugees in Bengal out of a total of 8 million from East Pakistan and advocated for emergency aid to World Bank for Bengal. He continued to visit the state during the 70s.

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Bengal for a while,” noted Bandyopadhyay. Konar’s and his party CPI-M’s ideology conflicted with Majumdar’s, creating two strands of Communism in the state. One eventually came to power in 1977, and the other—Communist Party of India–Marxist-Leninist (CPI-ML), founded in 1969—went underground to lead an armed uprising. Half a century after their demise, Bengal continues to oscillate between the politics of Majumder and Konar.

Meanwhile, the massive drain of resources for a span of 210 years (1757–1967) had turned a land “more wealthy than Britain” to a poor province. The investment in Bengal dried up, much before the state became almost entirely reliant on micro, small and marginal initiatives and borrowings. Politics over the next several decades revolved around food and the theft of food grains, small construction and materials supply business, illegal small savings projects and petty criminal enterprises such as controlling fish ponds in both 24 Paraganas, stone quarries or sand mining. Indeed, in 2021, it looks like a proverbial “third world economy.” However, it is interesting how these ‘businesses’ have evolved as issues in this election when they have existed for several decades due to the lack of formal jobs. The myopic policies inflicted on the state, resulting from the assumption that an economic policy applicable to a small hamlet can also be applied to a state of 90–100 million people, have had a severe impact on peoples’ lives.

Political Violence

Political violence has historically been a key driver of Bengal’s politics, both before and after independence. Such violence is spurred primarily by economic crises, which in turn have resulted in unemployment in the formal sector. Over the years, young women and men, especially in the urban and semi-urban areas, have come to believe that the best way to ensure steady income is to align with a political party. Thus, there is a state-wide dependence on politicians and political parties for livelihood, which in turns fuels political violence.

Almost all political parties in the state exploit the cheap services of the unemployed youth belonging to the lower economic classes, and engage them to control the voters and manage locally owned “businesses.” The young men, usually employed by the syndicates, are deployed to manage polling booths and trained to physically confront the Opposition. During Communist rule (from 1977 to 2011), such men (and some women as well) were organically connected to what was referred to as “party machinery.” Political scientist Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya

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observes: “A range of political manoeuvrings in India’s postcolonial democracy involves management and representation of political society on a daily basis. In a state like West Bengal the CPI (M) with the help of its well-orchestrated, locally embedded and vertically connected party-machinery performed this function better than others.”²³ With the CPI-M-led Left Front keeping in place a “well-orchestrated” system, political violence could be calibrated.

Historically, political violence spikes during elections but a steady stream of such violence—in the form of killings, filing of fraudulent cases, or damaging of property—occurs throughout the year. Human rights activists Sujato Bhadra and Purnendu Mondal concluded that between 1977 and 2010, the ruling party CPI-M “killed” 531 people of “various political parties.”²⁴ In the same period, more than 2,000 workers of CPI-M were also killed.

Quoting a report from CPI-M’s mouthpiece, *Ganashakti*, Bhadra and Mondal claimed that 2,647 CPI-M workers were killed between 1977 and 2010. Many more workers of other leftist political parties were killed, too, in addition to CPI-M workers. A total of more than 3,955^f political murders were orchestrated across West Bengal²⁵ during this period that coincides with the Left’s tenure (1977-2011).

The authors concluded that “more or less every political party has blood in their hand.”

According to the same authors, in the initial years of the Left’s rule, at least 676 CPI-M workers or leaders were killed by Congress^{g,26} while in its later years, various Naxal factions and the AITC killed more than 500 CPI-M workers.²⁷ An unaccounted number of party workers of mainly Marxist-Leninist (ML) parties and other outfits were killed in the late

“There is a state-wide dependence on politicians and political parties for livelihood, which in turns fuels political violence.”

f This reported figure likely falls short of the actual number of killings.

g Exact years are not mentioned by the authors, but Congress was not powerful enough after the late 90s to attack the Left.

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1960s and much of 1970s to quell the Naxalite uprising. There is no exact data, but a few informal surveys indicate that a large number²⁸ of workers of various ML parties were killed. Between July 1971 and January 1972, at least 71 persons were killed in police action only in Birbhum district,²⁹ including members of the police services.

The legacy of movements and violence is thus a continuing, well-documented process in Bengal, preceding India's Independence. Towards the end of 2020, the three key parties (the AITC, the BJP and CPI-M) shared with the author detailed lists of their workers and leaders killed over a period of time. The AITC produced a list of 1,067 workers killed since the party's formation, between 1998 and 2020, broadly averaging 90 killings a year, or a death every four days. The BJP's list furnished names of 93 persons killed between June 2013 and July 2020, and it may have gone up since then, in the run-up to the 2021 Assembly Poll. Home Minister Amit Shah mentioned a figure of over 130 in February 2021.³⁰ The CPI-M furnished details of 615 of the Left Front's workers killed between 16 May 2009 and 18 November 2019, averaging 62 annual deaths around the time the Communists lost power in the state.

A small, arbitrary sampling by the author of 11 telephonic interviews, indicates that the killings can be attributed to mainly three reasons: a) area and resource control; b) political animosity; and c) revenge for past actions of the deceased and family disputes when political affiliations are used to establish property rights. The majority of the killings can be attributed to *area and resource control*. Many could have been prevented if people's dependence on political parties was reduced and political sectarianism brought down. The 2021 elections are no exception; already, it is marred with violence.

The Rise of the BJP in Bengal

Hindu Nationalism and the Bengal Polls

According to Professor Ashis Nandy, a “strand of Hindu nationalism” has been evident in undivided Bengal since the early 19th century. “This strand was relevant during and even before Banga Bhanga [1905, first Partition of Bengal] and there was an element of love for Hindu nation-state in Bengal. But perhaps in those days, many used to nurture such sentiments, inspired by Europe.”³¹ Nandy notes that the BJP—an openly a Hindu nationalist party—would likely have wanted to capitalise on this strand, but did not succeed for the longest time.

Bengal’s 19th-century history is peppered with two prominent ideologies: deeply Hindu nationalism and an anti-imperialist radicalism, with both often advocating for armed resistances. Famously, Narendranath Dutta (Swami Vivekananda) and his brother Bhupendranath exemplify the two strands, with the former advocating for Hindu nationalism and the latter aligning himself with Communism, in favour of armed uprising. He even prepared a document—a road map—to initiate Communism in India and submitted it to Vladimir Lenin after the Russian revolution (1917). Bhupendranath edited a popular revolutionary nationalist paper, *Jugantar* (1906), which later became the mouthpiece of Anushilan Samiti, an underground revolutionary party, born in an “*akhara*” or gymnasium, and men’s neighbourhood clubs in north Kolkata.”^{32,33} The history of Anushilan Samiti is significant, as it highlights the strands in Bengal’s politics.

A branch of the Samiti went on to form the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), a Left Front constituent in the 2021 election. On the other hand, a 21-year-old Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, the founder of Hindu nationalist Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), was sent to Calcutta in 1910 to “pursue his medical studies and—unofficially—to learn

“A strand of Hindu nationalism has been evident in undivided Bengal since the early 19th century.”

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terrorist techniques from the Bengali secret societies” and he “made his way into the inner circle of Anushilan Samiti, to which only an elect few had access.”³⁴ Many 19th-century Bengali men—often those connected to families who benefitted from the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793—developed their ideas of Hindu nationalism based on the European Christian idea of nationalism, to which they were exposed while studying in England. Educationalist and nationalist Brahmabandhab Upadhyay, who was a friend of Rabindranath Thakur, is a good example. Thus, Hindu nationalism did not arrive with the BJP in Bengal in the 21st century; it has been rooted in the undivided province for the last 200 years, albeit with latent aspirations to have a Bengali nation-state.

In the middle of the 20th century, the leading voice of Bengali Hindu nationalism was Bidhan Chandra Roy, who favoured the idea of having *Bande Mataram*—and not *Jana Gana Mana*—as the national anthem.³⁵ Syama Prasad Mookerjee, the founder of *Bharatiya Jana Sangh*; and Nirmal Chandra Chatterjee, the president of the Bengal chapter of *HMS*, were two others.³⁶

Yet, despite Bengal’s reasonably long history of experimenting with nationalism, the community rejected nationalist parties after the first election in 1951–52. Subsequently, one key reason for the Left’s rise was the *Tebhaga Movement* in the 20th century, the peasants’ agitation aimed at securing two-thirds of the farm produce for the producers. Bengal has a long tradition of peasant uprising but “the organized movements started around the middle of 1930s, when *All India Kishan Sabha (AIKS)* was established,” noted social researcher-scholar Maitreya Ghatak.³⁷ The farmers’ movement led by *AIKS*, the peasant wing of the *Communist Party of India (CPI)*, was further intensified by the 1943 famine and the influx of refugees in the aftermath of the 1947 Partition. This consolidated the Communist base in Bengal.

Octogenarian Sudhanshu Mandal of Baduria, in North 24 Parganas, told the author how the Communists helped them settle in Bengal, after his family,^h along with millions of others, were uprooted from *Muladi* in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). “They [the *CPI*] gave us a lot. This land, established as a refugee camp, turned later into a residential

^h He was ten years old at the time.

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colony. Thanks to the CPI and the CPI (M) we could build our homes and we can now be considered a part of the growing middle class.”³⁸ Such projects to rehabilitate uprooted Hindus helped Communists gain a foothold in West Bengal, offsetting the growth of the nationalists.

Indeed, the Left managed to turn crises into issues. Throughout the 1950s and the 1960s, the Left ran campaigns centred around food shortage or incidents of police firings in Bengal, building a robust party network. After coming to power, the Left followed it up with a vision to develop a land reform programme and a plan to nurture Bengali nationalist sentiment through wisely designed programmes. A good example was to drop English till the fifth standard to promote Bengali language learning and teaching.

The Left also learnt how to run a state on all fronts, from peasants to workers, along with management of mass organisations and Assembly sessions. Once in power, their focus was to structure a robust party machinery that would facilitate their stay in power for three decades.

Multiple other factors have been documented by scholars and writers over the last seven decades.

The Decline of the AITC

The AITC’s two main advantages are Mamata Banerjee, and her welfare schemes. Banerjee continues to be ahead in the race in the 2021 elections, as she was in the eight elections (panchayat, assembly, parliament together) since 2008, when the AITC made its mark in the Panchayat poll. While the party’s victory or defeat depends on Banerjee alone—some of her welfare schemes have done exceptionally well, e.g. plugging leakages as assessed by international development monitoring and funding agencies—the AITC has another key advantage, i.e. being a local party, it can easily connect with its voters. This year’s results will be a significant indicator of the extent to which the BJP and the RSS’ field-level workers have managed to replace AITC’s cadres.

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However, the anti-incumbency bias creates a strong disadvantage for the AITC. Multiple allegations—from highhandedness to corruption—against top as well as low-level leaders have put a strain on the AITC’s position in the state. Banerjee’s call to return “cut money” or bribes taken to deliver the benefits of government projects is a clear admission of the corruption rampant within the party.ⁱ In May 2020, irregular relief distribution in the aftermath of the cyclone Amphan significantly damaged the AITC’s credibility; the party has since failed to dispel the perception that there was corruption in the relief distribution. Another key disadvantage of the AITC is the party’s second-in-command, MP and youth leader Abhishek Banerjee, the nephew of Mamata Banerjee. He is often described as the Achilles’ Heel of the chief minister, and the 2021 elections will be a test for how well he can deal with a burgeoning BJP in Bengal.

An interview conducted by the author with Anukul Maiti, a tea-seller in Bibekananda Park in south Kolkata, indicates the popular points of dissatisfaction with the AITC. Despite having no real grievance against the party, Maiti wants the party to lose for three reasons: One, the sidekicks of the party leaders have “become big,” unlike in the Left. Two, all parties should be defeated after five years, “like in Kerala.” Three, the AITC has become “very arrogant.” The sum total of the complaint corroborates the overall observation, i.e. the AITC has failed badly to manage anti-incumbency, unlike the Left in Bengal or the BJP in Gujarat. Political scientist Ranabir Samaddar notes that the AITC is run on “an amorphous ideology,” which has been Banerjee’s biggest strength in garnering support but is also turning out to be a significant disadvantage in 2021 by progressively weakening the organisation.

The Shift towards the BJP

In 2021, Hindu nationalists have finally managed to gain ground in the state’s politics, overcoming shortcomings. The old bases of RSS have been activated. The support, input, and dedication of the members of RSS and its affiliates are the BJP’s most valuable assets in the 2021 West Bengal election. The body has been active in Bengal for a long time

i Interestingly, many of those that featured at the top of the list of Bengal’s premier scams have now jumped ship to join the BJP. Since the AITC was created as an antithesis to regimentation, while combating the Left, it is, like Congress, a platform where many can walk in without much dedication or loyalty and, equally, walk out without guilt.

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and has established a network in nearly all spheres, e.g. socio-cultural programmes for all sections of the society. While such programmes do not have a direct electoral impact, they act as a force multiplier for the BJP. The RSS is likely to act as a key bridge between the electors and the elected, as it did in 2019.³⁹

With the help of the RSS, the BJP can monitor fund distribution, identify problems, and plug gaps at the booth level while gathering grassroots information. The one area where the RSS–BJP machination has scope for improvement is the lack of understanding of ground-level politics amongst low-level RSS officials.

Over the last decade, there has been an outstanding jump in the BJP’s vote share in West Bengal. Across the last two elections, the drop in the Left’s vote share has been accompanied by an almost equal rise in the BJP’s. On several occasions in the last two decades, BJP senior leader and former Governor of Tripura Tathagata Roy has noted^j that the “best possible way to bring [the] BJP to power in Bengal is to ensure Mamata’s victory. She is the most meritorious student of the Left on Bengal, and only she can dislodge the Left, which would facilitate [the] BJP’s rise.” This comment has proven prophetic. In 2011, the BJP received four percent votes in West Bengal. In 2014, this went up to 17 percent, on the back of a Hindutva wave led by Narendra Modi, but dropped substantially to 10 percent in the 2016 Assembly Polls. However, in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, it jumped to 40 percent—a leap of 23 percent so far, the highest in Bengal’s history.^k According to the post-2019 poll survey conducted by the Delhi-based *Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS)*’s Lokniti Programme, the Left lost 23 percent of Hindu votes between 2014 and 2019.

^j In conversation with the author of this paper.

^k Amongst the BJP’s possible disadvantages is its refusal to implement the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), 2019 (despite passing it in Parliament in December 2019). It remains to be seen whether the Dalit refugees, with substantial votes, again polls for BJP in 2021 or switches side as they were keen to see the CAA being implemented. The Dalit refugees—about five million in size—overwhelmingly voted for the BJP in 2019.

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Meanwhile, Prime Minister Narendra Modi is the BJP's biggest advantage, with his effective and ceaseless campaigning. This time too, between Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah, the BJP is expected to address 70 rallies in March and April.^{l40} The series of rallies will keep the BJP ahead in the race, at least in the areas where Modi will be campaigning. Dilip Ghosh, the BJP's president in West Bengal, has successfully connected with Dalits and the indigenous population in only five years, especially in parts of the area referred to as Rahr Bangla,^m and has emerged as a crowd puller. "He is the most well-travelled politician in the state in this election," says Professor Samaddar.

However, he is not yet a match for Banerjee, and the party must rely on PM Modi in the state, despite running the risk of damaging Modi's image in the event of a defeat. According to former BBC Correspondent and former Labour Party Communications Director Lance Price, the BJP's ability to mount campaigns from ordinary, micro-managed, people-to-people conversation (*Chai pe Charcha*) to a larger than life, technology-driven campaign amplifying messages at an outstanding speed and volume is unlikely to be matched by any other political party. The AITC is failing to match it too, and their campaigns are almost entirely focused on the chief minister at this stage. For the BJP, the risk is that such a mega-campaign may hurt Bengal's sub-nationalist sentiments, with the citizens interpreting the aggressive campaigning as an attack on a Bengali leader.ⁿ

While the anti-incumbency bias against the AITC is another key advantage for the BJP in the 2021 elections, it will not be able to make full use of two significant corruption cases, the Saradha financial scam and the Narada Cash on Camera fiasco, since many of the erstwhile fund managers of the AITC, allegedly involved in those scams, are now the BJP's election managers. But the BJP's ability to mount 360 degree campaigns—almost inevitably centred on Modi—has delivered success for both Modi and the BJP.

l A small section within the BJP—old school members of the Sangh Parivar—told the author, in confidence, that they are not sure if "it is a good idea to campaign very aggressively in a state which may not be very aggressive by nature, despite a history of political violence."

m Parts of central and south Bengal covering the tribal and Dalit belt.

n "We have to remember that when Modi launches such campaigns at the national level, a large section of the Indians is overjoyed. They celebrate it as the rise of one great Hindu leader against India's enemies. But when such a campaign is mounted against another Indian, despite she or he being an arch political rival, the risk is that it is mounted against another Indian, a Hindu, who may also represent regional nationalist sentiments," said a senior RSS-affiliated BJP leader in a private conversation.

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The BJP has correctly identified that economic drivers and promises can work in Bengal, a state bogged down by a narrative oscillating between a Left-leaning and far-Left discourse for seven decades. When the Prime Minister says, “Bengal has seen Congress, the Left and the Trinamool Congress, and should give the BJP a chance,” it possibly touches the imagination of the voters. However, the BJP has not yet indicated a clear road map on how it can change Bengal’s economic fortune by bringing in investment or, more precisely, infuse cash in a cash-strapped economy.

One key driver of the shift is the *rise of Hindu nationalist sentiments* across the nation. That Hindutva majoritarianism is now a major factor in Indian elections at all levels is particularly evident in the changes in the AITC’s election manifesto over the years: in 2011, the party had a section dedicated to Muslims; the 2021 manifesto, however, makes little to no mention of any minority schemes.

In Bengal, this is accompanied by two other definitive reasons. One is *the case of Yunus Ali*,^o who joined the BJP in early August of 2014 and rose through the ranks to become the vice president of the BJP’s Minority Cell in North 24 Parganas district. Before joining the BJP, Yunus Ali was a member of the Forward Bloc. Ali’s shift was primarily due to the AITC’s violence, with its cadres setting fire to the party office, arresting Ali’s brother, and beating Ali, who was then a booth manager of the Left Front in Choto Jagulia village in North 24 Parganas.⁴¹

Ali was only one of the thousands of Left Front supporters who were slapped with false cases, beaten, and tortured by AITC members. Their respective parties could not provide proper protection and shelter to hide and eventually they, like Ali, joined the BJP for shelter. However, by uprooting its key but familiar Opposition, the Communists, the AITC unwittingly paved the way for the rise of the right—an unknown and more potent rival. Old timers of Congress politics, who are now senior leaders of the AITC, privately acknowledge that this was a mistake. The Left, according to them, did not vacate the Opposition space (occupied first by Congress and then by the AITC), knowing that the right may claim the space, until the AITC forced their hand into it. Some argue

^o The author has tracked Yunus Ali’s life over the last seven years. Back in 2014, Ali used the pseudonym “Sadeq Ali,” to cover his identity, as he was under severe pressure. Now, he offers quotes happily and insists that there is no need to maintain anonymity.

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that this idea is purely conjectural, since it would have been impossible to control the Opposition space for long, regardless of the AITC's actions, with the country riding a Hindutva wave post 2014.

The third reason is the “*Muslim vote*.” Despite Muslims and Hindus having cohabited in Bengal since 1204, when Islam came to eastern frontier, West Bengal was born, according to historian Richard M. Eaton, driven by fear and foreboding between the two communities. The state elections have merely reflected this fear, and the political parties have used the suspicions to map their policies.

Academic Sheila Sen summarised this fear in her 1975 PhD (JNU), later turned into a book, *Muslim Politics of Bengal: 1937-1947*. Sen noted that the Muslims had “a feeling” that they were “economically exploited, culturally subjugated and politically dominated by the Hindus,” despite being “the majority community in Bengal” as they were “economically socially and politically backward in relation to the minority community.”⁴² The Hindu upper class and caste, despite being a minority in undivided Bengal, were close to the British largely because the primary opposition to the British came from the ruling power in Bengal, i.e. the Muslims who were defeated in the Battle of Palashi (1757). Sen finds that there is substantial research to illustrate that “educationally advanced Hindu community” took “advantage of economic opportunities,” while the Muslim community brooded “over the past and the ruin brought about by the British who replaced them as the ruling power in Bengal.”⁴³

“A key driver of the shift towards the BJP is the rise of Hindu nationalist sentiments across the nation. In Bengal, this is accompanied by two other factors: the case of Yunus Ali and the Muslim vote.”

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This idea, that one grows at the cost of the other, has been intrinsically connected to Bengal's electoral politics since the first election in undivided Bengal's Legislative Assembly in 1937. It is best exemplified in the success of the Muslim League in strengthening "its hold over the Muslim masses as well as the elite" and emerging "as the most representative body of the Muslims in Bengal."⁴⁴ "The constant opposition and criticism of the ministry by the Hindus—Congress and non-Congress—clearly brought home to their mind that the Hindu interests and Muslim interests would never be identical in Bengal. This helped to strengthen the polarisation already existing in Bengal politics."⁴⁵

Mamata Banerjee, despite her popular appeal, failed to understand that the interests of the communities "would never be identical," due to the fractured history of South Asia. In a bid to consolidate her voting bank, she offered a tiny stipend to Imams and Muezzins (prayer callers) soon after she came to power in 2011. "It was a mistake," admitted one of Mamata Banerjee's Muslim ministers.^p "Didi thought that Muslims are instrumental to her victory. It is partly true, and partly it was the optics; wherever she went (in the initial years), Muslim boys thronged in thousands as they were extremely disappointed with the Left for multiple reasons. It possibly made her feel that she should do something for the Muslims and ended up giving a tiny stipend to the Imams. I too was not sure at that point if giving a stipend to clerics is good or bad."

Banerjee was on billboards with her head covered, hands folded in front of her face in the presence of clerics at a time when the country was riding a Hindutva wave. She possibly did not register the risk of offering a prayer in public surrounded by Muslim clerics. This cosmetic approach to associate with Muslims was systematically used to denigrate her on social media, consolidating the Hindu vote. Consequently, the BJP's Hindu vote bank witnessed an unprecedented rise from 21 percent in 2014 to 57 percent in 2019, pointing to a deep polarisation.⁴⁶ To salvage the situation, Banerjee offered a stipend to Hindu priests,

p In a conversation with the author of this paper.

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and was seen chanting Chandi mantras in public meetings. The AITC even removed the word ‘Muslim’ from its latest manifesto. “This is precisely the success of [the] BJP. Their political ideology is deciding the fate of politics,” noted Sabir Ahamed, chief research coordinator of Pratichi Institute in a recent article. In essence, she lost control of the main political driver of South Asia—Hindu-Muslim relations—in a state with 30 percent (three million) Muslims.

Bengal has had its fair share of Muslim leaders since Independence, with many prominent enough to lead their respective parties at the local and the national level. However, rarely has there been one, since A.K. Fazlul Huq, who could be described as a leader transcending communities, like Bidhan Chandra Roy or Jyoti Basu or Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in Bangladesh, or be described as a representative voice of the Muslims. To be able to touch the emotional chord of the community is mandatory for a South Asian politician, and the only Muslim leader to have achieved this in Bengal was, possibly, Humayun Kabir. Kabir played a significant role in bringing breakaway Congress (Bangla Congress) and the Communists together in 1967, to form Bengal’s first non-Congress government. However, he did not accrue enough cross-party support and, as the press suggested in the summer of 1967, preferred to remain behind the scene “as a kingmaker.”

Against this backdrop, Abbas Siddiqui, a cleric in his mid-30s, has turned the vote-connected political equations on its head. Siddiqui launched his party Indian Secular Front (ISF) in 2021, eventually tying up with the CPI-M and Congress to contest in 30-plus seats—mainly in south Bengal, where the AITC is much stronger than in the north.

In a recent interview with the author, Siddiqui noted that he, like Kabir, “prefers to remain a kingmaker” and has decided to not contest the poll. His emergence as a leader of south Bengal, where about 75 percent of the 294 Bengal Assembly seats are located, has raised some crucial questions. Can Siddiqui’s ISF cut a percentage of Muslim votes in south Bengal (precisely two districts of south Bengal, North and South 24 Parganas) from the AITC? The four south Bengal districts, the “deep

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south”—South and North 24 Parganas, and East and West Medinipur—has 95 (32 percent) of the 294 seats. As of now, the ‘deep south’ is the AITC’s bastion. In the 2016 Assembly poll, the AITC won 82 of the 95 seats in these districts, and 29 out of the 31 in South 24. In the 2019 Assembly election, when the BJP triumphed in 121 Assembly segments, bagging 18 out of the 42 Lok Sabha seats, the AITC still managed to win 74 of the 95 segments, and all 31 in South 24. Thus, without penetrating the “deep south”—the centre of Tebhaga and other historical peasant and land movements—dismantling the AITC will be a difficult task.

In the Lok Sabha Polls in north Bengal, the BJP has damaged the AITC severely. It has also damaged the AITC in the east and west of Rarh Bangla in Nadia, Bankura, Birbhum, Purulia, Hooghly, and parts of Bardhaman. These districts have a reasonably higher population of scheduled castes (SC) and Tribes (ST). This is one area of serious concern for the AITC—the SC and ST votes.

The AITC and the BJP received the same percentage of votes—44 percent—in the 2019 Lok Sabha election, in 68 SC Assembly segments. This vote was with the AITC in the 2016 election. The AITC’s performance was worse in the ST seats, as it managed to secure only three out of 16 ST seats, while the BJP bagged nearly 13 ST seats and 50 percent of the tribal votes. For the AITC, it is critically important to reverse the trend and get a good percentage of the SC/ST votes back as they jointly constitute 30 percent (2011 Census) of the state’s population.

The areas have been showing signs of discontent since the Panchayat Polls of 2018, and in most cases, the Opposition was not allowed to file nominations in Birbhum, Bankura, Hooghly, and parts of Bardhaman and Medinipur.⁴⁷ In Nadia and North 24 Parganas, the BJP has penetrated amongst Dalits as well, as reflected in the 2019 polls. However, to ensure victory, the BJP must make its way into the “deep south,” especially South 24 Parganas. In this, Siddiqui could facilitate, if his new party can perform. After negotiating for seats with Mamata Banerjee in the four-district bloc, Siddiqui decided to form the ISF as he was “disappointed with Mamata Banerjee’s policy to appease the Muslims.”⁴⁸

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“I do not support Didi’s policy to give stipends to Imams and Muezzins (prayer callers). It has not helped to uplift the Muslims in the State. The money was given from the income of property of the Wakf Board and should have been spent judiciously by spending it for the education of the children of the Imams.”⁴⁹ As of now, Siddiqui is far more aggressive against the state’s chief minister than against the BJP, while the BJP too is relatively soft on Siddiqui.

A Bengali newspaper *Jugashankha* reported on 13 January 2021 that, in a public meeting in Panchla in the Howrah district, the BJP President in West Bengal, Dilip Ghosh, said, “In this country, Ali Hossain [chief of the BJP’s minority cell in Bengal] has as much rights as Dilip Ghosh. Abbas Siddiqui and Asaduddin Owaisi of south India have as much rights [to do politics] ... If she has worked for the Muslims, why is she worried? Muslims will vote for her.” Mentioning the 2006 *Sachar Committee Report* that underlined the deprivation of Muslims in Bengal, Ghosh said, “if [the] BJP was in Bengal, the Muslims would have been in as much peace and affluence as [in] Gujarat.” Regarding the BJP’s softer stance towards Muslim parties in Bengal, Siddiqui told the author, “[The] BJP is hatching a conspiracy against me to make people of various caste and creed feel that I have an understanding with the BJP. This is done to damage my base.”⁵⁰ He said in the interview that “it is not [his] job to save Didi” and insisted that Banerjee’s Muslim formula “of extracting most of state’s 25-30 percent Muslim votes and dividing the Hindu vote would not work in 2021.”

If Siddiqui can convert a tiny fraction of his claims to votes, the AITC will sustain severe damage in the “deep south,” which is the party’s stronghold as of now. The other possibility is that Muslims—nearly 30 percent of the state’s 100 million people—may devoutly follow a Pir or a Maulana, but vote only for the party that would look after the

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community's interest. "More precisely, the party that would not touch the institutions – financial and religious," said a top Muslim businessman from south Kolkata.^q If so, they may still vote for the AITC.

A third possibility will unfold if the ISF can strengthen the ailing Left and Congress through their union, United Front, and the Left and Congress can pull the anti-Mamata votes, which will damage the BJP, along with some portion of the Hindu votes that went to the BJP in the last election returns.

Many young Muslims, especially in the educated middle and upper middle-income groups, have rejected the AITC's governance, insisting that community has not progressed much during the party's rule and has been subjected to communal politics. Ten years after *Sachar Committee Report*, a 2016 report by the Social Network for Assistance to People (SNAP) and Pratiche Institute, founded by Amartya Sen, indicated that the condition of Muslims in healthcare, economic condition or education is dismal in Bengal, compared to the majority community.⁵¹

“In the Lok Sabha Polls in north Bengal, the BJP has damaged the AITC severely. However, to ensure victory, the BJP must make its way into the “deep south.””

q On the condition of anonymity.

Conclusion

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Both the Left and Right blocs in Bengal are now locked in an aggressive narrative-building exercise, which is adding to the heat on the ground and could inflict long-term damage on the democratic ecosystem of the state. Issues such as economic conditions and religious polarisation, which informed the 1950-51 Bengal elections and contributed significantly to the political volatility of the state, continue to remain critical in the ongoing 2021 elections.

At the time of writing this paper, Bengal has completed the first four phases of polling; two factors can now be highlighted. One, it is marred by unprecedented acrimony that has resulted in deaths, and two, the election is being conducted by the political parties along distinctly communal lines. The contesting parties must shun hostility if the state is to break free from its long history of political violence. [ORF](#)

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