WEST BENGAL
MOOD REPORT - 2021

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by

Dr. Sajjan Kumar

PEOPLES PULSE
an ear to the ground

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NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

Given the specificity of Bengal politics, particularly pertaining to a relatively weaker role played by the identity politics along the lines of caste and community, there was a methodological challenge to come up with an analytical frame before hitting the ground. The state experts, predominantly Bengalis were mostly dismissive of the argument that Bengal may be witnessing the centrality of identity politics like other states. The fact the 2019 Lok Sabha results clearly demonstrated that areas with high SC and ST population like north Bengal and Jungle Mahal were swept by the BJP,were acknowledged, albeit not as a decisive shift. It was blamedon the relative organizational weaknesses of the Trinamool Congress. The counter argument was that areas like S24 Parganas where there is a high percentage of SCs, but have a strong entrenchment of the incumbent organizationally, didn't go to the fold of the BJP.

In this backdrop, these contested claims and the gap between the identitarian signs of the 2019 Loksabha outcomes and the skeptical approach of the seasoned experts created a necessity to explore the question: is Bengal witnessing the centrality of identity politics from class to caste in a big way, not seen before?If yes, how?This required two massive challenge: one, a prevailing data of the demographic profile in all the assembly constituencies along the lines of caste and communities and two, to visit all the Assembly segments to test the competing hypothesis. Going for the usual method of visiting select constituencies and then extrapolating the findings would have been risky proposition.

Visit to all the 294 Assembly constituencies of West Bengal. Image courtesy, Google timeline.
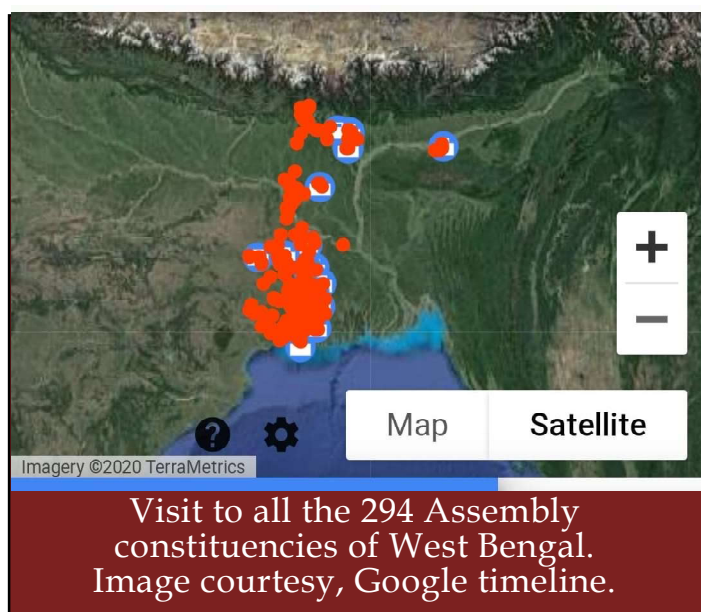
Since, it was my first visit to the state as far as the political study was concerned, I was all the more careful and cautious. Secondly, attempting to write on the core spatial domain of Bhadraloks warranted a solid footing on the ground to get even a shared deliberative place, my decadal pan Indian experience of political and electoral study notwith-standing.

To my utter surprise, I couldn't get a prior AC wise caste and community dataeven from leaders of the BJP, the CPM or the Trinamool. Someone in the political marketing or political management realm with deep investment in the state may have collected this data recently, but it is not something which you can ask someone and be guided to probable places or persons. The Left never needed this profiling as they governed by overlooking this aspect, and they mobilized electorates down to Panchayat and village levels simply by channelizing the party affiliated clubs and the local organization. Trinamool inherited this structure, discarded the ideological element, started playing the identity card in a big way, but kept seconding the perception that Bengal doesn't have a space for the identity politics as seen in other parts of the country.

Hence, the rough demographic profile which constitutes apriori element of my preparation for the fieldwork emerged as a factor that I needed to collect from the field. This required that in every constituency, firstI meet the people who may be called experts with a panoramic view of the past and present of the ground and then collect the demographic profile so that I could employ the purposive sampling and conduct my field investigation systematically. This is what I did in all the 294 Assembly Constituencies. The questions that were asked were around the socio-political transition that is happening; the changing political psychology of the electorates;their attempt to overplay and underplay one aspect over the other. An attempt was made to incorporate the body language and gestures of the respondents in drawing inferences. Also, all the hypothesis, contending and competing, as collected from the local and state experts were tested on the ground, based on a demographically representative profiling of the respondents.

The fieldwork was tedious and tiresome, but in the end it was satiating when besides having mapped the political shifts on the ground I have with me the demographic profile of all the assembly constituencies. The tabulation of the same is in the process and will be in public domain soon. The interplay of the opinion and the identity do indicate a massive shift in the direction of politics.

The second challenge, was language. I can understand Bengali but couldn't speak. Many friends and seniors, in good intention,warned me about the linguistic difficulties in the countryside, particularly areas which don't share boundary with the Hindi speaking states. Though some were encouraging and asked me to go ahead. Given the paucity of time, I couldn't have waited to learn the language before going to the field. All I did was rehearsing two lines which translated as, I understand Benagli, but couldn't speak.This mechanical repetition at every place in my non-Bengali accent must have been amusing to the people but to my pleasant surprise they were happy, in fact, more than sympathetic and encouraged me to ask questions in Hindi, to which they responded in a mix of Hindi and Bengali. Besides, I was quickly learning the everyday political vocabularies and started mixing them more and more in my questions.So, language did not emerge a problem in Bengal, even in the countryside.

This fieldwork would not have been possible without one of my senior from JNU who besides being a civil society activist is an encyclopedia of Bengal politics. Anyone who does extensive fieldwork is aware about the difficulty in designing the constituency wiseroute map as constituency wise road map is not easily available. This become all the more daunting when the number of ACs to be covered is 294. He finalized the route in two sittings and I didn't have to change the route plan except at one place. Besides, he ensured that every day as per the route map, I meet the senior people who know the ground to have an expert view of the field before going and testing them on the ground. These details and name would come later in subsequent reports with their permission. Besides, there were other friends in Bengal who accompanied me throughout the research and ensured all sorts of help. They were as enthusiastic about this study as me. To their disappoint-ment, I am yet to tabulate and prepare the detailed AC wise report. As I had to rush immediately to the poll bound Assam after completing Bengal visit, these basic works got delayed. However, this will be completed soon.

The report herein is already published in newspapers, three in **The New Indian Express**, two in **The Hindu**, one in the **Indian Express**and one in **Hindustan Times**. I am grateful to them for giving me the space to publish my findings and analysis. I hope to write many more pieces as I give coherence to the notes taken from the field which lasted from the last week of September to the first week of December 2020.

The images used in the report are from my own collection and some taken from other sources for representational purposes. In the meantime, many findings that I got are more accentuated. Trinamool Congress has come up with more policy initiatives and BJP is making the right moves as desired by the majority of pro-change respondents on the ground. However, I am confident about two aspect: the direction of change is as per my finding and the anti-incumbency sentiment is so intense on the ground, that no measure could placate it or reverse it in such a short span of time. Rather, as election would draw closer, this trend would get further accentuated.

Lastly, this compilation of articles is the first mood report released by the Peoples Pulse. This is done to submit into the public domain our findings and argument which is not shared by many senior and seasoned analysts. We would be publishing other detailed reports in the month of March. Then there would be a third and final one after the election.

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THE GROUND IS SHIFTING BELOW TMC'S FEET

Why the BJP seems to be the default beneficiary in the coming Assembly Elections in West Bengal?

A recently concluded study following two months of fieldwork in all the 294 Assembly constituencies of West Bengal revealed one interesting feature about the psychology of the electorate. When asked about their electoral choice and the expected outcome, a few spoke aloud, while the majority either remained silent or whispered what they thought. People speak out when they are pro-incumbent; they are silent when they have made up their mind to vote for change. In a follow-up question, those wanting "paribartan (change)" came out overwhelmingly as ex-Communist Party of India (Marxist) and former Trinamool Congress (TMC) supporters. In fact, a majority of the old Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) supporters on the ground seemed more wary and bitter about the saffron party being taken over by the Left and Trinamool elements, allegedly for ulterior motives.

Party to Personality

The answer to this conundrum lies in the specificity of Bengal politics. Being a "party society", as Professor Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya calls it, partisanship in Bengal has remained a political fact even under TMC's decadal rule, albeit with a difference. While the majority of the Left leaders at the Panchayat level hailed primarily from the teaching community, under the TMC, those who got prominence were local contractors, businessman and domineering personalities. They used the party society mechanism for personal aggrandisement, thereby attempting to change the State's political culture from being party-driven to personality-centric.

This helps explain why most of the ongoing political analysis today on Bengal is an assessment of the impact of personalities like the TMC's Suvendu Adhikari in Jangalmahal and Purba Medinipur, the BJP's Mukul Roy, Gorkha JanmuktiMorcha's Bimal Gurung in Darjeeling, the Congress's Adhir Ranjan Chowdhury in Baharampur and Asaduddin Owaisi and Abbas Siddiqui among the Muslims. This also accounts for TMC's constant attempt to force the organisationally weak BJP to declare a chief ministerial face, thereby making the contest as one between Mamata Banerjee and a regional BJP face. By subtly circumventing the leadership question, the BJP is pushing the election into the rhetorical arena of Modi versus Mamata to acquire the decisive edge. In short, while the hold of the party society is still there, the space for individual personalities is becoming prominent.

This is a change of degree if not of kind in Bengal. This shift from party to personality also signifies disillusionment among the majority of the electorate with the existing political parties. The electoral choices are negative — people want to oust the incumbent rather than reward the new. The alternative is not a positive choice, but rather a default beneficiary. And it is the TMC which is solely responsible for this tectonic shift in the political common sense of the State wherein a majority seem disgruntled with both the institutions of the state and the existing political parties. Three factors account for this state of affairs.

Reign of Terror and Corruption

First, across the State, the marker of the beginning of a systematic anti-TMC sentiment was the 2018 panchayat election. From CPM office bearers to the common people, everyone narrated how candidates of the opposition parties were not allowed to vote. An overwhelming majority cited horrifying incidents of physical assault and filing of false police cases against the ones who resisted. Even, BasudebAcharia, the nine-time MP (Lok Sabha) from Bankura was not spared when he tried to get his party candidate to file the nomination. The police were reported as acting like they were an extension of the ruling party. Thus, there is a fear psychosis among the opponents, and this has been particularly intense since 2018. This has resulted in a majority, including the Left, to want the election, down to the booth level, to be under the strict supervision of Central paramilitary forces, with no role for the State police.

Another factor which fared quite strongly in responses accounting for a mammoth undercurrent against the TMC was the intensification and monopolisation of corruption. Responding in a comparative sense, people narrated how during the Left rule, corruption was dispersed and even the common man used to get a part of the pie. Under the TMC, the majority of local leaders were contractors, businessman and other dominant sections. So corruption, as per the ground narrative, meant not only plundering the state resources meant for the public but also depriving the common man from having a share of the same.

In the past, under the framework of 'party society', being affiliated to the ruling party also meant a source of income for a majority of the people in Bengal, especially for the subaltern section in the villages.

Under the TMC, the local party leaders have the monopoly, thereby giving a decisive blow to the partisan bonding along party lines. For instance, in the Haroa Assembly constituency, there is reportedly about 55,000 bigha of wasteland which businessmen take for fish cultivation by paying an annual sum of around Rs. 12,000 -15,000 per bigha to the local office of the local party rather than the government.

Earlier, every family used to get Rs. 1,000 annually from the money received. As per the report, under the TMC, the local leaders themselves started cultivating the fish, thereby depriving the party of the sum. By extension, the money being given to the people in the area also stopped. A majority of the respondents who complained of this shift happened to be Poundra Khatri Dalits and poor Muslims.

The recent cases of corruption were reported most intensely in areas considered to be the stronghold of the TMC where the party held its ground even in the 2019 Lok Sabha election, namely, North 24 Parganas, Kolkata, Howrah, part of Hooghly, South 24 Parganas and East Medinipur in the aftermath of the destruction by Cyclone Amphan. Respondents said that the relief fund was plundered by the local leadership so much that they have started calling it "Amphandurniti (Amphan corruption)".

Subaltern Interface with BJP

Finally, the emerging perception that the incumbent is employing the instrument of fear and intensifying everyday corruption has created a scenario of 'ruling party versus the rest' in a majority of the villages. Within this, it is primarily the Dalits and Scheduled Tribes, accounting for about 30% of the State population, who are at the receiving end. They feel abandoned and hounded by the self-aggrandising local TMC leadership. The CPM and Congress don't enthuse them, particularly the subaltern youths, due to their dilapidated organisational state and ageing profile of leadership. Thus, they see the Modi factor as an alternative, even in the countryside. They have minimalist material expectations which in combination with an embryonic charm for Hindutva has created a conducive ambiance for the BJP. The saffron party seems to be the default beneficiary in the ensuing election.

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WINDS OF CHANGE BLOWING IN BENGAL

At present, bearing the muslim respondents, the mood for change could be positively tested on the ground if one could go for a random but demographically representative response from the voters.

'Bengal is different as here people take time to change the incumbent. But when desired, they make up their mind beforehand and choose to remain silent until the day of voting. This happened in 1977 and 2011. This willhappen in 2021 again', opined an elderly OBC respondent atLalgarh in Jhargram assembly constituency.

The statement was not in isolation, but rather, it signified an articulated summing up of the dominant mood for change which is prevalent on the ground– a fact that resonated in my field study in all the 294 assembly constituencies of Bengal.

At present, barring the Muslim respondents, the mood for change could be positively tested on the ground if one could go for a random but demographically representative responses from the voters across the state from Dalits like Rajbanshis, Namoshudras and Chain Mandals, Tribes like Tea-Tribes and a section of Gorkhas, general Hindu Bengalis and Hindi speakers in North-Bengal, a subregion lying between Bihar and Jharkhand on the western side and Nepal, Bhutan, Assam and Bangladesh on the northern and eastern sides respectively.

The contradiction between NRC and CAA is immaterial to them as both are meant to stop the illegal infiltration of the Muslims from Bangaldesh, opined a Rajbanshi Dalit in Toofangunj constituency. Where would the Hindus from Bangladesh go if not in India, he countered upon being pointed out that majority of illegal immigrants happen to be Hindus, particularly the NamoshudraDalits. This sentiment is shared further, on the western side of the state sharing the borders of Jharkhand and Odisha, the sub-regions referred as paschimanchal and Jungle-Mahalrespectively, from Birbhum to Paschim-Bardhman and Purulia, Bankura, Jhargramto West-Medinipur, resided primarily byBauri and Bagdi Dalit castes, Santhal and Munda Tribes, OBCs like Kurmi-Mahatos, besides the general Hindu castes like Brahmins, Kayasthas and peasant castes like Mahishyas and Aguris, the sentiment for change is prevalent.

Similarly, the pro-change sentiment is also shared,both in degree and kind in central Bengal, composed of districts like PurbaBardhman, Nadia and Hooghly wherein we find the same demography, albeit with less STs and more concentration of Bagdi Dalits and castes like Aguris, Mahishyas,Gwala Ghosh, Brahmins and Kayasthas. Lastly, in the southern Bengal, we find dense pockets of Namoshudra Dalits in North-24 Parganas, Poundra-Kshatriya Dalits in South-24 Parganas, Bagdi Dalits in Howrah and East-Medinipur besides Mahishyas and Gwala Ghosh communities along with the presence of migrant communities and general castes with the core of Bhadraloks residing in and around Kolkata. Here, barring a miniscule section of Bhadraloks, that too mainly in South-Kolkata, one finds the votaries of pro-Change superseding the status quoists. However,this seamless demographic flow is interspersed with Muslim minorities who are veering towards the Trinamoolin a big way. Nevertheless, their impactgets limited in the face of a thick consolidation of Hindu votesin favour of the BJP.

Hence, contrary to the common-sensical assumption that TMC may be weakened and the saffron wave is strengthening on account of the defection of strong leaders like Suvendu Adhikari and others to BJP, it is the prevalent pro-change sentiment on the ground which is encouraging these leaders to defect with the intention to ride on the strong tailwind of pro-change sentiment. Attributing an expected BJP victory in Bengal to individual leaders would be a classic case of analytical fallacy wherein effect is confused as the cause.

Naturally, there are strong skeptics including the seasoned analysts. However, in the age of social media and with the rise of a new wave of politics, their skepticism is based more on the old set of assumptions wherein they are strong on logics but thin on empirics. First, the oft-referred cliché of assembly election being different from Lok Sabha election doesn't hold ground in Bengal as the electoral determinants of a strong anti-incumbency against the Trinamool on account of rampant corruption and political violence, which prevailed in 2019 is still the prime factor on the ground. In fact, now people have got further emboldened in the face of organizational chaos gripping the Trinamool.

Secondly, while it is rightly pointed out that in Bengal, BJP is organizationally weak and lack local faces on the ground in addition to not having a state leader Mamata Banerjee's stature, it would be wrong to infer that these weaknesses would prevent BJP from capturing power in the ensuing election. People are not casting a positive vote to BJP, rather they would vote to defeat TMC wherein BJP is the preferred option, mainly on account of it being in power at the Centre and having leaders like P.M Modi and Amit Shah who are perceived to be serious about their intent to win Bengal by all means. This faith in the capability and intent of the BJP leaders rather than the party's organizational strength was visible when a majority of pro-change respondents dismissed the counter questions by stating that they would vote for party-symbol rather than the candidate.

This leader centric approach was further revealed when in the month of October a significant section of pro-change respondents stated that in Bengal, BJP needs Amit Shah more than party president J.P Nadda as till then the former, after skipping Bihar election completely, had not started his Bengal visit, leading to the doubts about his presence in the state.

Now, with prevailing ground sentiment and BJP sending the right signals, thereby striking a chord with a majority of the electorates, the momentum for change is too strong to be dipped. Winds of change is blowing in Bengal.

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HOW TRINAMOOL IS LOSING NARRATIVE TO BJP

Barring rare exceptions, the people's impression of the local Trinamool leadership everywhere falls in the same template. corrupt, rowdy and arrogant.

*T*This road is maintained by P.W.D, Govt. of West Bengal, happens to be one of the pan-Bengal omnipresent signboard which greets a traveler in almost every nook and corner of the state. The region may change, from Coochbihar and Darjeeling in North Bengal to Jhargram in the Junglemahal through Kultali in Sunderban, but the signboard remains the same– a familiar being with the same shape, size, colour and font. Ironically, after having travelled for almost 13000 K.M is the state from October 2020 to December 2020, I can claim another interplay: in majority of the places, the roads, especially in the interiors, are in bad shape. This state of affairs is unfortunately true for the incumbent party too. It's everywhere in the state, but mostly, in pretty bad shape.

Barring rare exceptions, peoples' impression of the local Trinamool leadership everywhere falls in the same template. Corrupt, Rowdy and Arrogant! On top of that, thefear of retribution by the incumbents is so strong that the line between peoples' dislike and their hate against the ruling party often gets blurred.

A thick set of respondents across the state narrated the way the dissidents, opponents and anyone daring to question the prevailing corruption and upmanship on the ground are hounded systematically, which includes measures like physical attack, filing of false cases and depriving them from availing benefits of welfare schemes. In fact, this state of precariat affair is endorsed by the local leadership of the Left, Congress and the thinly present BJP. In fact, besides the common people, it is the local CPM leadership and their support base who have been at the receiving end of the incumbent's ire in the last five years. Sooner you visit their local offices and enquire about the state of affairs, the tale of the site being attacked and destroyed on the eve of 2018 Panchayat election in a planned way would be an indispensable part of the narrative. Their narration betray their dilemma.They desire to see Trinamooldefeated but realize that BJP has emerged as the alternative.

The tale of Trinamool's measures of unprecedented harassment is revealed in the case of Biplab Pal, a businessman and a Hotelier at the border town, Bongaon, in North 24 Parganas. Being a prominent businessman he kept his political cards closed. However, on the eve of 2018 Panchayat election, he supported one BJP candidate, thereby earning the ire of local Trinamool leaders and the chairman of Bongaon municipality, Shankar Adhya. Consequently, a series of statues throughout the length of his Hotel Matri Mandir blocking any access from the front of the road was built, allegedly in the name of beautifying the city. His business came to a standstill. Desiring revenge he joined the BJP in 2018 and now holds the post of party's district general secretary. "They have destroyed my business. Hence, for the last three years I am invested completely into politics wherein I am working day and night to ensure the defeat of the Trinamool in Bongaon Uttar assembly constituency", he stated, "and the same day we win", he continued,"these statues would be placed in front of chairman's property which is on the other side of the road."

This sentiment of fear, anger, hate and revenge against the incumbents signify the hubris that Trinamool got afflicted with in their attempt to vanquish the rival CPM. The party succeeded in decimating its prime rival. However, in so doing, it created the conducive ambiance for the emergence of its nemesis, the BJP. Pushed to the brink, the thick support base of the Left started shifting to the BJP en-masse as they realized their own party is incapable of protecting them. Thus, both Left and Congress lost the imagination of being a credible alternative to the incumbent.

It was at this juncture that laden with anti-Trinamool polemics and being the ruling party at the centre, BJP emerged as a default beneficiary of this state of grand illusion and anger. That personally P.M Modi and Amit Shah exhibited deep interest in winning and wresting Bengal from the Trinamool, further added to the exodus of the people from the Left to the BJP since 2018. This tectonic shift on the ground is an ongoing process and is strong enough to supersede the limiting factors like organizational weakness and lack of entrenched leadership in majority of assembly constituencies that BJP is afflicted with. "We would vote for the symbol, not the candidate", is the popular response of the pro-change respondents when asked as to how their sentiment would help BJP win, given party's organizational weakness.

Now, what Bengal is witnessing is a wave of exodus of the Trinamool leaders to the BJP. "First, the people started shifting to the saffron party, now it would be the turn of the leaders as they have sensed the popular mood. Besides, they need to win in the coming election", opined a school teacher at Tamluk in east Medinipur.

Further, the process of change started with the slogan, Prathame Ram, Pare Baam (First BJP, then CPM) wherein majority of anti-Trinamool people announced their tactical shift to the BJP. "There will not be any Baam after Ram, if the shift to Ram happens, no one should be under any illusion that BJP would be here for a long haul. Tripura is the prime example in this regard", opined the popular doctor and CPM leader, Dr Gauranga Goswami at Kalna in east Bardhman. His words sound ominous not only for the Left but also for the incumbent Trinamool, especially when the popular anti-incumbency response has moved from the tactical Prathame Ram, Pare Baamto the decisive Jai Shri Ram.

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HOW BJP TURNED WEST BENGAL'S LEFT SUPPORT BASE IN THEIR FAVOUR

The incumbent Trinamool blames it on the vitriolic anti-Mamata mentality of the CPM, which in their desperation to see the Trinamool defeated, aligned with the devil.

Since 2019 Lok Sabha election in Bengal when BJP won 18 seats and attained over 40% of vote share –a whopping gain of 30% from 2016 assembly election–the shift of Left support base to the saffron camp wherein party vote share declined to 7.5% from 26.6% in the same period,explained the new political dynamics in the eastern state.

While the politically potent slogan agey Ram porey Bam (first BJP then Left) became the explainer, the anchor of the slogan and the intent behind the same became a matter of contentious debate. The incumbent Trinamool blames it upon the vitriolic anti-Mamata mentality of the CPM who in their desperation to see the Trinamool defeated aligned with the devil. To the Left, the slogan was a mischievous strategy employed by the BJP and other Hindutva affiliates to mislead the people and cash in upon their genuine anti-Trinamool sentiment.

However, on the ground, majority of the respondents who admitted shifting from the CPM to the BJP in 2019 offered a genealogy which reveals that none of these parties played an active part in coiningthe slogan. Rather, it seemed to have emerged from the intense anger of the local CPM cadres and support base along with a section of common people on the ground, who were battered by the incumbent party in 2018 Panchayat election.They felt let down by the sheer inability of the state level Left leadership, a factor perceived intensely in the backdrop of the aggressive anti-Trinamool pitch P.M Modi and Amit Shah peddled. Thus, the sentiment of the majority of the Left voters and the BJP struck a chord. The result was visible in 2019.

Interestingly, with the further consolidation of anti-Trinamool sentiment, the Left in Bengal, particularly the CPM, is standing on the intersectionality of having a positive perception among its erstwhile voters while being considered electorally irrelevant in the ensuing election. This puzzle of faring positive on perception but negative in terms of electoral relevancy signify the uneven dialectics between the anti-Trinamool rhetoric of the CPM and the BJP. Shorn of ground assertion, the Left leaders intensified their verbal attack against the Trinamool for systematic battering and targeting of their cadres and supporters whose quest for settling score was in search of a new but strong anchor. Politically, this was a phase of everyday isolation for the Left support base.

The entry of BJP top duo, Modi and Shah, with the same anti-incumbency pitch, albeit with a cultural twist, was both beautiful as well as frightening for the them. It was in this state of dilemma that a pragmatic approach became the common sensefor the majority of Left voters as they had two templates to choose from: the rational but complacent body language of the Left leadership and the decisive and aggressive posturing by the BJP's top leadership. Unambiguously, they got swayed by the brand BJP and abandoned the Left, presumably for the time being to start with. Though, unintended and passively, the Left in Bengal by its complacency contributed in constituting a conducive ambiance for the popular reception of the BJP as a credible alternative to the incumbent. This was the battle that Left lost to the BJP in terms of degree as the former failed to match the latter's anti-Trinamool pitch, which has a popular resonance on the ground. This led to the emergence of the BJP as a credible alternative to the incumbent despite their organisational weakness.

Having lost in the war of perception to the BJP, the Left was further trapped into another dilemma which was two-fold. While they were on the same plane with the BJP as far as attacking Trinamool on the plank of corruption and hooliganism was concerned, they had to align with Mamata on ideological grounds. It was here, that BJP scored a clear advantage. A combination of issues like series of low and high intensity communal incidents, NRC and CAA, led to the Left and the Trinamool coming on the same horizon against the BJP. Normatively, the Left was making the right choices in all the instances, but politically it was facing further marginalisation. People on the ground were privileging their experience over the ideology. The coming of the Left and the Trinamool together on many issues on ideological ground led to the polarisation of the polity wherein the political fault lines got clearly demarcated between the incumbent and the BJP with the Left playing a second fiddleon the one hand to the saffron party, when they both attacked the incumbent for employing instruments repressions as a tool of dominance, and on the other, despite their attempts for demarcation, they were seen merely as complementing the Trinamool's crusade against BJP's policies like NRC and CAA.

This state of in-between-ness further alienated their own support base. The ones who were at the receiving end of the TMC's violence felt let down by their old party for both: failing to stand for them adequately as well as for aligning with the incumbent on issues like the CAA. This for the Left was like Gorbachev's glasnost and perestroika moment wherein they lost the resonance with their own support base for neither being the main anchor of anti-Trinamool or of anti-BJP camp.

Lastly, BJP played their cards quite meticulously. Fearing electoral backlash from a significant section of the electorates on the issue of NRC as the northern and eastern regions of the state is inhabited by the partition affected refugees who have deep apprehension against the law. To placate the expected antagonism, the BJP hurried with the passing of the CAA and thereby assured their emerging support base, particularly the Namoshudra Dalits. Unlike, other partition refugees, the Namoshudras' migration to India picked momentum since the 1980s when Bangladesh witnessed Islamisation under President Hussain Muhammad Irshad. Since then the community has been crossing the border and coming to India continuously. My interaction with the community members revealed an interesting dynamics. Amit Shah's memefiedchronology remark on first CAA then NRChas served its purpose among the community who are willing to believe the BJP duo but who as refugees and beneficiaries, were once the committed support base of the Left. Hence, if ground sentiment is the explainer, BJP by the instrument of CAA has emerged as the main votary the refugee issue which the Left once championed. Therefore, with Left's electoral marginalisation, the ensuing election is set to be a bipolar contest between a defensive Trinamool and an assertive BJP.

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MUSLIM VOTE IN THE STATE SEEMS TO BE CONSOLIDATING BEHIND TRINAMOOL

The West Bengal election will be about unprecedented Muslim consolidation behind the incumbent rather than a split in their vote.

As Bengal veers toward assembly election, there is growing speculation about the Muslim voting pattern. Already, the perception that the combined weight of AIMIM chief Assaduddin Owaisi and Abbas Siddiqui, the influential Pirzada of Furfura Sharif shrine, would split Muslim votes has become the dominant political sense. Going by this assumption, of all the detrimental factors which may prevent the incumbent Trinamool Congress from returning to power for the third consecutive term, the role of Owaisi and Abbas Siddiqui are on the top. Interestingly, this assumption is shared by an overwhelming majority of both the pro-BJP and anti-BJP respondents, almost in all the 294 assembly constituencies, who I interacted with during my fieldwork recently. This line of thinking is premised upon three interrelated and extremely persuasive reasonings but mistaken assertion: one, a significant section of Muslim electorates are as angry with Trinamool Congress as different sections of the Hindus; two, post-Bihar, Owaisi has proved that Muslims are willing to vote for Muslim centric parties, especially in constituencies wherein they constitute electoral majority; three, the vacuum created by the left partieswould force Muslims to choose new outfit in constituencies wherein anti-Trinamool sentiment is strong, leading to split in the Muslim votes to the detriment of the incumbent.

A close scrutiny would reveal the underlying fallacies behind these assumptions. First, it fails to take into account the incommensurable specificities of Bihar and Bengal in general and the trajectory of AIMIM's interventions in particular.

Second, it assumes the vast majority of Muslims as gullible souls who are not aware about the stakes in the ensuing election and therefore,their likelyhood of being innocently swayed to the allure of two Muslim leaders. However, the reality is just the opposite. Muslims across the state are consolidating behind the Trinamool even in Muslim majority areas like north Dinajpur, Malda and Murshidabad wherein Congress used to have the larger traction until recently. Hence, as far as main text of the minority voting pattern in Bengal is concerned, 2021 Bengal election would be about unprecedented Muslim consolidation behind the incumbent rather than a split in their vote.

Here, it is important to note that the Bihar victory of AIMIM in Muslim dominated Seemanchal region was not an one election development. The party has been working consistently since 2015 under the leadership of an extremely capable leader Akhtarul Iman, who was two term MLA from RJD before joining AIMIM in 2015. Further, in the aftermath of CAA, the complete loss of faceJD(U) witnessed among the community created a conducive ambiance for the AIMIM in Muslim dominated constituencies wherein the fear of BJP victory is absent. Lastly, unlike Bengal, Bihar has a trend of electing independent or new party candidates in every election. None of these factors are common toBengal. On the other hand, the state being a party society, doesn't get easily fascinated by the new entrants who fall outside the fold of the established parties. Though, the hold of party-society framework is loosening a bit, the prospect of a new party, that too among the anxious Muslim minorities, striking a popular chord with electorates is as delusional a possibility as the chances of the man eating tigers of Sundarbans opting for vegetarianism.

In fact, Muslims are unequivocally clear as to which party they would vote to and offer the underlying reasons persuasively. Barring around 10 seats, Trinamool has emerged as the preferred choice even among the minorities who have been hostile to the party until recently as they fear the coming election to be a bipolar contest between the incumbent and the BJP. Everywhere, TMC is gaining at minority vote at the cost of the Left and the Congress. This bipolarity summarily rules out any flirtation with the new Muslim platform in the state.

Further, while in none of the 20 seats that AIMIM contested in Bihar, it's vote share accounted for the victory of BJP, the erroneous perception that Owaisi led to the defeat of RJD led alliance in Bihar has already taken hold among the minorities. Thus AIMIM victory in Bihar has a negative connotation among the Muslims of Bengal who are anxious about its intervention in Bengal. This has made them more cautious about not splitting their votes– a factor advantageous to TMC as far as Muslim votes are concerned.

Finally, the much hyped Abbas Siddiqui is nothing but a hot air. While the followers of Furfura Sharif shrine are as numerous in Dijanpur, Malda and Murshidabad as in the south Bengal, their amazing distinction between following a religious figure in religious matters while rejecting him in the political arena leaves no doubt that there would be no takers even for Abbas Siddiqui in Bengal. Of course, many Muslims, especially the youths go to listen to him and appreciate the issues he raises, particularly the ones pertaining to the weaker sections. This explains why a section of minorities argue that all he is trying is to fish in the troubled water and ultimately he may end up being a part of the Left-Congress front wherein his pro-Poor rhetoric could be offered as a justification for the alternative secular alliance. In the final analysis, his insubstantiality is revealed by the shifting areas of influence one offers in his support which start from Hugli district, then passes through parts of Howrah and finally stops at South-24 Parganas.

A test on the ground reveals it being nowhere, including the Bhangar assembly constituency where he has a huge following, where Muslims constitute around 80 percent of the population and where he was attacked on 10th August 2020, allegedly by the Trinamool cadres leading to state wide anger among the Muslims. Hence, irrespective of a victory or loss, Trinamool is expected to get the highest share of Muslim votes as theyare consolidated behind the party, all these split theories not withstanding.

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IN BENGAL, THE SALIENCE OF JAI SHRI RAM

The state is witnessing the fusion of Hindutva and subaltern mobilisation against the political-cultural elite

"Jai Shri Ram has become a mudradosh (a catchphrase) for us", said a voter, belonging to the Matua community, in Thakurnagar, West Bengal. "We started using it to tease the Trinamool, but now it has become as natural as saying good morning in English." When asked how Jai Durga or Jai Kali — associated more deeply with Bengal — hadn't, instead, become the rallying cry, he responded, "Ram is as familiar to us as you."

As West Bengal heads to the polls, it is at the intersection of changing cultural contours, shifting political dynamics and contested identity claims. Identity is always a two-way process. A particular mode of recognition by a group requires others to endorse it.

Thus, the claim that Bengal is the intellectual-heartland of India is shared by a vast section of non-Bengalis, thereby constituting the image of the state being different. Irrespective of the changing political context in the last four decades, from the Left front to Trinamool Congress (TMC) rule, the Bhadraloks (the cultural elite) have been fierce custodians of Bengal's sense of exceptionalism and guarded it passionately. For instance, a quintessential Bhadralok would condemn and lament the rising assertive religiosity in other parts of the country while defending Durga-Pujo in Bengal primarily as a social gathering.

However, since 2018, political shifts and social changes, particularly among the subaltern sections in rural and mofussil Bengal, have raised questions about the Bhadralok sense of entitlement in representing and speaking for the state. What Bengal is witnessing is a new wave of subaltern assertion, using the instrument of Hindutva to push the narrative.

The growing political and cultural salience of the Jai Shri Ram slogan in Bengal was reflected in three key moments — first, during the 2018 communal riot in Asansol on the occasion of Ramnavami; second, as chanted by people when Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's motorcade passed through Chandrakona in West Midnapore and Bhatpara in North 24 Parganas in May 2019; and, finally, on January 23 this year, when the slogan was raised in the presence of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Banerjee during the celebration of Subhas Chandra Bose's birth anniversary in Kolkata.

The Bhadralok response to the slogan has been one of unease. It claims that the slogan has never been a part of Bengal's religiosity and is almost alien to the land, and therefore, those invoking must be the migrants from neighbouring states. These incidents are also seen as the handiwork of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). However, a closer look would reveal that this argument, defending the specificity of Bengali religiosity and shifting the blame entirely to the BJP and migrants is not only untrue, but also fails to take into account the role played by the Trinamool Congress. It also ignores ground realities. After having travelled through all 294 assembly constituencies in the state, four ground realities become apparent.

One, the BJP, outside Kolkata, is organisationally weak and, even after a spree of defections from the incumbent, lacks strong local leadership. Two, an overwhelming majority of Hindus are polarised against the Trinamool, allegedly on account of rampant corruption and systemic violence by the ruling party's rank and file in connivance with the state police. Three, it is primarily the erstwhile supporters of the Left who have been at the receiving end of Trinamool's excesses, and are now clamouring for "revenge". And, finally, barring few pockets such as parts of Murshidabad, Malda and Dinajpur, both the Left and the Congress are not considered as credible alternative by pro-change voters. Thus, the BJP has become the default beneficiary of the existing resentment against Trinamool.

Even a cursory look into the intersection of these facts shows that the salience of the slogan has deeper roots. If the BJP is so weak outside Kolkata, crediting it, albeit negatively, with the ability to provoke citizens in different parts of the state to mock, challenge, and finally bear the brunt of the CM's anger, by chanting Jai Shri Ram, doesn't add up. The search for the underlying forces behind the slogan should be directed at the social realm and the role played by the Trinamool itself.

Travels on the ground, primarily the interiors of south Bengal, reveal the everydayness of Jai Shri Ram greetings, chants and sloganeering among a vast section of Bengalis who are opposed to Trinamool.

For instance, respondents across castes at Chowkbazar in Balrampur assembly constituency in Purulia defended the slogan as a way of getting back at Trinamool supporters — and alleged that the district president of TMC ridiculed their sentiment by asking who is Ram. A schoolteacher at Bishnupur claimed Ram to be an integral part of everyday life, and argued how Ramayana is inscribed even in the world famous Baluchari silk sarees. At Habra in N-24 Parganas, a group of respondents expressed their anger at the government arresting some people for using the slogan. Ironically, in most of these places, then same people lamented the poor organisational profile of the BJP.

The story of Jai Shri Ram goes beyond the BJP in Bengal. It has become a code of solidarity, a way of greeting, and a signal of anti-Trinamool consolidation. And it has become an everyday tool of political demarcation not only against the Trinamool but also against the patronising attitude of the old elites who privilege ideology over the everyday precarious experience of the subalterns. It signifies the fusion of the subaltern with Hindutva against the worldviews of Bhadraloks.

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SHIFTING SANDS AND THE OWAISI EFFECT

The rise of the AIMIM chief as a prominent Muslim leader points to many political intricacies

Asaduddin Owaisi, president of the All India Majlis-e-Ittehad-ul-Muslimeen (AIMIM), complicates political equations. He stirs the easy fit between mainstream secular parties and their hold over Muslim voters. In terms of the popularity index in India, he comes close to the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) triumvirate of Narendra Modi, Amit Shah and Yogi Adityanath. Recently, AIMIM's electoral gains in Bihar and Mr. Owaisi's visits to poll-bound West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh have revived the debate around his exact intention, emerging Muslim voting patterns and their implications for the BJP and its rivals.

Mr. Owaisi's national avatar is a conjunction of the political dynamics that were induced by the Sachar Committee report and the Batla House encounter case, wherein while political Hindutva was on the decline, the interplay of the backwardness of Muslims and their insecurities exposed the failures of secular mainstream parties in catering to the community's aspirations. This created a secular paradox, where, comforted with the decline of the BJP and the electoral ascendency of the Congress and other regional parties, many Muslim outfits and leaders blamed secular parties for failing Muslims. Thus began a new, although cluttered, phase of the community's experiments with Muslim parties and a growing clamour for more represent ation.

The Peace Party of India and the Rashtriya Ulama Council in U.P., the AIUDF in Assam, and the popular resonance of the Pasmanda movement led by Ali Anwar Ansari in Bihar, and, since 2012, that of the AIMIM in Maharashtra, Karnataka, Bihar, U.P., and now in West Bengal, point to the churn within the Muslim community.

Here, it is important to note initially, the AIMIM had its limitations. Firstly, it was just a city-based party. Secondly, until the 2004 Andhra Pradesh Assembly Election, the party's electoral tally had plateaued at a maximum of just four seats. Thirdly, whenever the party tried to venture outside Hyderabad — like in the 1989 and 1994 Assembly elections, where it contested 35 and 20 seats respectively and forfeited its deposit on 28 and 15 seats — it fared poorly. Thus, Mr. Owaisi had the ardent task of strengthening the party's foothold in its home turf before venturing outside. Hence, he chose the safe path of aligning with the UPA and defended the Congress in 2008 in the wake of the confidence vote sought by the Manmohan Singh-government after the Left Front withdrew support over the Indo-U.S. nuclear deal.

By 2009, two factors were helping him. His parliamentary interventions established him as an eloquent spokesperson on the Muslim question at the national level, and the delimitation exercise making more Assembly constituencies in Hyderabad, like Malakpet and Nampally (previously Asifnagar AC), Muslim-dominated seats raised the electoral tally of the AIMIM, thereby empowering Mr. Owaisi at the regional level.

This fuelled his national ambitions. By 2012, the party had set its eyes on two neighbouring States — Maharashtra and Karnataka — and particularly regions which were part of the Hyderabad State during the Nizam's rule and had significant Muslim populations. A significant breakthrough for the party's national ambitions came in October 2012, when the AIMIM won 11 of the 25 seats it contested in the Nanded municipal polls in eastern Maharashtra. Now, Mr. Owaisi followed the template of the secular paradox theory — accusing the Congress of favouring Hindu communal forces and acting against the interests of the Muslims, he withdrew support from the Congress government in Andhra Pradesh and at the Centre.

A closer look at Mr. Owaisi's political moves reveals his larger calculations. In his quest to find an alternative to the BJP and political Hindutva in future, he is working towards the creation of a national third front, a non-Congress, non-BJP alliance, wherein AIMIM would be an indispensable part, acting as a magnetic pull for minority votes away from traditional claimants like the Congress and other parties.

For instance, in 2018, Mr. Owaisi supported the JD(S) over the Congress in Karnataka; in Maharashtra in 2014 and 2019, he targeted the Congress and the NCP more than the BJP. The same template was repeated in 2015 and 2020 in Bihar and in 2017 in Uttar Pradesh. Now, in Bengal, the ruling Trinamool Congress and Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee are the prime targets, and predictably, the Samajwadi Party, the BSP and the Congress would be in Mr. Owaisi's line of fire in the run-up to the 2022 Uttar Pradesh Assembly poll.

Political psychology

No wonder, parties that are at the receiving end of Mr. Owaisi's politics label him as being hand-in-glove with the BJP. However, the underlying reason for Mr. Owaisi's attack on mainstream secular parties is a necessary evil he must embrace. The seats AIMIM aims to win in every State happen to be minority-dominated constituencies mostly controlled by these parties. Wresting those seats leaves Mr. Owaisi with no other option but to train his gun on them rather than the BJP. However, navigating the Muslim electorates' maze is also contingent on the community's political psychology.

Let's take three states: Bihar, Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. In Uttar Pradesh alone, in the Meerut-Muzaffarnagar-Saharanpur region, one finds castes like Mule Jats, Tyagi Muslims, and Gujjar Muslims, besides the Sheikhs, Sayyids, Quraishis and others; in Ruhelkhand region, the Turks, Pathans, Saifis, Ansaris, etc., maintain their caste identifications; in Braj, particularly in the Aligarh town, the upper-caste Pathans, who have lost their political clout, are present in pockets; further, in the Poorvanchal region, both south and north of the Ghaghra river, the OBC Ansari Muslims constitute a majority but lack political representation.

In Bihar, the OBC Ansari Muslims are politicised and dominate the Bhojpuri- and Mithila-speaking districts; in the Seemanchal region, where the AIMIM recently had electoral gains, the rivalry among the upper-caste Surjapuri and OBC Kulhaiya and Shershahvadi Muslims is well-known.

Further, in parts of north-Bengal like Coochbehar, Alipurduar, Jalpaiguri, the Nashya Shaikh Muslims, who are also found in Dhubri, Kokrajhar and Goalpara district of lower Assam, have a signigicant presence; similarly, in districts like Dinajpur and north Malda, the Muslim universe mirrors the composition of Seemanchal Bihar, ie., the Surjapuris and Shershahvadis; in south Bengal, while a majority of Muslims identify themselves as Sheikhs, they fall under the OBC category and are divided along sectarian and religious lines of being either the followers of Furfura Sharif or of the Jamiat-Ulama-i-Hind.

In this context, the Muslim psychology is about accentuating these internal differences when the fear of an aggressive Hindutva discourse is not the prime factor affecting their minds. However, when elections are polarised and the fear of the BJP's imminent victory is paramount, Muslims close ranks and vote for main-stream secular parties. Hence, it can be expected that in the 2021 Bengal election or the 2022 Uttar Pradesh election, the aggressive Hindutva push and the prospect of a BJP victory may ensure that Muslims would reject Mr. Owaisi and consolidate behind the traditional claimants. In the meantime, the AIMIM chief would keep analysts guessing.

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PEOPLES PULSE

an ear to the ground

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