

Poll Perceptions and Strategies in West Bengal

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The results of the recent Lok Sabha elections in West Bengal yield a number of insights. The Bharatiya Janata Party gained spectacularly, the left parties failed miserably, and the Trinamool Congress had to fight every inch of the way. How the main parties campaigned and fared is examined here.

The 2019 Lok Sabha election has become a landmark one in the history of India with many ramifications. Narendra Modi ranks third after Jawaharlal Nehru and Manmohan Singh in retaining power for the second consecutive term as Prime Minister.

In West Bengal the All India Trinamool Congress (TMC) secured 43.29% votes. Even though the percentage increased by a little over 3.5% as compared to 39.77% in the 2014 election, the number of seats retained by the TMC has decreased to 22 in 2019 as against 34 in 2014. The question that arises is: Did the total voter turnout for the 2019 elections increase drastically as compared to 2014? Further, the vote share of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has increased to 40.23% with 18 seats in 2019 as compared to 17.02% with two seats in 2014 (Purohit 2019). This has been largely carved out from the vote share of the left that did not secure even a single seat but managed to retain 7.47% of the votes polled. It witnessed a sharp fall from 29.93% in 2014. Another difference this time is that the left, TMC, BJP and Congress contested separately. It is being assumed in the public discourse that the people's political choice was clearly against rather than for a party.

At the same time, the vote calculations by the opposition parties clearly had some lacunae that they need to rectify in the future.

Accumulated Factors against TMC

To begin with, the BJP worked relentlessly to garner the support of the common people and which turned into affirmative votes in its favour. Both Modi and Amit Shah did not hesitate to go to different corners of West Bengal frequently. The

party manufactured confidence both in the common citizens as well as its own workers and members in the state. This led in due course to the turf becoming polarised between the TMC and Modi/Shah. A number of aspects must be taken into account.

First, the rejoinders and responses of the BJP leaders to the assertions and moves of the TMC might have concretised people's confidence that the former were set to take over at the centre once more.

Second, as the poll results in the western fringes of the state show, the rigorous attempts on the part of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh in gaining the confidence of the citizens on the eligibility of the BJP as the only formidable option to gain power, paid off handsomely.

Third, is the almost Kautilya-like manner of the BJP's attempts in West Bengal of garnering fake crowds in the rallies of TMC. It must be noted that this

method is a modification of what used to be followed in times of the left rule, when a large section of the people used to be forced directly or passively to participate in election rallies. This time, as Mukul Roy said, a large chunk of the TMC supporters were utilised by the BJP because, even as they campaigned for TMC, they functioned at the core in favour of the BJP (Ghosh 2019). It is well known by now that Roy was the strategist in this case and it proved to be productive in ensuring a catastrophic electoral journey for the TMC directly and also for the non-Congress alliance.

Fourth, the BJP quickly welcomed those legislators that the TMC had refused to give tickets to or had other differences with. It did not hesitate to re-channelise the wrath of these leaders by offering them tickets to contest against the TMC itself from the same constituency, except in the case of Anupam Hazra. It, therefore, needs no explaining that these leaders used their formidable support base in their favour in these elections.

Fifth, there was no solidarity among the stakeholders of the non-Congress,



non-National Democratic Alliance (NDA) compact; since both Mayawati and Mamata Banerjee were hopeful for the post of Prime Minister, the unity was destined to be fractured. Perhaps because she found West Bengal politics irrelevant to her objectives, Mayawati did not turn up in the assembly organised at the behest of Banerjee in January 2019. Later, Banerjee also turned to the leaders in the South in her quest for the Prime Minister's post; Chandrababu Naidu, former Andhra Pradesh chief minister showed great interest in supporting Banerjee. Her ambition was also ridiculed by BJP leaders and that obviously overlapped with the views of a large section of the citizens of West Bengal.

Sixth, the urban part of the state that polled in favour of the BJP could not be convinced about the alternative alliance with the example of the alliance between the Samajwadi Party (SP) and the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in Uttar Pradesh (UP). The memory of the feud that followed the alliance a few years ago in Bihar between Nitish Kumar and Lalu Prasad Yadav at the assembly level might have been fresh in their minds. The discourse in West Bengal is premised on the belief that Bihar and UP have more conformity at the social level than Bihar and West Bengal due to demographic differences. Politically too, this calculation is very clear. The supporters of the left and TMC, had there been an alliance between them despite their ideological antagonism, would have voted for neither of them. This happened in UP in the case of the alliance between the SP and BSP. Therefore, the urban citizens of West Bengal concluded that the UP example was not a viable option for them.

Seventh, this time around a large number of the left votes were cast in favour of the BJP. They found it a Hobson's choice in the absence of any other alternative to the TMC. There seemed to be a glimmer of a chance of an alliance between the left and the Congress. But, it failed to materialise and that prompted the left supporters to vote for the BJP as a better alternative to the TMC and obviously, the left parties. Except in Jadavpur constituency, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) failed to create any dent

in the electoral results, ranking third. The BJP came up to the second position in terms of the poll percentage in the Jadavpur constituency. Even if one assumes that for a section of the left supporters voting for the BJP was a move for the time being calculated at getting rid of the TMC and then going back to their original political position, it seems to be next to impossible to do so. In fact, this election showed a permanent exodus of the left across the country itself, not only in West Bengal.

Eighth, the NDA's last budget gave the middle class some relief in terms of deduction of income tax in the standard deduction and no tax payable on income up to ₹5 lakh. Finally, the anti-corruption strategies announced by the BJP regime and its assurance to the common people to take action against those involved seems to have boosted the manufacturing of a BJP support base among the non-political common people, especially those who faced financial losses due to corruption, particularly in the rural areas of the state. Besides, the BJP campaigned exhaustively to convince the people that the democratic rights of the citizens in the panchayat (rural self-government) elections in the recent past were not protected. Interestingly, a large section of the urban voters too were convinced by this campaign.

New Grounds Broken

Further, the BJP tried to gain the confidence of the Matua community as well. As many as two constituencies—Ranaghat and Bongaon—with a dominant Matua population have been won by the party. The internal dispute within the Thakur family of the Matuas became politicised and their verdict was in favour

of the BJP. Obviously, losing the support of the Matua community—which is a large vote bank in the districts of North 24 Parganas and Nadia—has added to the frustrating results of the TMC.

In Darjeeling where the BJP won by more than 4 lakh votes and its ally won the by-election at the assembly level, it is reported that the verdict is a rejoinder to what happened there in 2017 (Chhetri 2019). So, it was also not unexpected that the TMC would lose its seat here. In 2019, the BJP recorded the third consecutive success in Lok Sabha polls. The BJP also achieved as many as three out of a total of eight assembly seats in the by-elections this time around, namely, Habibpur (Malda), Krishnaganj (Nadia) and Bhatpara (North 24 Parganas).

Overall, in these election results in West Bengal, the issues of the impact of demonetisation, controversy over the military strike in Pakistan, etc, failed to yield anything in favour of the TMC. However, the triumph in the Lok Sabha elections does not necessarily indicate an easy victory in the assembly polls as well. Yet, the glimpses of the sabotage among supporters of the TMC, as clear from Roy's version cited above will be witnessed in the coming days, but might not work again in 2021. So, to win in the 2021 assembly elections, the BJP might have to explore the situation again because poll perceptions vary for elections at different levels.

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