

Bengal, A Month Later: It's Time to Get Real - The Wire

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Many in West Bengal are still pinching themselves from the 4th of last month to believe that they are actually in a Bharatiya Janata Party ruled state – something that was unthinkable until it really happened. Everyone could realise that the record turnout of almost 92.47% of voters meant that Bengal was angry and was sure to vote unambiguously in any one direction. Some incorrigible optimists (*mea culpa*) believed that the angst was directed at the unabashed alliance between the Election Commission and the BJP, with the indulgence of a Supreme Court.

Never before in history had one man in Delhi, the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), tormented so many and forced so many lakhs of humans in this state (including the old, the infirm, and hapless women) to stand in long queues to prove that they do exist – belying his deeply malevolent belief to the contrary. Never before had a Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls needed to be done with such haste and a malicious predetermined agenda to eliminate certain targeted troublesome voters. One has never imagined that so many unheard-of terms like ‘unmapped’, ‘under adjudication’ and ‘logical discrepancies’ would disguise his booby traps laid to disenfranchise millions. India will also remember the present Chief Justice of India for his extreme forbearance and his sweeping legitimisation of an unprecedented roll revision, despite the process that entailed a dozen depredations by the CEC. It will also never forget his “cockroach” comment as he rose in fierce defence of a questionable establishment.

In 41 years of service, which includes conducting two parliamentary elections in West Bengal as the Chief Electoral Officer, one has seen the election process at levels closer than the CEC and the very supportive court. But one has never witnessed such a man-made crisis, including so many deaths of election officials, by suicide or under extreme work pressure, and nor has the Supreme Court ever intervened at every step to supplant executive officers with judicial ones. One is not sure if the undefined and unquestioned power under Article 142 of the Constitution authorises the court to override an explicit provision of the law of parliament without elucidating why it was so absolutely necessary. We refer to Section 24 of the Representation of People Act of 1950 that clearly says that appeals against deletions from voters’ lists shall lie with the district magistrate or additional DM or nominated executive magistrate – which the Supreme Court handed over to retired high court judges to decide. Thus, 27 lakh citizens (or the overwhelming majority of them) were debarred from voting until their appeals against deletions that had been done primarily by the CEC’s opaque and unaccountable computer, are disposed of. This may take a hundred years, going by the present rate of disposal.

Having said all this, one must accept the hard fact that the decisive vote in Bengal for the BJP was not in protest against these palpable actions, but to express undisguised wrath against Mamata Banerjee. Her Trinamool Congress (TMC)’s terrible image and worse record of governance aroused mass fury – as one had forewarned so passionately in 2024, while resigning as TMC’s Rajya Sabha MP. Friends and foes in Delhi, many of whom would give their left arm to be an MP, just could not understand then, the disappointment and trepidation (about the struggle against communal politics) with which one left a party that was doomed to self destruction. One observes with pain the same alarming inability of balanced liberals to accept this blunt truth and, instead, delude themselves for weeks, recounting how the SIR conspired to defeat Mamata Banerjee. Of course, the SIR tried its best, but her defeat can still not be proved to be directly attributable to the deletions that were done on an unprecedented scale. Analysts have worked hard to prove otherwise, by running data through computers and even calculating the abnormal speed of voting, but the TMC itself has gone on record that it is only in 31

constituencies, that their margin of loss is less than the number of voters deleted by various convoluted stratagems of the Election Commission. And, assuming (absurdly) that all the deleted voters pressed the button for the TMC candidate in these 31 seats, then also the party is still nowhere near victory.

Cultivation of communalism

Among the reasons for this debacle, some are quite obvious, like widespread and visible corruption and open extortion. IFB Agro in Abhishek Banerjee's constituency had to cough up Rs 40 crore to TMC after ruffians threatened it. Besides, numerous party workers were fed up with Abhishek's high-handed behaviour vis-à-vis senior and middle level party leaders who had risen up the ranks. His snooty control and domination through a top-to-bottom pyramid of I-PAC – a consultancy organisation that had been turned by him into an intelligence-gathering parallel political outfit. Complete de-industrialisation has hurt the state for decades but Potemkin advisers carried on with expensive annual public charades called 'Bengal Global Business Summits' promising the moon. But these hardly impressed the jobless young, suffering from cankering unemployment. Mamata's continued neglect of Dalits in "casteless Bengal" was utilised to the hilt by "casteist" BJP who assiduously wooed voters of the Rajbanshi, Matua and Scheduled Caste communities of the western tract – who switched over almost totally to the BJP. Their 24% vote was propped up to make up for the 27% Muslim vote that is naturally against the BJP – but few people notice these numbers.

Mamata Banerjee's constant harping on Bengal's culture of tolerance and the intrinsic unorthodox values that were institutionalised after almost two centuries of social reform and the Bengal renaissance did work, for her first decade of rule. It was derided by the Gangetic belt conservatives as "Bengali sub-nationalism". But the local BJP went on battering the castle's gates, nevertheless, importing aggressive Hindu pride, belligerent Ram Navamis and celebrating "upcountry deities". They actually succeeded in raking up long-dormant Brahmanical pride and "superiority" that was extended to cover the 'upper' castes of the *bhadraloks*, estimated at about 10-12% of the population. The BJP missed no opportunity to lampoon Mamata Banerjee as 'Begum Mumtaz' for posing for *duas* wearing a head scarf and for assuring protection to Muslims. The fact is that she hardly extended any special benefits to them, other than small allowances to mosque imams and the age-old Haj subsidy. This contributed to a considerable section of Muslims moving away to the Congress, the CPI(M) and other smaller parties – which accounts for them getting 3%, 4.5% and 2.5% of votes. Every vote counts as the BJP won by just a 5 percentage point margin over the TMC's 41% – but bagged 208 seats, against TMC's 80.

Another factor is and was the non-stop, multiple source campaign of the BJP and its controlled mainstream media that several crores of Bangladeshi infiltrators (meaning Muslims) have taken over Bengal and India. This finally yielded results after hammering for a decade. Incidentally, proclaimed illegal Hindu immigrants like Matuas are not treated as *ghuspaithias* (illegal immigrants) by the Union government, but as "refugees" This "Muslim takeover" exaggeration has always provided constant fixes to Islamophobic sections of Bengali *bhadraloks* (though most continued to be liberal and/or left) and the hardcore Hindi-Hindu lot who constitute a solid 5% of voters. The dose's "high" is pumped up daily, through mostly-fake social media posts and it works wonders on those whose intellect justifies what their instinct prompts.

Muslims in Bengal

But one must also point out to the growing radicalisation of sections of Bengali Muslims in terms of newly adopted dresses and demeanour. Burqas, hijabs, skull caps, ankle-high pyjamas and typically Islamic beards were hardly ever a part of the Bengali Muslim who was earlier totally indistinguishable in looks and dress from Hindus. This transformation appears to have evoked negative feelings, as much as a Muslim would feel if most Hindus started sporting large *tilaks*, keeping *choti*-tufts or wearing provocative saffron. And then, the highly incendiary, anti-India, anti-Hindu statements and actions of an ignoble Muhammad Yunus and the Bangladeshi Islamic extremists enraged many a tolerant Hindu – who never stopped to analyse India's role

in propping up Sheikh Hasina. This time, many young voters moved to the BJP, as they saw no hope with the TMC and 12 years of sustained, expensive and penetrating Modi propaganda had to bear some results sometime.

The new CM, Suvendu Adhikari, was one of Mamata Banerjee's henchmen and he is the only CM who was caught on camera accepting a bribe. He is just six years old in the BJP, but he has overshadowed senior lifelong members of the RSS and the BJP (there are many rumblings on this issue), thanks to Modi-Shah's special affections. The latter went up after he defeated Mamata Banerjee who made the crucial mistake of contesting against him in his den in 2021. He is now modelling himself on another defector, Assam's Himanta Biswa Sarma's terror tactics and 'zero tolerance to Muslims' policy. But the fact that he could not announce his own cabinet for three weeks after his oath-taking on May 9 and that he has not distributed the portfolios till today shows how tightly Delhi will control him.

This subservience is sure to annoy voters in Bengal, many of whom are already regretting their impulsive vote, as they were fed up with the TMC. His first actions at targeting Muslims and bulldozing the stalls of poor hawkers in several places has not gone down well with the neutral middle band. The announcement that the needy lot among the 27 lakh deleted voters (whose appeals are moving at a snail's pace before almighty Justices) are now sought to be debarred from popular schemes has already caused an uproar. And Suvendu's single minded fixation to "detect, delete and deport" several crores of Bangladeshis may soon land him in a soup, as wiser analysts say that the number is not likely to cross a handful of lakhs only. Besides, how virulently Bangladeshis react to Bengal's quick-fix ruthlessness and clumsiness is to be seen. The Centre may step in at some point if it pushes Bangladeshis even closer to Pakistan and China. Some feel that Suvendu's deep (but acquired) Hindu prejudices and his merciless actions may generate its own opposition and lead to a rethink among the bhadralok class.

But, there is now widespread celebration in many quarters, including hard-core intolerant Bengalis (who have increased their presence, but are still not central or unchallenged) and among the 5% Hindi-Hindu bloc. The upcountry trading communities settled in Bengal prayed (and paid) for what they now view as the mainstreaming of the dissident Bengali ethos, but this may be a far cry. All that everyone wants is some economic growth and (for god's sake) a halt in Bengal's steady, unstoppable decline.

What of the TMC?

In the meantime, the TMC has started cracking up as 59 of its MLAs have reportedly moved the Speaker to recognise them as the real TMC. Unlike Operation Lotus in Maharashtra, which split the Shiv Sena and the Nationalist Congress Party so that the defeated BJP could form a government with moneybags, Suvendu's BJP has no such need and the state BJP has made it clear that defectors from the TMC are not welcome. But the breakaway lot badly requires some insurance policy against criminal cases for transgressing the law and other corruption charges during the previous regime. In return, the lot may split the TMC's parliamentary party from a (nuisance) number two opposition party position in the Rajya Sabha and the third similar position in the Lok Sabha. Good riddance — where Modi is concerned.

But the plot is still unfolding and it may be too early to jump to conclusions. Yet if Mamata Banerjee is really left with just a handful of legislators, it would be poetic justice as she has broken every party in Bengal and encouraged defections. The Left and Congress are showing some signs of green shoots and may be able to fill the opposition gap — which is a healthy development. But at the same time, unless Mamata Banerjee recovers her old spirit (which is difficult at 71), Bengal and India would certainly lose Narendra Modi's most intractable opponent.

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