

Beyond the ballot, a battle for identity and safety

Jawahar Sircar

West Bengal's election is not going to be a normal one—institutions have become part of the contest. So, voters are not just choosing a government, they are thinking about their own safety.

To understand what is happening, it is important to see why Bengal is not just another state for the BJP. Bengal's society underwent sociocultural reforms before the rest of modern India, breaking from religious orthodoxy through a long struggle led by the upper castes against obscurantism. A strong regional identity emerged from this—secular and casteless and now integral to everyday life. Religion is present, but it does not dominate politics. Durga Puja, for example, is more a social and cultural event than a religious one. Language and culture matter more than caste.

Because of this, the BJP's politics faces a certain resistance in Bengal. Many people, especially the middle class, are wary of the Hindi-Hindu cultural uniformity it seeks to impose, not hostile to Hindi or Hinduism per se.

Meanwhile, the Trinamool Congress faces anger for a different reason: its autocratic style of governance and corrupt cadre. What people describe is not just corruption at the top, but a system that exists at many levels—building a house, starting a business, making small repairs—all requiring informal payments to syndicates. This has led to frustration among ordinary people.

So voters are caught between two concerns: anxiety about cultural and political change on one side and anger about corruption and everyday difficulties on the other.

Now another issue has increased the tension—changes in voter lists. The legal side will be decided in court. But on the ground, the impact is visible. Among many poor voters, there is fear. They worry about losing benefits, documents or even their place in the system. And fear can influence voting more strongly than any campaign.

Because of all this, the election is no longer just about the Trinamool, the BJP, the left or the Congress. The Election Commission, the courts and the administration have also become part of day-to-day life here. This election feels larger and more uncertain as SIR is a strategy to delete voters at any cost, so the BJP may win.

This could actually help Mamata. Even people who are unhappy with her regime may support her if they feel there is a bigger threat to their identity or security.

This also reflects a longer pattern. The Congress, the left and now the Trinamool all started with strong ideas. The left, for instance, carried out land reforms and changed rural society, but new generations moved away from its ideology. The Trinamool built a strong grassroots network to defeat the left, but this network has become worse than the left and more powerful at the local level. Power becomes concentrated, then it becomes unpopular.

In such a situation, the need for a strong and credible opposition becomes important. Bengal needs a political space where issues can be raised without increasing fear, and where corruption can be questioned without turning it into a larger identity conflict. Right now, that middle ground looks weak.

When politics becomes a choice between different kinds of fear, voters stop thinking freely. That is why this election feels different. And even if it produces a clear winner, it may not fully restore

trust. Because democracy depends not just on voting, but on confidence in the system.

—As told to **Kanu Sarda**

The author is a retired civil servant and former Rajya Sabha member.