Party Politics in West Bengal: Historical and Contemporary Dynamics

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ABSTRACT

Party politics in West Bengal is a complex and ever-evolving phenomenon deeply rooted in the state's socio-cultural history. This overview explores the dynamic landscape of party politics in West Bengal, tracing its historical evolution and examining the key players, ideological underpinnings, electoral strategies, and socio-economic factors that have influenced voter preferences over the years. From the pre-independence era's freedom struggle to the contemporary political dynamics dominated by the All-India Trinamool Congress (AITC) and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), West Bengal's political journey reflects its vibrant cultural mosaic and socio-political complexities. This paper also discusses the current scenario in West Bengal, highlighting the role of various political parties in recent local and assembly elections. The methodology involves a comprehensive review of academic papers and journals on various aspects of West Bengal's politics, governance, and societal dynamics. While existing literature touches on governance-related aspects like healthcare policies, decentralisation, and power sector reforms, there is a research gap in integrating these elements to provide a holistic assessment of West Bengal's governance model. The paper identifies this research gap and calls for a more comprehensive study that explores the interplay of political decisions, decentralisation efforts, and policy reforms in shaping the state's development and governance outcomes.

Keywords- West Bengal, party politics, governance, electoral dynamics, political parties, socio-cultural history, decentralization, policy reforms.

I. INTRODUCTION

Party politics in West Bengal has been a dynamic and ever-evolving landscape, deeply intertwined with the state's rich socio-cultural heritage and historical significance. Situated in the eastern part of India, West Bengal has been a crucible of political movements, ideologies, and power struggles, making it a captivating case study in the realm of Indian politics. Mayers, J. (1998). From the days of the Bengal Renaissance in the 19th century to the present, this state has witnessed a complex interplay of political forces that have shaped its destiny and contributed significantly to the broader political narrative of the country. This overview will delve into the multifaceted world of party politics in West Bengal, tracing its origins, historical milestones, and the key players who have dominated the political landscape (Ray, S. K., et al. 2011). It will examine the ideological underpinnings of various political parties, their electoral strategies, and the socio-economic factors that have influenced voter preferences over the years. Furthermore, it will explore the state's remarkable political journey, including the emergence of regional parties, electoral dynamics, and the enduring influence of charismatic leaders (Bhattacharyya, D., & Rana, K. 2008). As we embark on this exploration, we will gain insights into the intricacies of party politics in West Bengal, a state where politics is not merely a contest of ideas and ideologies but a reflection of its vibrant cultural mosaic and socio-political dynamics (Sinharay, P. 2022).

II. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The history of party politics in West Bengal is marked by a dynamic and often tumultuous journey that

has significantly shaped the state's political landscape. Here is an overview of the historical background of party politics in West Bengal:

2.1 Pre-Independence Era: During the pre-independence period, West Bengal was an active centre of the Indian freedom movement, and various political groups and leaders played a crucial role in the struggle against British colonial rule. The Indian National Congress (INC) had a strong presence in the region and enjoyed considerable support from leaders like Subhas Chandra Bose and Sarat Chandra Bose. The Communist Party of India (CPI) also gained prominence in West Bengal during this time, particularly in rural areas. The Tebhaga movement in the late 1940s, which demanded a more equitable share of crops for sharecroppers, was a significant communist-led agrarian movement (Guha, A. 2017).

2.2 Post-Independence Period (1947–1967): After India gained independence in 1947, the INC initially dominated the political scene in West Bengal. Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy served as the first Chief Minister of the state. However, the state saw a significant political shift in 1967 when the United Front, a coalition of leftist parties, came to power. The coalition was led by the CPI (M) and included other left-wing parties like the CPI and the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP) (Guha, A. 2017).

2.3 Left Front Rule (1977–2011): The Left Front, primarily led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) or CPI (M), ruled West Bengal for an uninterrupted 34-year period from 1977 to 2011. During this time, Jyoti Basu and Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee served as Chief Ministers. The Left Front implemented land reforms, introduced pro-poor policies, and had a stronghold in rural areas (Guha, A. 2017).

2.4 Emergence of the All-India Trinamool Congress (AITC): The All-India Trinamool Congress (AITC), led by Mamata Banerjee, emerged as a significant political force in the early 2000s. It was formed in 1998, gained widespread support, and came to power in the state in 2011. The 2011 Assembly elections marked the end of Left Front rule, and Mamata Banerjee became the Chief Minister (Guha, A. 2017).
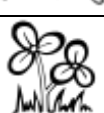
2.5 Contemporary Politics (2011–Present): Since 2011, the AITC has been the dominant political force in West Bengal. Mamata Banerjee has been the Chief Minister of the state for multiple terms. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has made significant inroads into the state's politics, particularly in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, where it won a substantial number of seats. West Bengal has witnessed intense political competition and polarisation, with the AITC and BJP being the primary contenders in recent elections (Guha, A. 2017).

2.6 Other Political Parties: Apart from the AITC and BJP, other political parties like the INC and the Left Front have also been active in West Bengal's political landscape, although their influence has declined in recent years (Guha, A. 2017).

2.7 Political Dynamics: West Bengal's politics have been characterised by ideological diversity, with left-wing, centrist, and right-wing parties competing for power. The state has also seen significant social and political movements, including issues related to land acquisition, industrialization, and communal tensions (Guha, A. 2017).

III. CURRENT SCENARIO OF WEST BENGAL ASSEMBLY ELECTION

List of a few political parties which are playing key roles in the West Bengal Assembly Election 2021.

SL.NO	Party Name	Contested Seats	Seats Won	Votes	Percent of votes	Parties Symbols
1	Communist Party of India (CPI)	10	0	118655	0.2%	
2	Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)	291	77	22850710	38.13%	
3	Indian National Congress	91	0	1757131	2.93%	
4	Communist Party of India (CPIM)	138	0	2837276	4.73%	
5	All India Trinamool Congress (AITC)	288	213	28735420	47.94%	
6	Indian Secular Front (ISF)	32	1	813,489	1.36	

Source: Election commission of India.

3.1 West Bengal Legislative Assembly result in 2021 election

All India Trinamool Congress (AITC): AITC was the ruling party in West Bengal as of the 2021 Assembly elections. They held the majority of seats in the Legislative Assembly. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP): The BJP emerged as the primary opposition party in West Bengal in the 2021 elections, gaining a significant number of seats and votes compared to previous elections. They made strong efforts to expand their presence in the state. Left Front: The Left Front, a coalition of leftist parties, including the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and others, had a notable presence in West Bengal politics. However, their influence has been declining over the years. Indian National Congress (INC): The Indian National Congress remained a player in West Bengal politics, though its influence had diminished compared to the past. Indian Secular Front (ISF): The ISF was a new entrant in the 2021 elections, formed in alliance with the Left Front and the Congress. It aimed to consolidate Muslim votes. All India Forward Bloc (AIFB), Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP), Communist Party of India (CPI), Nationalist Congress Party (NCP), Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation, and Socialist Unity Centre of India (Communist): These were smaller parties with varying degrees of influence in West Bengal politics, often aligning with larger parties or coalitions.

IV.   METHODOLOGY

This paper is totally based on a review of papers, articles, and journals that are published in prestige and valuable journals. Researchers have chosen more than 25 published journals as a sample of selected topics.

V.   REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Ghatak, M., & Ghatak, M. (2002) Since the middle of the 1980s, West Bengal's panchayat system has made a substantial contribution to the state's economic recovery. Since 1978, it has been the first significant state to regularly hold party-based panchayat elections. West Bengal, however, lags behind other states in the transfer of authority, resources, and duties to the panchayat. This essay explores a recent reform that attempts to address this problem.

Ray, S. K., et al. (2011) focused on a survey done in three districts of West Bengal, India, and found that 32.89% of the population, especially in tribal regions, did not seek medical attention from any institution. The majority (38.58%) chose public health facilities, followed by skilled private practitioners (27.27%) and untrained quacks (27.27%). The study also discovered that self-referrals and referrals from immediate family or friends accounted for the majority of referrals and that customer satisfaction could be raised by offering clean facilities with access to safe drinking water. The study did draw attention to the need for postnatal care to be improved in order to lower newborn and maternal death and morbidity.

Webster, N. (1992) Decentralised planning has been used by the Left Front administration of West Bengal, headed by the Communist Party of India (CPI) (M), since 1978. This tactic tries to broaden the party's support and uplift the underprivileged. However, the CPI's policy is equivocal, balancing political and electoral objectives for socialism and a people's democracy.

Islam, K. N. (2011) In fewer than 25 years, Bangladesh has undergone three name changes since changing from East Bengal to Bangladesh in 1971. The study gives a historical review of religious diversity in the Bengal region and examines how it relates to politics that are founded on religion. The people and leaders of Bangladesh have endured and maintained religious and social pluralism despite shifting ruling elites and sporadic violence. The poll intends to contrast the ideologically motivated religio-political interests aiming to build a repressive Islamic state with the current tolerant pluralism that is already in place.

Sinharay, P. (2022) examines Harichand and Guruchand Thakur's political deification as the anti-caste religion Matua Dharma's founders in West Bengal. The public's attention has been drawn to the Matuas, who are primarily Namasudras, as a politically active and significant electoral group. The deification process is examined through Matua print literature, neighbourhood celebrations, and remembrance customs at the popular and official institutional levels.

Nag, M. (1989) In contrast to rural West Bengal, the article contends that political awareness in rural Kerala, particularly up to the 1970s, had a substantial impact on the availability and use of health facilities. It recommends that Indian political parties and labour unions actively engage the populace on social concerns including women's rights, health, and education.

Harrison, T. (2017) focused on the relationship between NGOs and political parties in West Bengal, India, which is examined in the article. It combines a survey with case studies, interviews with politicians and government representatives, and survey data. The results cast doubt on the notion that relying on government financing forces NGOs to become more professional and bureaucratic. They emphasise the significance of government money that is not project-based and the significance of political connections in the distribution and management of government funds for NGOs. The study, which was carried out after the Left Front was in power, aids in comprehending Left Front tactics and NGOs' research methods.

Kohli, A., & Singh, P. (2013). Interest in Indian politics has increased as a result of India's rising global relevance. This Handbook offers a thorough overview of

India's political changes, economic progress, diversity of regional development, and shifting position. It looks at uneven development between states, economic growth since the middle of the 1980s, and governance quality. For scholars, researchers, policy analysts, and students researching Indian politics, the Handbook is a crucial tool.

Basu, A. (2013) Bengal's transformation from "press" to "media" has been a difficult process that has been impacted by the politics of the state. The environment of the media has changed from one of total state-imposed press restrictions to one of state-market amity, where government and corporate leaders manage news to support some ideas while undermining others. The political and economic classes have begun to examine democratic rights as a result of the economy's opening up. The media has evolved into a tool for the capitalist government, used to silence the populace and enforce governmental edicts. This change in media behaviour has undermined public trust in democracy and altered how the state operates on a fundamental level.

Basu, M. (2023). This study looks at how healthcare regulations affect elections in West Bengal, a state that had a communist administration for 34 years. It looks at how political parties portrayed healthcare in their platform statements, how the general public saw healthcare, and whether there was a lull following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Chatterjee, E. (2018). Despite efforts to reform the market, India's power sector, which is under the control of state governments, regularly performs below expectations. As an alternative to the World Bank's paradigm for liberalising the power market, West Bengal, a state with subnational governments, serves as an example of public sector reform. The reforms produced some of India's strongest early performance while strengthening utilities against political meddling. Due to party politics, which can result in short-termism and political capture of utilities, longer-term sustainability is still difficult to achieve.

Mir, A. A., & Rao, A. N. (2022). This study looks at how social media was used during the 2014 and 2019 elections for the Indian Lok Sabha and state assemblies, as well as the virtual campaigning brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. It discusses social media's importance in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Goa, West Bengal, and Kerala and shows how it will be used in the Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh elections of 2022.

Mayers, J. (1998). In West Bengal, the 12th Lok Sabha elections revealed a substantial shift in oppositional politics, pushing the Congress to the margins of electoral politics in favour of Mamata Banerjee's Trinamul Congress and growing BJP support. This reveals waning confidence in the party's leaders and a disapproval of its accommodative attitude towards the dominant Left Front. The division inside the state Congress points to a larger organisational ailment.

Bhattacharyya, R. (2008). The Burdwan district of West Bengal, India, is the focus of this study's analysis of the effects of IT on rural residents. It contends that only when e-governance is tailored to the requirements and capabilities of panchayats will it result in development advantages. The study measured socioeconomic demands and correlated them with e-governance gains using a standardised questionnaire. The case will be strengthened by replication with additional blocks and Gramme Panchayats.

Ghosh, A. (2001). In West Bengal, the Left Front won six terms in a row, which is unusual in Indian electoral politics. Its success was aided by elements like the change in the Chief Minister, inter-communal harmony, the performance of the rural sector, and favourable state growth.

Lerche, J., et al. (2013). This special edition examines left-leaning politics in India and how agrarian issues relate to them. It talks about how capitalism evolved in rural India, how it related to capitalism and neoliberal globalisation, and how rural class relations evolved. It also looks at how leftist politics in India have studied and planned for these shifts.

Das, R. (2013). The Left Front coalition government in West Bengal, India, from 1977 to 2011 was in power when the thesis was written. The Communist Party of India-MMarxist (CPIM) encountered electoral difficulties as a result of the government's liberal approach to economic development, which placed a strong emphasis on non-agricultural growth and the private sector. The CPIM had to solicit private investment despite its dedication to pro-poor initiatives in order to benefit from the liberalised policy environment. The thesis examines the causes of this change and how it was defended while upholding the party's customary rhetoric. It also looks at recent opposition to the clearing of land for industrial facilities and the enforcement of party leadership directives.

Nielsen, K. B. (2010, June). Since 2006, the Singur controversy in West Bengal has been a divisive topic in Indian development. Tata Motors abandoned the factory in 2008 when a local rural movement contested their land acquisition. The Left Front government, economists, farmers, social activists, NGOs, and opposition political parties are among the five parties that have examined the controversy. The voices of individuals opposing industrialization have been silenced in spite of public attention. The Singur dispute should be viewed as a component of a movement to civilise the growth of capitalism.

Chattopadhyay, P. (2023). In post-colonial democracies like India, gender inequality in governance is still a major problem. Even after 34 years of Left Front government, gender has not been a central aspect of politics in West Bengal. The Kanyashree programme focuses on gender parity; however, initiatives that emphasise empowerment and social violence against

women raise questions. The inclusion of Kanyashree prevents initial politicisation and persistent critiques.

Öktem, K. G. (2012). In Kerala, West Bengal, and Tripura, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) has led successful governmental coalitions. It demonstrates that the Left has experienced sporadic victories in Kerala while experiencing stagnation in West Bengal. According to the report, these variations are the result of various tactics employed by regional party units.

Datta, P. (2007). The revival of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) in India has lagged behind other states, notwithstanding West Bengal's early leadership in decentralization. Conceptual and programmatic limitations were discovered by the Mukarji and Bandyopadhyay Committee in 1993, with the Left Front Government's "feasibility frontier" providing a justified answer to these limitations.

VI.   RESEARCH GAP

Several papers touch upon aspects of governance, such as the panchayat system, healthcare access, political party dynamics, and power sector reforms. However, there is a need for a broader study that integrates these elements to assess the overall governance model in West Bengal. This would involve examining how political decisions, decentralisation efforts, and policy reforms impact various sectors, including healthcare, education, and economic development. The effectiveness of political and administrative decentralisation in West Bengal and its impact on service delivery and development outcomes. The role of political parties, particularly the Left Front, in shaping governance policies and their implications for the state's development. The relationship between social dynamics, such as religious diversity and caste-based politics, and governance in West Bengal. The influence of external factors, such as globalisation and media transformation, on governance and the public's perception of democracy. The role of gender inequality in governance and the effectiveness of gender-focused initiatives.

VII.   CONCLUSION

This summary explores the political landscape of West Bengal, focusing on its pre-independence struggles and the current dominance of the All-India Trinamool Congress and Bharatiya Janata Party. It highlights the historical background, ideological diversity, electoral dynamics, and the role of political parties in shaping the state's political landscape. The paper also highlights the current situation in local and assembly elections and the existing body of knowledge on politics, governance, and societal dynamics. However, a comprehensive study is needed to integrate political decisions, decentralisation efforts, policy reforms, and the impact on critical sectors like healthcare, education, and economic development. Future research should offer a more holistic perspective on the state's political and socio-economic dynamics.

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