



International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

Political Inertia and Identity Politics: An Analysis of Contemporary West Bengal

Priyam Choudhury

Christ university (Bengaluru)

ABSTRACT :

West Bengal is known for being politically aware and having a lot of culture, but it also has a strange political trait: it usually has long-term rule by one party (or coalition). This essay talks about the idea of a "culture of delayed politics" or political stagnation in Bengal. It looks into why ruling parties tend to stay in power for a long time. It looks at the social and political reasons why this happened, starting with the Congress era and going through the 34 years of Left Front rule and the more than ten years of Trinamool Congress (TMC) rule that came after that. This study also looks at the problems that are currently affecting Bengal's politics, focusing on the controversial issues of Hindi imposition, linguistic chauvinism, and the growing divide between religions. Using news reports, academic articles, and political analyses as secondary data, this paper shows that a deeply rooted party-society structure, the strategic use of Bengali sub-nationalism, and a welfare-patronage model make a strong ecosystem that resists political change, even when there is a lot of anti-incumbency. .

Keywords: West Bengal Politics, Political Inertia, Left Front, Trinamool Congress, Bengali Sub-nationalism, Hindi Imposition, Religious Polarization, Bhadrak.

Introduction:

The Paradox of Bengal's "Delayed Politics"

People know Gopal Krishna Gokhale for saying, "What Bengal thinks today, India thinks tomorrow." This phrase sums up how the state has always thought of itself as a leader in politics and ideas. The Bengal Renaissance and the Indian independence movement are just two examples of how the area has been a hotbed of new ideas. But the fact that it has had elections since independence is strange. The Bengali voters are very smart, but they have been surprisingly stable in their politics, often sticking with the same government for decades before making a big change.

When people talk about "political inertia" or a "culture of delayed politics," this is what they mean. People in Bengal do care about politics; a lot of people vote and there is a lot of political talk in public. The system just won't change. First, this paper will talk about the cultural and structural reasons why the ruling parties in West Bengal have stayed in power for so long. Next, it will look at how this well-established political system is now dealing with the new and often divisive forces of religious and linguistic identity politics.

Research Question

How do historical patterns of political inertia and the strategic use of Bengali sub-nationalism explain the longevity of ruling dispensations in West Bengal and shape their response to contemporary challenges of religious and linguistic polarization?

Objectives of the Research:

- To analyze the structural and cultural factors (such as the cadre-patronage model, the role of the Bhadrak, and welfarism) that contribute to the phenomenon of long-term single-party dominance in West Bengal's political history.
- To investigate the role of Bengali sub-nationalism as a political tool, particularly in the context of perceived 'Hindi imposition' and the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).
- To examine the impact of growing religious polarization on the state's electoral dynamics and its potential consequences for West Bengal's social fabric.
- To synthesize these findings to forecast potential political dynamics for the 2026 Assembly elections and identify critical governance and economic issues that require policy intervention.

The Anatomy of Longevity: Why Ruling Parties Stay in Power

The Congress, the Left Front, and the Trinamool Congress have all been in charge for a long time, since 1947 with some breaks. They are based on a mix of things that make a strong cycle of incumbency.

The Cadre-Patronage Model: From Party Society to Syndicate Raj

The Left Front set the stage for a long-term government. Political scientist Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya called it a "party-society" because the party's structure affected all parts of civil society (Bhattacharyya, 2009). Through local committees and control of the three-tier Panchayat system, the party cadre became the main link between the state and the people. They decided who could get jobs, resources, and government benefits, which made the party a necessary part of everyday life.

When the Trinamool Congress came to power, they didn't tear down this building. Instead, they used it for their own purposes. "The TMC has done in 10 years what the Left did in 34 years," said political analyst Prashant Kishor. "They have built a cadre on the ground" (The Indian Express, 2021). This system turned into the well-known "syndicate raj," a group of local party leaders who were in charge of everything from planning festivals to getting supplies for real estate. This creates a strong network of supporters who stay loyal and vote, which makes it very hard for opposition parties to get through.

The Role of the Bhadrakol and Cultural Hegemony

The Bhadrakol (literally "gentlefolk")—the educated, culturally-inclined Bengali middle and upper class—has historically played the role of a kingmaker. Their initial disillusionment with the Congress's handling of the Naxalbari uprising and economic stagnation led them to embrace the Left Front, which offered an ideological and intellectual alternative. For decades, the Left enjoyed the cultural and intellectual hegemony that came with Bhadrakol support.

The shift occurred in the 2000s with the agitations in Singur and Nandigram. The Bhadrakol, including prominent intellectuals and artists, turned against the Left's high-handed industrialisation policies. Mamata Banerjee successfully positioned herself as the champion of the "Maa, Maati, Manush" (Mother, Soil, People), appealing to this sentiment. As The Telegraph reported during the 2011 election, "A galaxy of intellectuals, who had once been the Left's showpiece, had deserted the sinking ship and thrown their weight behind Mamata Banerjee" (The Telegraph, 2011). Once a party secures the tacit approval of this influential class, it gains a legitimacy that transcends mere electoral numbers, contributing to its longevity.

The Weak and Fragmented Opposition

A long-ruling incumbent naturally benefits from a weak opposition. During the Left's tenure, the Congress was internally fragmented and lacked a compelling narrative. After 2011, the Left Front and the Congress were electorally decimated and have struggled to present a credible alternative to the TMC. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has emerged as the principal opposition, but its success has been limited by cultural and linguistic barriers, which will be discussed later. This lack of a viable alternative forces voters, even those dissatisfied with the incumbent, to choose the "devil they know," thus prolonging the ruling party's tenure.

The Welfare State Model

The TMC government, in particular, has mastered the art of direct welfare delivery, creating a vast constituency of dependent beneficiaries. Schemes like Kanyashree (a conditional cash transfer for girls' education, which won a UN award), Swasthya Sathi (health insurance), and especially Lakshmi Bhandar (a basic income for women heads of households) have created a direct line of patronage from the Chief Minister to the voter, bypassing traditional party structures. As an article in The Hindu noted, these schemes, particularly those targeting women, were a "game-changer" in the 2021 Assembly elections, insulating the TMC from anti-incumbency sentiment over corruption and local governance issues (The Hindu, 2021).

The New Battleground: Language, Religion, and Identity

While the structural factors above explain political inertia, the contemporary political discourse in West Bengal is increasingly defined by identity politics. The rise of the BJP at the national level has introduced new fault lines, which the TMC has strategically exploited to consolidate its position as the sole defender of Bengali identity.

Hindi Imposition: A Rallying Cry for Bengali Sub-nationalism

Bengali is an important part of who they are. People are very proud of Bengali literature, language, and cultural symbols. People are very against any attempts to make them speak Hindi. The TMC has called the BJP a party of "bohiragoto" (outsiders) who want to weaken Bengal's unique culture because its leaders are from all over India and speak Hindi.

A lot of people liked this story during the 2021 election campaign. People compared the Hindi speeches of national BJP leaders to Mamata Banerjee's fiery Bengali speeches. The BJP's "Jai Shri Ram" was met with the TMC's "Jai Bangla," which made the contest seem like a fight between a religious chant from another country and a secular-nationalist greeting from India (BBC News, 2021).

The BJP doesn't like this so-called "Hindi imposition" because it has a lot of bad effects:

Alienation of the Electorate: It makes the party seem more like a "outsider," which makes it harder for them to connect with people in the area on a cultural level.

Consolidation of the Opposition: The ruling party (TMC) can use the issue of cultural pride to avoid talking about how bad it has been as a government.

Creating a cultural barrier: It makes it hard for the BJP to find local leaders who can connect with people the same way that Bengali politicians do. The Print said that the BJP's central leadership had trouble understanding local issues and often sent leaders who didn't speak the language or understand the culture (The Print, 2021).

Linguistic Composition of West Bengal

The 2011 Census shows that Bengali is by far the most spoken language in the state. This makes it the heart of West Bengal's culture. Hindi and its dialects are the largest language group that isn't English. Santali, Urdu, and Nepali are also spoken, but mostly in certain areas (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011). The fact that people speak these other languages shows how different the state's population has been and how people from other countries have changed it.

language	percentage
BENGALI	86.03%
HINDI	7.18%
SANTHALI	2.79%
URDU	1.87%
NEPALI	1.26%
OTHERS	0.87%
TOTAL	100%

Source: Adapted from Census of India 2011 data on languages and mother tongues

Religious Polarisation: The Communal Fault Line

Historically, West Bengal politics, dominated by the Left, was largely secular in its public discourse. However, the legacy of Partition left deep, unaddressed communal wounds. The BJP's rise has brought this simmering tension to the forefront. By championing the cause of Hindu refugees and raising issues like the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the BJP has sought to consolidate the Hindu vote.

This has had two major consequences:

Counter-Consolidation of the Muslim Vote: West Bengal has a significant Muslim population (around 30%). The BJP's rhetoric has led to a near-total consolidation of the Muslim vote behind the TMC, which is seen as the only party capable of defeating the BJP.

Competitive Communalism: The TMC, while positioning itself as secular, has been accused of "minority appeasement" by the BJP (e.g., stipends for imams). In response to the BJP's Hindutva push, Mamata Banerjee has also been seen engaging in public displays of her Hindu identity, such as reciting Sanskrit shlokas and visiting temples. This creates a dangerous cycle of competitive communalism that threatens the state's social fabric.

As an editorial in the Hindustan Times argued, the 2021 election was "fought as much on religious identity as on issues of governance," marking a departure from Bengal's traditional political discourse (Hindustan Times, 2021). This polarisation benefits the incumbent TMC by solidifying its minority vote bank, which is larger and more consolidated than any specific caste-based vote bank the BJP can currently muster.

THE FUTURE (2026 ASSEMBLY ELECTIONS)

The 2026 West Bengal Assembly elections are shaping up to be a critical juncture, likely evolving into a direct confrontation between the incumbent Trinamool Congress (TMC) and the challenger Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The TMC's path to a fourth term will depend on its ability to sustain its popular welfare schemes, like Lakshmir Bhandar, and effectively leverage Bengali sub-nationalism to counter the BJP (Ghosh, 2023). However, it faces formidable headwinds from strong anti-incumbency, persistent allegations of widespread corruption, such as the school jobs for cash scam, and internal factionalism (Bagchi, 2023). The BJP, in turn, must overcome its "outsider" image by cultivating credible local leadership and presenting a coherent vision beyond religious polarisation (Chatterji, 2021). The performance of the Left-Congress alliance will be a key variable; their ability to regain even a fraction of their lost vote share could significantly impact the main contest by splitting the anti-TMC vote.

To move beyond the current cycle of identity politics, all political parties must address pressing governance and developmental issues. The foremost challenge is tackling systemic corruption and restoring public trust in state institutions, particularly in recruitment and law enforcement, which has been severely damaged by ongoing scandals (Bagchi, 2023). Political violence and the "syndicate raj" that stifles local enterprise must be dismantled to improve the law-and-order situation, a long-standing issue that deters investment (Bhattacharyya, 2018). Furthermore, parties need to present concrete roadmaps for creating employment, improving the quality of education beyond mere infrastructure, and upgrading the state's healthcare system, which remains overburdened. A shift in political discourse from emotive slogans to policy-based debates on these core issues is essential for the state's long-term progress.

Bengal's economy needs a two-part plan to come back to life. One part should focus on industrialization and the other on strengthening its traditional industries. The government needs to make the economy safe and open so that big private investments can come in. This is a step beyond the Singur protests, which still have a big impact on industrial policy (Dutta, 2022). This means that buying land will be easier, businesses will be safe from political extortion, and new infrastructure will be built, especially for logistics and port connections. A strong focus on bringing back the manufacturing sector in former industrial centers and boosting the IT and service industries can create the high-quality jobs that will stop skilled young people from leaving (Government of West Bengal, 2022).

The state's economy won't fully recover, though, until its agricultural and human capital base is also improved. We should invest in food processing, cold storage chains, and modernizing farming methods instead of just growing food to survive. This will raise farm incomes and create a strong agro-industrial ecosystem (Roy, 2021). This would make the state's large agricultural output more valuable and create jobs in rural areas. Lastly, it's important to invest in people by building skill development centers that meet the needs of today's businesses and changing the way schools work to encourage new ideas. A healthier, better-educated, and more skilled workforce is the best way to make the economy grow in a way that lasts. This will change Bengal from a place where politics is stuck to one where the economy is always changing.

Religious Composition of West Bengal

The primary data for the religious composition of Indian states comes from the decennial census. According to the Census of India 2011, West Bengal has a Hindu majority and a substantial Muslim minority, which is the second-largest in the country in terms of percentage after Assam among major states. The distribution highlights the two dominant religious groups that heavily influence the state's socio-political landscape (Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, 2011).

Religion	percentage
Hinduism	70.54%
islam	27.01%
Christianity	0.72%
others	0.45%
atheist	1.28%
total	100%

Source: Adapted from Census of India 2011 data

Conclusion

The "delayed politics" of West Bengal is a complex interplay of historical, structural, and cultural factors. The long-term rule of political parties is not a result of voter apathy but is engineered through a deeply entrenched party-society and patronage system, first established by the Left and now perfected by the Trinamool Congress. This system is sustained by the lack of a credible opposition and the strategic approval of the state's influential Bhadrakalok class.

Into this established political ecosystem, the new and volatile issues of language and religion have been injected, largely due to the BJP's national ascendancy. The perceived threat of "Hindi imposition" and the rise of political Hindutva have allowed the TMC to weaponise Bengali sub-nationalism, positioning itself as the guardian of Bengali culture. This has further consolidated its power, particularly by unifying the state's large minority vote in its favour.

The primary drawback of these developments is the erosion of issue-based politics. Debates over governance, corruption, and economic development are increasingly sidelined by emotive appeals to cultural and religious identity. This not only deepens social divisions but also strengthens the very political inertia it seeks to challenge, ensuring that for the foreseeable future, the party in power in West Bengal will likely remain there for a long time.

REFERENCES

1. Bhattacharyya, D. (2009). Party Society, Its Consolidation and Crisis: Understanding Political Change in West Bengal. In *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44(7), 36-45.
2. BBC News. (2021, March 29). 'Jai Shri Ram': The Hindu chant that became a political slogan. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-56552432>
3. Hindustan Times. (2021, May 3). The Bengal election verdict is a vote for federalism. [Editorial]. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/editorials/the-bengal-election-verdict-is-a-vote-for-federalism-101620054884279.html>
4. The Hindu. (2021, May 3). Analysis | Role of women, welfare schemes and Bengali sub-nationalism in Mamata's victory. <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/west-bengal-assembly/analysis-role-of-women-welfare-schemes-and-bengali-sub-nationalism-in-mamatas-victory/article34471015.ece>
5. The Indian Express. (2021, May 15). Prashant Kishor on Bengal win: 'Never seen a more biased EC... What Left did in 34 years, TMC has done in 10'. <https://indianexpress.com/elections/prashant-kishor-on-bengal-win-never-seen-a-more-biased-ec-what-left-did-in-34-years-tmc-has-done-in-10-7315518/>
6. The Print. (2021, May 4). 'Outsider' tag, flawed ticket distribution, no CM face — what went wrong for BJP in Bengal. <https://theprint.in/politics/outsider-tag-flawed-ticket-distribution-no-cm-face-what-went-wrong-for-bjp-in-bengal/651381/>
7. Bagchi, S. (2023, April 20). Explained | The school jobs for cash scam in West Bengal. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/explained-the-school-jobs-for-cash-scam-in-west-bengal/article66759716.ece>
8. Bhattacharyya, D. (2018). Politics of the middle class in West Bengal. In R. Samaddar, D. Thelama, & I. Kumar (Eds.), *The new middle class in India and the politics of the informal sector* (pp. 56-78). Routledge.
9. Chatterji, R. (2021, May 10). Why the BJP lost West Bengal. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/05/10/why-bjp-lost-west-bengal-pub-84471>.
10. Dutta, I. (2022, October 11). A decade after Singur, Bengal's industrialisation is still in a limbo. The Hindu BusinessLine. <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/national/a-decade-after-singur-bengals-industrialisation-is-still-in-a-limbo/article66000109.ece>
11. Ghosh, S. (2023, July 25). Lakshmi's Bhandar: How a welfare scheme is changing gender dynamics in rural Bengal. The Wire. <https://thewire.in/women/lakshmis-bhandar-how-a-welfare-scheme-is-changing-gender-dynamics-in-rural-bengal>
12. Government of West Bengal. (2022). West Bengal Industrial and Economic Corridor Policy. Department of Industry, Commerce and Enterprises. <https://www.wbidec.com/images/pdf/west-bengal-industrial-and-economic-corridor-policy.pdf>
13. Roy, D. (2021). West Bengal: An agricultural profile. NABARD. <https://www.nabard.org/auth/writereaddata/tender/1608212137State%20Focus%20Paper%20-%202021-22,%20West%20Bengal.pdf>
14. Office of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India. (2011). C-1 Population By Religious Community and C-16 Population By Mother Tongue. Government of India. Retrieved from <https://censusindia.gov.in/2011-common/censusdata2011.html>