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How the Red Fortress was Won: An Analysis of the West Bengal Assembly Election

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Abstract

That the Left Front, the longest-serving democratically elected Communist government, was voted out in West Bengal did not come as a surprise. The margin of victory for the Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress was, however, not anticipated by many. The Trinamool rode on the strong desire for change among West Bengal voters. Among the other factors for the Trinamool's thumping victory were discontent over the Left Front's land acquisition policy, the transfer of allegiance of Muslim voters to the Trinamool and the inability of the Left to comprehend the extent of voter dissatisfaction.

It would not be an overstatement that the 2011 West Bengal Assembly election verdict was a historic one. The world's longest-serving democratically elected Communist government was shown the door on 13 May 2011 by the Trinamool Congress led by Mamata Banerjee. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI[M])-led Left Front, which had governed West Bengal for a record 34 years, was reduced to a mere 62 seats in the 294-seat Assembly while the Trinamool surged to 184 seats, well over the majority mark. The Trinamool's ally, the Indian National Congress, won 42 seats.

The magnitude of the Left's defeat can be gauged from the results of the last Assembly election in 2006. Then the Left Front had won 233 seats to the Trinamool's 30. The turnaround for the Trinamool was in the making for some time. In elections first to the *panchayat* or local-level bodies in 2008, then the 2009 Lok Sabha elections and finally the

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civic polls in 2010, the Trinamool Congress had steadily increased its vote share in both rural and urban Bengal. The national Lok Sabha elections, where the Left Front's share of seats fell from 35 to 15 while the Trinamool Congress' jumped from one to 19, was a clear indication of the erosion of the Left's support. In the 2011 Assembly elections, there was a 12 per cent swing in the vote share in favour of the Trinamool, while the Left Front suffered from a little under 9 per cent swing away from it.

There were several reasons for the defeat of the Left Front in the Assembly polls. Perhaps the most critical was the strong momentum for change blowing in West Bengal. This was summed up in the Trinamool's slogan of '*poriborton*' or change which struck a chord with the voters. Voter discontent was high because by every possible indicator Bengal was lagging behind other states. Beginning in the 1970s, there was a flight of industry from the state, which was once an industrial powerhouse. By 2007-08, the share of manufacturing in the state's net domestic product had fallen to 7.4 per cent compared to 13.6 per cent in neighbouring Orissa. At the same time, West Bengal's share in employment in the manufacturing sector fell from 13.3 per cent in 1976-77 to 5.0 per cent in 2008-09. Agriculture and land distribution was one of the early success stories for the Left Front, but even agricultural production had flattened out long ago.

Along with the exit of capital, Bengal suffered from a brain drain with students, who had the wherewithal, leaving to better their prospects. The Left Front did not help matters by doing away with English for several years in government primary schools. But what was most shocking was the state of health and education, the two areas where a Communist government was expected to have the most impact. The number of hospitals beds per 100,000 people in rural Bengal is 3.8 compared to an all-India average of 17.5. In education, the drop-out rate of students is over 75 per cent compared to an all-India average of 60 per cent. More worryingly, the education system had been completely taken over by CPI(M) party *apparatchiks*.

What, however, decisively swung the mood in favour of the Trinamool were the agitations around the industrial projects in Singur, the site for the Tatas' Nano factory, and Nandigram, the site for a chemical hub to be operated by an Indonesian multinational. Both projects foundered on the acquisition of land, which was owned by small to medium farmers, by the Left Front government. The compensation package offered by the Government was rejected by many of the farmers. Mamata used the discontent to mobilise support among the rural peasantry, which had traditionally been one of the most die-hard supporters of the Left. Beginning with Mamata's 26-day fast from 3 December 2006 on behalf of farmers in Singur, who were protesting acquisition of their land, and culminating in crippling protests in 2008 that eventually led to the relocation of the Nano project to Gujarat, Singur became emblematic of the Trinamool wave that has since swept the state. In between, on 14 March 2007 the police, reportedly along with CPI(M) cadre, fired on protesting peasants, an incident

which caused a real dent in the Left Front's rural support. In this period there were several other incidents of political violence in the state.

Singur and Nandigram were critical events in other ways. There was an outpouring of anger against the government's policies by Kolkata's intellectuals, who have traditionally been Left-leaning. Street marches were organised and the famous slogan of the 1970s – '*Tomar naam amaar naam, Vietnam Vietnam* (Vietnam is your name and mine)' – was resurrected in another guise: '*Tomar naam amaar naam, Nandigram Nandigram* (Nandigram is your name and mine)'. Mamata, whose support base had so long been confined to the urban underclass, was now being vociferously backed by both the intelligentsia and the rural poor.

There were three other reasons for the landslide victory for Trinamool. First, Muslims – who comprise nearly a quarter of Bengal's population and are heavily concentrated in the countryside – have traditionally supported the Left. But over the past two years they have switched their allegiance to Trinamool, partly because of Nandigram and partly due to the Left's failure to improve their lot, a fact highlighted in the Sachar Commission Report commissioned by the central government. Second, the high turnout of nearly 84 per cent, aided by a six-phase election with unprecedented security, allowed many citizens who had not voted in earlier elections out of fear of reprisals to vote this time around. This worked to the Trinamool's advantage.

Third, the attitude of the Left contributed in no small measure to Mamata's success. During the election campaigning, CPI(M) leaders kept insisting that their party had recovered from the reverses of the past three years. Even a day before the results were announced, a party assessment predicted that the Left Front would win a narrow majority. Clearly the CPI(M) – which won a mere 40 seats and saw most of its prominent leaders, including chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, bite the dust – was living in denial. Such was the anti-Left sentiment that even its traditional bastions in south-west Bengal were not left untouched. However, the Left Front still won just under 41 per cent of the vote share showing that it might be down but not out. Whether the CPI(M), the leading light of the Front, will take meaningful measures to connect with the people or take refuge in these numbers, as indicated by its central leadership in the immediate reaction to the election result, remains to be seen.

Mamata clearly has the mandate to bring about change in Bengal. Unusual for a regional party, the Trinamool had issued a vision document before the election which sets out a time-bound agenda for reviving the state. While the goals, such as reviving industry and agriculture, are laudable, getting fresh investment for the state in the wake of Singur and Nandigram will be a real challenge. Besides, the Left Front has left the state's finances in a mess and West Bengal is saddled with a huge debt burden, which is among the highest in the country. There is also the threat of political violence, which has been a recurrent feature in Bengal over the past decade, not to forget the Maoist threat in the state's most under-

developed and tribal dominated regions bordering Jharkhand. How the CPI(M) cadre, used to the benefits of state patronage for over three decades, and the Trinamool workers flush with victory will react over the next few months, will be critical to the state's future.

Despite the challenges, there are a few things going right for Mamata. Being a crucial coalition partner in the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance government at the centre gives her the leverage to get central funds and investment for West Bengal. She has strategically offered ministerial berths to the Congress in West Bengal despite having the numbers to form the government on her own. But more than anything else, she has the backing and goodwill of a large portion of Bengal's citizens who have seen the state stagnate and fall behind the rest of India over the past two decades.

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