

Elections 2019 — the Stakes are High in West Bengal

The past couple of months have seen West Bengal emerging as a battlefield between the central and the state government, putting Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee at loggerheads. The recent CBI-Kolkata Police face-off and the state government denying permission to Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) Rath Yatra and other rallies have been enough to rile both parties against each other.

A lot of onus is put on a good performance in Bengal, both by the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC) as well as the BJP. Riding high since her party's victory in the 2011 Assembly Elections, Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee will be looking for a good run in the upcoming elections as well. With a total of 42 seats, West Bengal is only next to Uttar Pradesh (80 seats) and Maharashtra (48 seats) in the General Elections. Therefore, a good show in West Bengal may propel her to be a strong contender for the power-position in New Delhi, if the post-poll scenario comes down to the coalition or the 'mahagathbandhan'.

With its recent losses in the states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh in December 2018, it seems that the BJP may not end up with an impressive tally, as it had been able to achieve in the 2014 elections. In such a scenario, it would be crucial for the BJP to compensate for the losses in the Hindi heartland, with other states. Since 2014, the party has made successful inroads into the North-eastern states. However, for the General Elections, the seven states account for only a total of 24 seats. This may explain the continuous interest the BJP has in the states of West Bengal and Odisha.

The Regional Dynamics of Bengal since 2011

In terms of the traditional electoral divisions, West Bengal is divided into two major divisions, namely the South and the North Bengal.

South Bengal, comprising two sub-divisions — upper and lower South Bengal, has the bulk of the population and seats in the state. The division of North Bengal also denotes two sub-regions, upper and lower North Bengal. The upper North Bengal has the divisions of Darjeeling and Cooch Behar. While the

divisions of Murshidabad, Malda and Uttar Dinajpur make up the lower North, which is at times also referred to as Central Bengal.

South Bengal and the TMC

South Bengal — Seat-share in General Elections

Seats won	TMC	BJP	INC	CPI(M)	OTHERS
2014	19	0	0	0	0
2009	15	0	0	1	3

Source: Election Commission Data

The Assembly elections of 2011 saw the TMC replacing the Left, and sweeping the South Bengal division. Out of the total 218 seats, the TMC won 191 seats. The party has been able to hold its sway much over the entire state, particularly the region of South Bengal since the 2009 General Elections. In 2009, the party won a total of 19 seats, while it was able to increase its tally to 34 seats in the 2014 elections. In between these elections, it swept the South Bengal division in the 2011 Assembly elections, and was able to retain it in the face of the ‘Modi-Wave’ that swept other parts of the country in 2014.

Central Bengal and the Congress

Central Bengal — Seat-share in General Elections

Seats won	TMC	BJP	INC	CPI(M)	OTHERS
2014	11	1	4	0	1
2009	4		5	7	1

Source: Election Commission Data

The lower north or the Central Bengal comprises mainly the districts of Murshidabad, Malda and Uttar Dinajpur. Malda is a stronghold of the Indian National Congress (INC), where it had been undefeated since 1980. Despite its worst electoral performance in 2014, the Congress was able to hold its sway in the divisions of Central Bengal. In 2009, it won six seats in this division — Malda Uttar, Malda Dakshin, Jangipur, Bahrapur, Raiganj and Murshidabad. In 2014, it managed to hold on to four of these seats, losing Raiganj and Murshidabad to the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI(M)], in those elections.

In the 2016 Assembly elections, the Congress and the CPI(M) had forged an alliance in the state. Together, both parties were able to continue their domination over Raiganj, Murshidabad and Malda.

North Bengal and the BJP

North Bengal — Seat-share in General Elections

Seats won	TMC	BJP	INC	CPI(M)	OTHERS
2014	4	1	0	0	1
2009		1	1		4

Source: Election Commission Data

Prime Minister Narendra Modi kick-started the BJP’s campaign for the 2019 Lok Sabha elections at Thakurnagar, located about 60 km north-east of Kolkata, close to the Bangladesh border in North 24-Parganas district.

The party has done well in the north Bengal divisions. In fact, the only seat that the BJP had been able to win in both 2009 and 2014 elections had been Darjeeling, in north Bengal. The party had been able to wrest power in Darjeeling, with an alliance with the local party Gorkha Janamukti Morcha (GJM). However, GJM leader, Binay Tamang has ended his party’s decade-long association with the BJP-led NDA in 2018. The reason stated for this is the BJP’s stoic silence over the 105 days-long agitation for Gorkhaland in the region in 2017. Binay Tamang, has in fact, made overtures to the ruling CPI(M) and was a

part of the mega rally of the opposition in Kolkata, against the Modi government.

North Bengal seems to be the focus of the BJP in the 2019 elections. Narendra Modi along with the BJP leaders Amit Shah, Rajnath Singh and Yogi Adityanath had visited North Bengal in the past fortnight, conducting meetings in Alipurduar, Cooch Behar, Balurghat and Raiganj.

The Citizenship Amendment Bill and the Tussle over the Matuas

The Citizenship Amendment Bill seeks to amend the Citizenship Act, 1955, so as to make illegal immigrants, who are Hindus, Sikhs, Buddhists, Jains, Parsis and Christians from Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan, eligible for Indian citizenship.

In West Bengal this may yield rich dividends to the BJP, especially in the North 24-Parganas district. This district of South Bengal is home to the Matua community. The Matuas trace their ancestry to East Bengal, and entered West Bengal after the partition as well as after 1971. The community comprises 17.74 per cent of the state's population. Citizenship has been their long-standing demand.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's first rally in the state was in Thakurnagar, a bastion of the Matua community. The rally was organised by the Matua community as a vote of thanks for the 2016 Bill. Since 2009, the Matuas have voted en masse for the TMC. The community constitutes around 50 per cent of the population of that particular region, and has the ability to swing votes in favour of a particular political party.

Even though the Bill could not be placed in the Rajya Sabha, the BJP may still have some rich dividends from the state.

The Dwindling Fortunes of Congress in Malda

West Bengal has a sizable Muslim population. According to the Census 2011, the state has over 24.6 million Muslims, who constitute 27.1 per cent of the state's population.

Malda with 51.27 per cent of Muslim population is considered a stronghold of the Congress. Its veteran leader A B A Ghani Khan Choudhury had held the

constituency for the party since 1980. However, in January 2019, the elected Congress MP Mausum Benazir Noor switched over to the TMC. She was the Malda district president of the Congress as well as the niece of late A B A Ghani Khan. This may have an adverse impact on the already diminishing support base of the Congress in the state, which had been confined to the districts of Central Bengal. This also opens up the constituency for another bitter TMC–BJP fight.

While Benazir Noor will contest from the constituency as a TMC candidate, her cousin Isha Khan Choudhury has been named as the Congress candidate. In the fight between the cousins, it may be the BJP that may improve its vote share in the region. It had already made inroads into Malda in 2018 panchayat polls, where it won 6 of the district’s 38 Zila Parishad seats.

The Battle for 2019

TMC remains the significant party to beat in the elections. Since coming to power in 2011, it has improved its vote share with each subsequent elections. In 2011, its vote share was 39 per cent which increased to 44.9 per cent in the 2016 elections. The party’s vote share in the 2016 elections was the second highest in the state since independence.

BJP with its prime focus on North Bengal districts is the main opposition of the TMC in the upcoming elections. With the election season coming in full swing, the next couple of weeks will see the BJP push for more rallies in the state, especially by Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

An earlier attempt of an alliance between the Congress and the CPI(M) has not been materialised. With the CPI(M) that has already ceded much of its ground to the TMC in the state, and the Congress limited to its core strongholds, neither the Congress nor the CPI(M) seems to be viable threats to the better prospects of Mamata Banerjee or Narendra Modi.

The large number of seats and the tussle between these two leaders put the election for West Bengal at high stake.