



## BJP'S DEFEAT IN WEST BENGAL

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June 1, 2021

*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



The onset of May 2021 brought with it a remarkable victory in the battlefield of election for Mamata Banerjee, the West Bengal's Chief Minister, and her party Trinamool Congress (TMC) against Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Ms. Banerjee is India's only female state chief minister. She has won a sensational landslide, picking up more than 200 seats in the 294-seat assembly.<sup>1</sup> Bengal is important for it was seen as a final frontier to cement BJP's hegemony in India by consolidating its power across the country. Against this backdrop, Ms. Banerjee's victory becomes a great respite from the BJP's complete takeover of the country.

The following table shows seat share in West Bengal by different political parties in 2016, 2019, and 2021 elections:

Political Parties	2016	2019 (Assembly Constituency Segments)	2021
TMC	211	164	213
BJP	3	121	77
INC	44	9	0
LEFT FRONT	26	0	0
Others	10	0	2

Source: Observer's Research Foundation, May 5, 2021<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Soutik Biswas, "West Bengal Election: Modi Loses a Battle in the 'war for Indian Democracy'," *BBC News*, May 3, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-56969085>

<sup>2</sup> Soumya Bhowmick, "Bengal Elections 2021: A Factsheet," *Observers Research Foundation*, May 5, 2021, <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/bengal-elections-2021-a-factsheet/>.

TMC has been ruling the state without a major challenger in the region. In normal circumstances, the victory of twice elected chief minister would not have made this big into the headlines. Even the increase in BJP's seats from three in 2016 to 77 in the recent elections, would have been cherished as a big leap forward. However, the current case is different for BJP threw everything: money, media, organizational machinery, and of course Narendra Modi in the recent elections. Its leaders made haughty claims of an imminent victory and had high hopes from the region. However, it would be far from true to say that their hopes were without any reason. Bengal has long been an ideal laboratory for Hindutva politics, with about one-third of the population being Muslims. It had all the ingredients from the lack of development to dynastic politics, from corruption to decaying law and order situation which were sufficient to provide a fertile ground for BJP's victory over Congress and other parties in many other states during the past. Against this backdrop, the BJP was optimistic of making a strong foothold in Bengal too.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in 2019 BJP secured 18 out of 42 seats in Lok Sabha.<sup>4</sup> This elated number in its seats was read as a desire for a change in Bengal by BJP. However, the election result dashed all the hopes of Modi and his party. Such a major defeat in West Bengal exposed the vulnerabilities of the BJP's government, emboldening its resisters and providing a reality check to its supporters.<sup>5</sup>

During the West Bengal elections, several factors contributed to the defeat of the BJP. The foremost is the lack of preparation and planning on part of the BJP, which solely relied on the charisma of Modi to win the elections. As a result, BJP failed to come up with popular leaders at the local level. Most of their candidates were turncoats from TMC. Of the 19 sitting Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) from the TMC, the Left, and the Congress who joined the BJP since 2019 and contested on a BJP ticket, only five managed to win in this election.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, Ms. Banerjee started off her political career by defeating Somnath Chatterjee in the Lok-Sabha elections in 1984<sup>7</sup> and has been persistent in her politics ever since. She belongs to the region and is aware of the psyche of its voters. This provided her the tint of localism which resonated well with the electorate of West Bengal.

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<sup>3</sup> D. K. Singh, "Why BJP Just Can't Digest the Election Defeat to Mamata in West Bengal," *The Print*, May 20, 2021, <https://theprint.in/opinion/why-bjp-just-cant-digest-the-election-defeat-to-mamata-in-west-bengal/661999/>

<sup>4</sup> Subrata Mukherjee, "Why the BJP Lost Bengal," *The Indian Express*, last modified May 17, 2021, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/why-the-bjp-lost-bengal-west-bengal-elections-mamata-banerjee-7318804/>.

<sup>5</sup> Yogendra Yadav, "Bengal Has Stopped BJP's Ashvamedha Yagna — and Given India an Opportunity," *The Print*, May 2, 2021, <https://theprint.in/opinion/bengal-has-stopped-bjps-ashvamedha-yagna-and-given-india-an-opportunity/651049/>.

<sup>6</sup> Snigdhendhu Bhattacharya, "West Bengal: Of 19 Turncoat MLAs Contesting From BJP, 13 Lost," *The Wire*, May 5, 2021, <https://thewire.in/politics/west-bengal-of-19-turncoat-mlas-contesting-from-bjp-13-lost>.

<sup>7</sup> Mukherjee, "BJP Lost Bengal."

Moreover, with time women voters have become crucial in Indian politics. Female voters also played a key role in the victory of TMC in West Bengal where they voted vehemently in favor of the party.

#### Population Parameters during West Bengal Elections 2021:

Indicators	West Bengal	National Average
Population	91.3 million	1.21 billion
Population growth	13.84 %	17.70 %
Population density	1028 per km <sup>2</sup>	382 per km <sup>2</sup>
Sex Ratio	950	940
Child Sex Ratio	956	914
Literacy	76.26 %	74.04 %
Male literacy	81.68 %	82.14 %
Female literacy	70.54 %	65.46 %

Source: Observer's Research Foundation, May 5, 2021<sup>8</sup>

The above parameters show that West Bengal has a more than 70 percent female literacy rate. This proved useful for Ms. Banerjee where her slogan like "gender and welfare"<sup>9</sup> tilted the major female vote in her favor. Banerjee's schemes promised that women would be educated, and strict measures would be taken against underage marriages. This resonated well with the female voters in West Bengal. On the other hand, BJP promised an extension of its centre's welfare schemes likes "Ujjwala"<sup>10</sup> which had little to none to offer to the women, mainly because they were convinced by Ms. Banerjee and her issue-based politics. Moreover, PM Modi kept calling her "Didi-O-Didi" during his rallies and continued attacking Ms. Banerjee personally by mocking her leg injury.<sup>11</sup> This helped her get the sympathy votes of the women too.

Another major factor that contributed to the elections was the sizable Muslim population and the constituencies with the minority population. In Bengal, over 27 % of the electorate belonged to minorities.<sup>12</sup> Resultantly, TMC won 76 of the 88 minority-dominated seats. The main reason was that the minority voters had learned their lesson well from the recent elections in neighboring Bihar where polarization and division in the minority votes benefitted BJP. Furthermore, in Hindu dominated parts, the same slogans like "Jai Shri Ram" which were potent in Uttar Pradesh failed to

<sup>8</sup> Bhowmick, "Bengal Election: A Factsheet."

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Rakesh M. Chaturvedi, "ET Analysis: How TMC Beat BJP at Its Own Game in West Bengal Elections," *The Economic Times*, May 4, 2021, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/elections/assembly-elections/west-bengal/et-analysis-tmc-beat-bjp-at-its-own-game-turned-around-saffron-poll-planks-for-its-own-gains/articleshow/82383821.cms>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

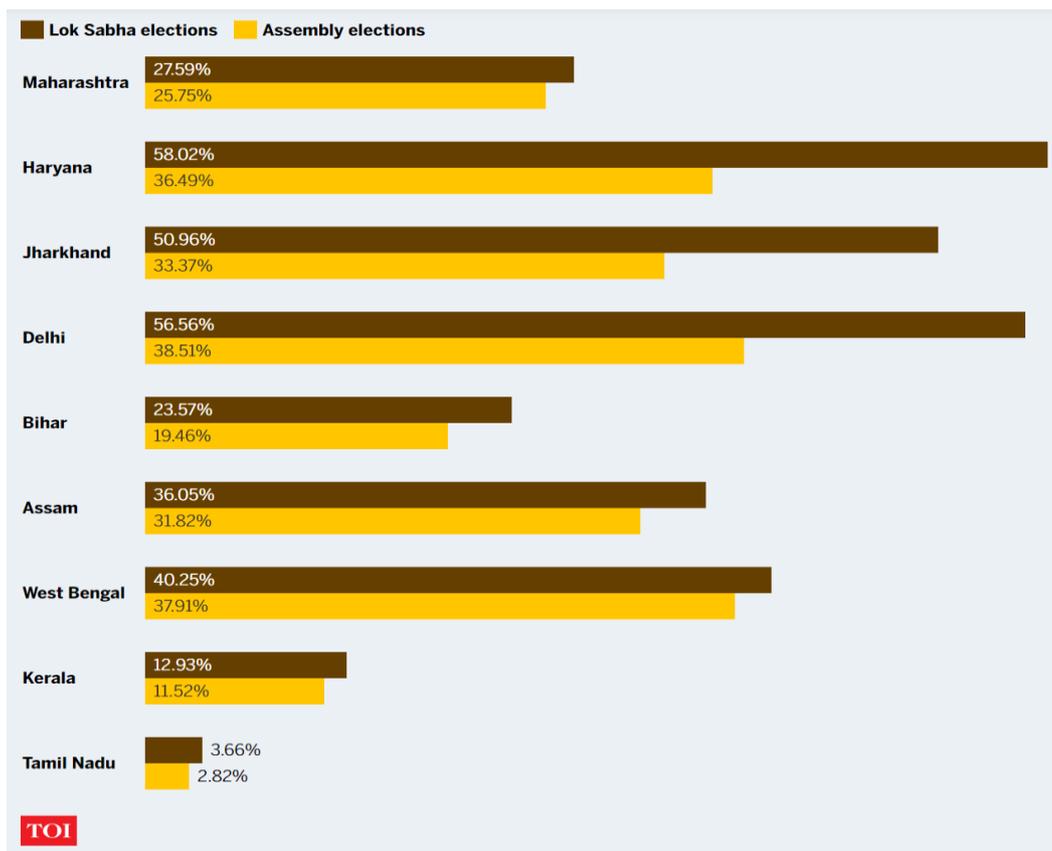
<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

yield the same electoral dividends for BJP in West Bengal, where this slogan was balanced by Banarjee's "Chandi Paath," in a state "that reveres Maa Durga."<sup>13</sup>

Various other factors contributed to BJP's defeat in the election including government's mismanagement in handling Covid crises which brought the imposition of a hasty lockdown with it. This lockdown produced a flood of migrant laborers and took its toll on the overall economy, especially the industrialization industry. Many in the industrialization industry belonged to West Bengal and this became a major factor while deciding their vote.

Analyzing the overall situation of BJP in recent elections a clear trend can be identified where it enjoys popularity in Lok-Sabha elections but fails to retain it when it comes to the assembly elections.

The following table shows BJP's performance from Lok Sabha to Assembly elections during recent years:



Source: Times of India, May 2, 2021<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

It depicts that BJP enjoyed a compelling victory in 2019 in the Lok Sabha elections but lost the assembly elections in Delhi and Jharkhand. Similarly, in Maharashtra, it emerged as a strong political force as a single largest party but could not manage to form a government. The same trend of losing votes in assembly election continued in Haryana too, where its votes for the regional assembly dipped, even though BJP managed to formulate government after making an alliance. The same happened in West Bengal too; where BJP secured 40.25 % in the 2019 Lok-Sabha election, but its votes dipped to 38.05 %<sup>15</sup> in the assembly election. This shows a clear trend in BJP's failure to retain the same popularity in assembly elections as enjoyed in the Lok-Sabha elections.

Overall, BJP's defeat in West Bengal has opened a door of unending possibilities for the opposition which was struggling to challenge BJP's majoritarianism in the country. The state elections are puncturing the myth of Modi's invincibility. So far, the myth is persisting because it still resonates with the national sentiment. However, the verdict in 2021 is different. A lot depends upon the upcoming elections in Uttar Pradesh (UP) at the start of 2022. If the saga of Modi's defeat is continued in UP it can prove to be a watershed moment in marking the countdown of BJP's government.

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<sup>14</sup> "Lok Sabha Vs Assembly Elections: A Worrying Trend for the BJP" *The Times of India*, May 2, 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/lok-sabha-vs-assembly-elections-a-worrying-trend-for-the-bjp/articleshow/82355144.cms>. This table is from the election day and the final results from West Bengal, Assam, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu for Assembly polls 2021 are slightly different from the table.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.