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# POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN WEST BENGAL: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DIFFERENT STATES OF INDIA

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## ABSTRACT

Elections in West Bengal have become synonymous with political violence. From the local self-government levels to the Assembly and Lok Sabha elections, have all been marred with bloodshed and violent crimes such as murder, loot, rape, etc. All though political violence isn't an uncommon phenomenon in India in general and in West Bengal in specific, there isn't sufficient literature on the issue apart from those focusing on communal riots, ethnic conflicts and insurgencies. Any violence becomes "political" violence when such violence is used as an instrumental tool in seizing political control and hegemony of one party to the exclusion of others. In Bengal such violence has mainly been perpetrated through the cadres of rival political parties upon each other. According the NCRB data the rate of such "political" murders is highest in the State of West Bengal. Free and fair elections in a peaceful manner is a *sine qua non* for democracy and the Rule of Law requires everyone to exercise their rights equally. The political violence in the State directly and indirectly hampers the electoral participation and thereby the quality and legitimacy of elections. Elections, right to vote, democracy and freedom from violence form core components of public law of a nation. In a State if these essential components are found to be faltering, one cannot help but look into the scenario of the other States around. States like Karnataka and Kerala despite having a significant population have recorded much lower rates of political murders. Even Bihar being a State having a history of violence has, in the recent times, recorded lower rates than that of Bengal.

This paper aims at analyzing the probable causes of this violence in West Bengal. It will go into a historical study of political bloodshed in the eastern State and compare the contemporary trends with the other States of our country. The paper ultimately aims to come up with plausible solutions taking the best practices from other States, to cure the persistent menace.

**Keywords:** Political violence, West Bengal, election, comparison, democracy.

## CHAPTER 1 - Introduction

Electoral violence is not a new phenomenon, and neither is it unique in India. But there are certain factors which set the violence in the State of West Bengal apart from its counterparts in States like UP, Bihar, Rajasthan or other eastern States for that matter. While caste, creed and conflicting ideologies like those of Maoism form the basis of clashes and violence in the latter, in Bengal violence is seen to stem out from the sheer hunger to capture political power and exercise a tight grip over the state machinery. Although socio-economic, religious and other factors are prevalent in the society of Bengal, these have gone on to bolster the quantum of violence. Political violence is practiced through various means and tactics which range from booth capturing, rigging, threatening and intimidating voters, to violent crimes like rape and murder.<sup>1</sup>

A major problem or limitation of research into political violence is the lack of accurate data. In incidents of this sort where State machinery is directly or indirectly involved and made instrumental in perpetrating violence, there can be no reliance made on reporting of incidents. In all probability victims would be secondarily victimized by not allowing proper reporting of offences. The “Status of Policing in India Report”<sup>2</sup> reveals the neglect and reluctance of police personnel in such cases and their averment to registering FIRs. The influence of politicians aggravates this problem of reporting and secondary victimization.

This problem can be further illustrated by the following example. The 2021 West Bengal State Assembly elections had witnessed a massive scale of post poll violence which included murders, rapes and displacement of hundreds of workers and supporters of the opposition party after the ruling party won a thumping majority in the State. However the **Crime in India 2021** report prepared by the National Crime Records Bureau reveals that in 2021 there were only 7 murders in the State of West Bengal for “political reasons”.<sup>3</sup> This figure appears to be grossly undervalued. Different media reports have come up with differing figures. For instance a Times of India report dated May 4, 2021, claimed 11 deaths to have taken place as a result of post-poll violence in that year. Another news report from June 2021 claims that as many as 25 deaths

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<sup>1</sup> Observer Research Foundation, *Understanding the Unique Nature of Political Violence in Bengal*, March 28, 2022, available at <https://www.orfonline.org/research/understanding-the-unique-nature-of-political-violence-in-bengal/> (Last visited on October 10, 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Common Cause & Lokniti, *Status of Policing in India Report*, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Ministry of Home Affairs, National Crime Records Bureau, Indian Penal Code, *Crime in India 2021*.

took place as a result of post poll violence.<sup>4</sup> Another report from December 2021 claims that 37 BJP workers alone were killed in the violence that ensued after the 2021 elections.<sup>5</sup>

These figures go on to show that there is severe dearth of reliable data on the actual incidents of post-poll violence. Furthermore the NCRB report only mentions of murders with political motives but doesn't disclose the other facts. In 2021 there were reporting of thousands of people being displaced from their houses, hundreds of shops being looted and vandalized and several women being raped. The issues reached national eye when the Supreme Court was moved by a 70 year old victim of gang rape along with her 16 year old granddaughter who were flagrantly denied justice by the administration in the State.<sup>6</sup>

Free and fair elections is a requisite for democracy. In an atmosphere of fear of loss of life, property or being subjected to violent crimes like rape, assault etc., the threatened and intimidated voter finds it next to impossible to cherish his Constitutionally enshrined right of suffrage. The cries of the victims which fall on deaf years highlights the problem all the more and it all leads to a situation where democratic ideals in their true sense cannot be achieved.

## **CHAPTER 2 - Tracing the History of Political Violence in West Bengal**

Bengal has always been the home ground for revolution. The revolt of 1857 had its initiation in the Barrackpore regiment of Bengal with the uprising and execution of Mangal Pandey. In the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries revolutionary and secret societies were formed to bolster armed revolt against the British. The State had also been witness to some of the most gruesome communal clashes and Naxalbari violence.

### **Congress Era -**

Political violence in the State after independence was normalized in the 1960s with the rise of the Left Front led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist). One of the earliest and most

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<sup>4</sup> The New Indian Express, *15,000 Incidents of West Bengal post-poll violence*, June 30, 2021 available at <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2021/jun/30/15000-incidents-of-west-bengal-post-poll-violence-report-2323380.html> (Last visited October 10, 2023).

<sup>5</sup> The Hindu, *West Bengal: 37 BJP Workers killed in post-poll violence, says Dilip Ghosh*, December 06, 2021 available at <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/national/west-bengal-37-bjp-workers-killed-in-post-poll-violence-says-dilip-ghosh/article34704439.ece> (Last visited October 10, 2023).

<sup>6</sup> India Today, *Bengal rape survivors of post-poll violence narrate horror, move Supreme Court*, June 14, 2021, available at <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/bengal-rape-survivors-post-election-violence-supreme-court-horror-details-application-1814546-2021-06-14> (Last visited October 10, 2023).

brutal incidents was that of *Sainbari* murders in March 1970 which is still a burning scar in the political memory of the Bengal. A family of Congress workers had gathered together for a newborn's naming ceremony when a mob allegedly under the leadership of Left leaders broke into the house and brutally killed the male members in front of their mother and then forcefully fed her rice mixed with her son's blood.<sup>7</sup> Instances such as these started becoming more commonplace in Bengal and soon emerged a 'gun culture' wherein politicians and their gunmen became two sides of the same coin. The 1972 victory of Congress party in the Assembly election was also blamed to be gotten with sheer muscle power.

### **Left Front Era -**

This was followed by the next Assembly election of the 1977 wherein for the first time the Left Front came to power under the leadership of the CPI(M). Apart from rural and agrarian reforms their main focus was on controlling the panchayats by all means of money and muscle power. Political scientist Dwaipayan Bhattacharya coined the term "**Party Society**" in this context to describe Bengal as from this time the society became completely politicised and polarized.<sup>8</sup> The ruling party started wielding absolute power in the State and all opposition voices were brutally and systematically stifled. State police was made instrumental in propagating violence upon political opposition.

A glaring example was the incident in 1993 which is popularized as **Shahid Dibas** (Martyr's Day) by the current ruling dispensation in the State. On 21<sup>st</sup> July the State Police opened fire on a Youth Congress protest march in the heart of the city, Kolkata, killing 13 people.<sup>9</sup> Other incidents such as those of the Marichjhapi massacre and Monks murder of 1982 created an atmosphere of terror and State-sponsored violence was the norm of the day.

The death-knell for the Left Front government were the **Singur** and **Nandigram** protests which also so huge bloodshed and the killing of nearly 50 people between 2007-08. These incidents finally led to the fall of the Left Front and the Trinamool Congress (TMC) was sworn in to

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<sup>7</sup> Times of India, *Victims recall Sainbari horror*, March 17, 2011, available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/victims-recall-sainbari-horror/articleshow/7723622.cms> (Last visited October 10, 2023).

<sup>8</sup> Dwaipayan Bhattacharya, *Government as Practice: Democratic Left in a Transforming India* 277-79 (2016).

<sup>9</sup> The Indian Express, *What had happened on July 21 1993 at Writers' building in West Bengal*, December 29, 2014, available at <https://indianexpress.com/article/political-pulse/what-happened-on-july-21-1993/> (Last visited October 10, 2023).

power in 2011.

### ***Trinamool Era and onwards –***

The TMC had won a decisive victory in 2011 in the State and it ended the three-decade long unchallenged rule of the Left in the State. It entered power with slogans like “*Badla Noy Badal Chai*” meaning “We don’t want revenge but change” and “*Paribartan*” meaning change. However the politics of violence hardly changed. Author Tanmay Chatterjee in his book on political violence in Bengal reveals that in the same year 2011 nearly 50 CPI(M) workers were killed after elections, allegedly by the TMC workers. The **2018 Panchayat polls** were marred with incidents of widespread violence in the State with several killed and 34% seats being won by the TMC uncontested. The **2019 Lok Sabha** polls also saw similar instances of violence and in 2021 Home Minister Amit Shah had claimed that as many as 130 BJP workers were killed in the State by the TMC. The violence reached its peak in the **2021 Assembly elections** which has already been discussed in the introduction.

A historical perspective reveals that violence has always been the norm in the electoral fate of West Bengal. Successive parties with vastly different ideologies have all failed to curtail this violence. It can be said without doubt that instead of restricting violence and taking positive measures towards it, the ruling dispensations (be it Congress, Left or TMC) have deliberately used it as a mechanism to withhold power and suppress political opposition. This attitude of malice has further aggravated the problem and also created issues of Centre-State conflict over various issues.

### **CHAPTER 3 - Comparative Analysis with different States**

A comparative study is proposed to be undertaken with States which are large in terms of both area and population. The election scenario in those States may be a guiding model for the State of West Bengal.

In **Uttar Pradesh** in the same year 2021, Panchayat elections were held. Panchayat elections in Bengal are themselves a bloody affair. In UP however which is hitherto a state with high crime rate, the election has been concluded peacefully barring minor incidents in 4 districts. No news

of death were reported.<sup>10</sup> Even in the 2017 Assembly elections, the polling was reportedly peaceful in the State. This was also coupled with an increased voter turnout of nearly 65% which had improved manifold from its performance in 2012.<sup>11</sup> Most certainly the figures hint to the efficacy of the law and order machinery of the State, albeit political and other vested interests are kept in consideration. The latest NCRB Crime in India report<sup>12</sup> also hints to the same. There has been significant fall in crime rates in the State of UP. Crimes against women, crimes against children, cyber crimes and communal riots have all seen significant dip in numbers from previous years.

In **Gujarat**, elections have traditionally been peaceful. 2019 Lok Sabha elections<sup>13</sup> Even the Assembly elections which were concluded recently there was no reported incidents of violence and the assembly elections remained substantially peaceful.<sup>14</sup>

Even if we take the example of panchayat elections in **Maharashtra** which were conducted in the same year as the Bengal Assembly elections, there were no such incidents of violence and the voting was recorded as peaceful although the turnout was low which could be attributed to the ongoing health crisis at that point of time. The elections also involved two districts which were naxal-hit areas, Gadchiroli and Gondia. The elections were conducted in the trying times of Covid-19 pandemic and yet they were largely peaceful.<sup>15</sup>

Another State for consideration in **Karnataka**. It is an excellent example, as the voter turnout was a positive figure of nearly 73% (1% increase from last Assembly elections) and the elections were absolutely peaceful in the 2023 Assembly elections. Although there was fierce political conquest between the BJP and the Congress party, and the State answered in anti-

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<sup>10</sup> Times of India, *Uttar Pradesh: Last round peaceful except minor clashes*, May 01, 2021, available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/lucknow/uttar-pradesh-last-round-peaceful-except-minor-clashes/articleshow/82338397.cms> (Last visited October 10, 2023).

<sup>11</sup> The Hindu, *Uttar Pradesh elections: Peaceful polling in first phase*, February 11, 2017, available at <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/uttar-pradesh-2017/Uttar-Pradesh-elections-Peaceful-polling-in-first-phase/article17289300.ece> (Last visited October 10, 2023).

<sup>12</sup> Supra 3.

<sup>13</sup> Times of India, *Steady, peaceful polling recorded in Gujarat*, April 24, 2019, available at <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/lok-sabha-elections/gujarat/news/steady-peaceful-polling-recorded/articleshow/69016676.cms> (Last visited October 10, 2023).

<sup>14</sup> The Hindu, *In Pictures | Gujarat Assembly elections phase 1 voting remains largely peaceful*, December 01, 2022, available at <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/gujarat-assembly/in-pictures-gujarat-votes-in-assembly-elections-2022/article66209655.ece> (Last visited October 20, 2023).

<sup>15</sup> The Indian Express, *Maharashtra panchayat poll held peacefully*, available at <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/mumbai/maharashtra-panchayat-polls-7147931/> (Last visited October 20, 2023).

incumbency wave, there were no substantial or notable incidents of violence as would have been deemed ordinary in Bengal. Apart from minor scuffles between party workers the elections remained calm.<sup>16</sup>

#### CHAPTER 4 - What sets Bengal's Electoral Violence Apart from Other States?

According to Ambar Kumar Ghosh<sup>17</sup> and Niranjana Sahoo<sup>18</sup> various factors set Bengal apart from the other large States when it comes to political violence. Following are some of the unique features:

1. **Partisan interests to capture power:** In Bengal political conquest has been the order of the day to capture total power and suppress political opposition since time immemorial as discussed throughout the paper. This has evolved a culture of violence targeting political power largely unseen in any other State.
2. **Ideology of violence:** In Southern States like Kerala the political contest is between the left and the right. Political ideologies clashing with each other is the basis of electoral conquest. But what sets Bengal apart is the unique nature of politics where ideology is largely fluid. Parties hardly adhere to their ideologies here. From the Left Front government ushering in telecommunication in the State, to TMC government (as opposed to left), introducing schemes like '*Lakshmir Bhandar*', ideology has taken a back seat for the parties. There is widespread defection and politicians quitting the losing party and going to the winning party are common. The **2021 Assembly polls** saw a large number of TMC leaders leaving the party and joining BJP days before the elections, only to quit BJP and re-join TMC after BJP's unexpected margin of defeat.
3. **Party-loyalty drives violence:** Unlike northern States like UP, Bihar etc. where caste-based politics and communal politics rules the day, in Bengal it is overriding loyalty for the party and the leaders that govern electoral attitudes. These lead to brainless violence at the drop of the hat with political sentiments being the raw driver of force.

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<sup>16</sup> The Hindu, *Over 72% turnout in peaceful Karnataka Assembly polls*, May 10, 2023 available at <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/karnataka-assembly/over-72-turnout-in-peaceful-karnataka-assembly-polls/article66836171.ece> (Last visited October 20, 2023).

<sup>17</sup> Associate Fellow under the Political Reforms and Governance Initiative at ORF Kolkata.

<sup>18</sup> Senior Fellow with ORF's Governance and Politics Initiative.

4. **Structural violence:** While in other States violence might be episodic, with some instances of violence during or after elections, in Bengal violence has been ingrained into the political culture. With party functionaries and State machineries actively being made instrumental in perpetrating the violence, violence has become the rule and peace, the exception.

## Conclusion and Suggestions

*“Purity of Election is the Fundamental to Democracy”*

~ Supreme Court of India<sup>19</sup>

Free and fair elections are a necessary requirement for democracy and the State of West Bengal has clearly failed to ensure the same to its people. The blame also cannot be avoided from the Central Government. With this scale of violence the most cherished rights which gave democracy its very identity, will remain a partial wish fulfilment for the citizens. Election Commission of India, the central, State and local governments have to come together in ending the menace of political violence from the State.

Here the State can take examples from different States such as UP, Karnataka, Gujarat etc. where despite other incidents of crime, elections have been largely peaceful. A culture of peace as opposed to that of Bengal has been established by the government.

The civil society also has to come up and accept its responsibility towards the same. The intelligentsia or as they are commonly known as ‘*Buddhijibi*’ community of renowned scholars, authors, poets, filmmakers, veteran actors, singers etc., should voice their opinions actively and condemn violence in all forms.

Ordinary people should also make use of available means such as social media and other means of telecommunication to record and report instances of violence.

Area specific helpline numbers and help centres should be established from the central level by the Election Commission months before and after the election to provide protection to the

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<sup>19</sup> Union of India v. Association for Democratic Reforms Appeal (civil) 7178 of 2001.



party workers from being persecuted. Safe havens should be created so that the family members of the workers are also protected.

Technology can be used for better surveillance through CCTV cameras and other advance techniques at remote places.

Apart from these top-down based methods what needs to change is the power-hungry mindset of people in politics and their greed for money and power. Once they realize and accept that the ultimate goal of every party is the welfare of the people, the atmosphere of fear will change into that of a healthy political contest.