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Prospects for West Bengal in the 2014 Lok Sabha Elections

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For over three decades beginning in 1977, West Bengal presented a fairly settled picture in terms of electoral politics. In election after election, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI[M])-led Left Front kept winning at the national, state and local levels. This began to change from 2008 onwards culminating in the defeat of the Left Front in the 2011 West Bengal state elections.

The 2011 verdict was a historic one. The world's longest-serving democratically elected Communist government was shown the door by the Trinamool Congress led by Mamata Banerjee. The 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. The Trinamool's ally at the time, the Indian National Congress, won 42 seats.

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The magnitude of the Left's defeat can be gauged from the results of the earlier Assembly election in 2006. Then the Left Front had won 233 seats to the Trinamool's 30. Beginning with the panchayat or local-level bodies in 2008, then the 2009 Lok Sabha elections and finally the civic polls in 2010, the Trinamool Congress had steadily increased its vote share in both rural and urban Bengal. 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 by the Trinamool's slogan of 'poriborton' or change which struck a chord with the voters.

The Rising Star of the Trinamool Congress

In the three years or so since the 2011 verdict, there is little to be seen of the change that the Trinamool had promised. The single-most important reason for the Trinamool's success is Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's personal popularity. This is somewhat paradoxical considering that the party has not delivered on most of its poll promises after it ousted the Left Front in the state elections in 2011. Indeed, there has been little by way of investment in the state, law and order is not very good and Mamata has been intolerant of any criticism. The primary reason, however, for Mamata's popularity is that she is still able to bask in the glow of defeating the Left Front, which had enjoyed an unprecedented run of 34 years in government and was increasingly seen as autocratic and ineffective in governance towards the end of its tenure. Besides, Mamata's simple lifestyle and the ability to connect with the masses have served to gloss over the shortcomings of her government. This was shown in the Trinamool's success in the panchayat elections in 2013.

There are other reasons too for the Trinamool's hold over the electorate. One is the migration of a majority of the Left Front cadre to the Trinamool. This has not only given Trinamool an army of political workers; it has also given the party the means to terrorise opponents in much the same way the Left used its cadre earlier. Two, the demoralised state of the Left, bereft of effective leadership, has left a political vacuum in the state. The Congress, which had allied with the Trinamool in the last Assembly and Lok Sabha elections, has some pockets of influence in north Bengal but is otherwise a party lacking credible leadership and a committed party cadre.

Election Strategy

The two main contenders in West Bengal – the Trinamool Congress and the Left Front – have a contrasting slate of candidates. While the Trinamool's roster is packed with celebrities and big names, the Left Front's is largely filled with unknowns. The Trinamool has renominated most of its 19 sitting MPs. Since, however, the Trinamool has broken its alliance with the Congress, which was in effect in the 2009 general election, it had the opportunity to put up candidates in 14 seats where the Congress had contested last time. The Trinamool has nominated celebrity candidates such as film star Moon Moon Sen from Bankura, actor Dev from Ghatal and footballer Bhaichung Bhutia from Darjeeling. Though there has been discontent among the Trinamool rank and file that political novices have been preferred over party workers, it is a sign of Mamata's confidence that she believes celebrities without any political experience can win seats for her party. Mamata has also played up the fact that her party has put up 11 women candidates.

The national ambitions of Trinamool have, however, taken a hit with the falling out between Mamata and Anna Hazare. Hazare had made a much-publicised visit to Kolkata in February 2014 where he had talked about extending support to Mamata in the general election. But that relationship soured after Hazare did not show up for a joint rally with Mamata in the Ramlila Maidan in Delhi. Though the Trinamool has already put up candidates across several states it seems Mamata has understood that it's best for her to concentrate on West Bengal and the Northeast where her party has elected members in the state assemblies of Manipur, Arunachal and Assam.

By all accounts the Trinamool Congress is on a good wicket in West Bengal. All the opinion polls have predicted a strong showing by the Trinamool. The most recent survey by NDTV shows Trinamool winning 47 per cent of the vote share and 32 of the 42 Lok Sabha seats in the state. Other surveys too put Trinamool in pole position in West Bengal though the forecast for number of seats for the party is marginally less. The latest survey by IBN-CSDS puts Trinamool in the range of 20-28 seats. It predicts that the Left could win between 7 and 13 seats and the Congress between 5 and 9 seats. If the predictions come true it is quite likely that the Trinamool could end up being the third largest party nationally, in terms of seats, behind the BJP and the Congress.

The state of the Left

The Left Front, which has been in the doldrums since being pushed out of power has taken the route of fielding several fresh faces. The Left has put up 26 new candidates of whom 10 are under 40 years of age. Five sitting MPs have not found a place in the Left's list for the Lok Sabha elections. Among them is the veteran CPI leader, Gurudas Dasgupta, who himself decided not to contest due to advancing age. Among the notable Left candidates is former Finance Minister Asim Dasgupta from Dum Dum constituency and nine-time MP Basudeb Acharya from Bankura.

For long an all-powerful entity in West Bengal, the Left is facing an uphill struggle. Ever since it ceded ground to the Trinamool in the 2009 general election, things have been going downhill for the Left. The panchayat elections in 2013 confirmed the slide. Part of the problem is the lack of leadership in the CPI(M), the largest party in the Left Front. Former Chief Minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee was never able to fill the big shoes of Bengal's and India's longest-serving Chief Minister Jyoti Basu. Bhattacharjee has never been a mass leader; neither is he a great organisational person. The same applies to the state CPI(M) chief Biman Bose. Indeed the CPI(M) has not been able to find a good replacement for the late party state secretary, Anil Biswas, who was an organisational man par excellence. But what has hurt the Left the most is the loss of its cadre who have migrated en masse to the Trinamool. That is the price the Communists have had to pay for a cadre which was increasingly committed not to its cause but to the perks of power. For the coming election most surveys are giving the Left at best 10 seats and around a quarter of the vote.

Conclusion

The two other contenders in the state, the Congress and the BJP, are both contesting all the seats making it a genuinely four-cornered or at least triangular contest in many constituencies. Among the Congress candidates are sitting MPs, such as central ministers Adhir Chowdhury and Deepa Das Munshi, and veteran politician Somen Mitra who had in the last election contested on a Trinamool ticket. The Congress still has pockets of influence in north Bengal and is expected to win a few seats from that region.

The BJP, which hardly has a presence in West Bengal, has named former MPs Satyabrata Mukherjee and Tapan Sikdar as candidates besides a host of celebrities including music

composer Bappi Lahiri, singer Babul Supriyo and magician P C Sorcar. The BJP is popular among refugees particularly in the districts along the Bangladesh border. It has also struck an alliance with the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha (GJM) for the Darjeeling seat and two other constituencies in North Bengal. In fact, the BJP had won its lone seat from West Bengal in 2009 from Darjeeling with support from the GJM.

Most surveys show the BJP substantially increasing its vote share in West Bengal from 6% in 2009 partly on the back of Narendra Modi's all-India popularity. Though this might not translate into seats, the question is whose vote the BJP will eat into: the Trinamool or the Left. It is likely that the Trinamool will be more affected by the BJP's increased vote share than the Left. That the Trinamool is not as confident as it was in the run-up to the elections is evident from its frequent-run-ins with the Election Commission. A failed chit fund scheme, which has been linked to some Trinamool leaders and hit several thousand small investors, has come back as an issue to haunt the party. All these factors could adversely affect the Trinamool's seat tally, bringing it below what the opinion polls are predicting.

**West Bengal National Elections, 2004 and 2009 and
State Elections, 2011**

	2004 Lok Sabha	2006 State	2009 Lok Sabha	2011 State
Total seats	42	294	42	294
Won by Trinamool	1	30	19	184
Won by Left Front	35	233	15	62

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