

Combative Federalism: New Model from West Bengal

A.K. Verma

West Bengal has the credit of producing many innovations in Indian democracy. The latest in this series is the new combative federal model during the 2021 state assembly elections and thereafter seen as a negative strain within Indian federalism. While occasional combative posturing of state government vis-à-vis Union government on some delicate and sensitive issues may be taken as a pinch of salt in our federal system, any overdose of 'combative' posturing may dent the centre-state relations beyond repair and may vitiate the over all democratic framework within which Indian federalism operates. This paper attempts to partly fill that void and discusses the new federal trajectory that emerged during West Bengal assembly elections having the potential to redefine Indian federal system.

Out of all the four states - Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West-Bengal (WB), and the Union Territory of Puducherry that went to assembly polls in March-April 2021, the West Bengal elections were the most keenly watched and hotly contested. From the month long electoral process, several significant narratives sprang and a new trajectory emerged in the federal domain. Strangely, they were either ignored or greatly downplayed in media, political circles and academic discourses in spite of the fact they all have significant bearing on not only West Bengal politics, but also national and state politics, federal polity and our political culture. This paper attempts to partly fill that void and discusses the new federal trajectory that emerged during West Bengal assembly elections having the potential to redefine Indian federal system.

Assembly Elections were held in West Bengal during 27 March to 29 April 2021 in eight phases. The media, political analysts and academics' attention was mainly focused on the return of Trinmool Congress (TMC) to power for the third time in a row and the failure of the BJP to get majority against its claim of getting a massive mandate in the state. However, during the campaign and after the declaration of results, one saw a lot of animosity between the main rivals - the TMC and the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) that took quite an ugly and violent turn. The ire of the victorious ruling party TMC knew no bounds as the TMC workers tried to physically harm those who they thought voted for the BJP. Not only that, there was an attempt by Chief Minister Mamta Banerjee to attack the federal government, the Prime Minister Narendra Modi, Home Minister Amit Shah and all constitutional institutions including the Governor, the Election Commission, the Paramilitary forces and even the Judiciary. An impression was created that the West Bengal government was virtually at war with the federal government and its institutions. That added a new trajectory to the evolving pattern of federalism in India since independence - what we can call 'combative federalism'.

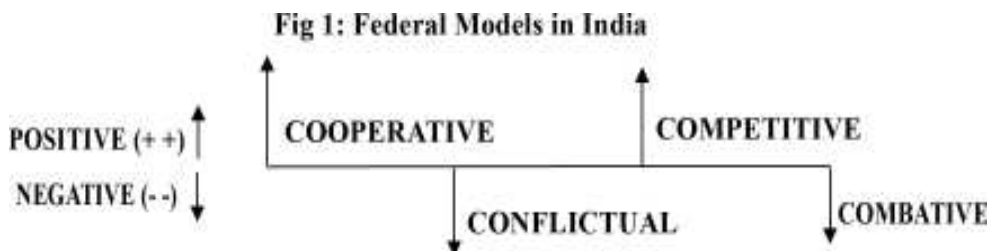
Federal Models In India

The paper examines and analyses the new federal trajectory that emanated from the 2021 assembly elections in WB. But, before we do that, we must take a look at the evolution of Indian federalism since independence and try to find out whether Indian federalism has been going through a uniform linear process in evolution or taking new trajectories since the beginning? And, if it had been taking new trajectories, whether they fall in water tight compartments in a timeline or co-exist with the older ones in Indian federal system?

A study of several federal tendencies demonstrates that the Indian federal process has not been linear and uniform; rather it has been taking new trajectories since the constitution came into force in 1950. We can classify these trajectories in two major categories - the positive and the negative. In each category, we find two significant trajectories. In the positive category, we see 'cooperative' and 'competitive' federal models

while in the negative category, we find the ‘conflictual’ and the ‘combative’ federal models. Thus, the Indian federal system experienced four major federal trajectories/models viz. cooperative, conflictual, competitive and combative (**Figure 1**).

Let’s examine the first three federal models, briefly, as enough literature is available on them, and, secondly, focus on the new and the fourth federal combative model that emanated from WB assembly polls recently.



Cooperative and Conflictual Models

The first phase ‘cooperative federalism’ was just after independence when the Indian National Congress (henceforth called Congress) was in power at both the Centre and states and their relationship was cordial. This first phase could be called the phase of ‘Cooperative Federalism’. This phase existed from 1947 to 1967, almost two decades. Because of the common leadership of the party for both the federal and state levels, the relation between the two power centres was based on cooperation, and irritants, if any, between the federal government and any state governments were amicably settled through the intervention of the party “high command”.

The second ‘conflictual’ phase in the evolution of federalism came in 1967 with the Fourth General Elections. Because of the growing factionalism within the Congress party, the party lost power in half of the federating units; out of 16 states then, it lost majority in eight states viz Kerala, Orissa, Madras (present TN), West Bengal, Bihar, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, and Punjab. While Kerala and West Bengal formed Left governments, Orissa went for a rightist government of Swatantra Party led by Rajendra Narayan Singh Deo. Madras had DMK government. Bihar also had a non-congress government of Jan Kranti Dal under chief ministership of Mahamaya Prasad Sinha. However, in UP, Punjab and Rajasthan Congress continued to be the single largest party. In UP, after the defection of Charan Singh from Congress and the formation of the Bhartiya Kranti Dal, he formed non-congress government in UP. In Rajasthan Mohan Lal Sukhadia of Congress managed to form government. In Punjab, a non-congress coalition government was formed under the leadership of Gurnam Singh (Akali Dal) (**Karleykar:1967**). With the arrival of non-congress governments in half of the states of the Indian Union, the political complexion of the federal polity changed substantially and some element of conflict could be seen between the central government and the state governments.

The earliest conflict between the centre and states on political complexion was witnessed in 1959 in Kerala when a legitimately elected Left government under EMS Namboodripad was dismissed by the central government under prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru on the dictates of his daughter and also the then President of the Congress Party, Indira Gandhi. But, the formation of non-congress governments in states created a disturbance in the psychology of the congress leaders and workers who did not see them as legitimate ‘inheritors of power’ but ‘usurpers of power’ not for any end other than their personal aggrandisements. That created consternation between the non-congress state governments and the Congress led central government.

The conflictual model got reinforced with the arrival of Janata Party government in 1977 at the centre in the backdrop of proclamation of Emergency under Article 352 of the constitution by the then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in 1975. The Morarji Desai government of Janata Party drew the conclusion that the people had rejected Congress in the entire Hindi belt in northern India and, hence, the congress governments in the

states had lost the mandate of the people. Invoking Article 356 of the constitution, they dismissed several state governments ruled by the Congress and ordered fresh assembly polls. As was expected, the states mostly returned Janata Party governments in states. However, the Janata government was a short lived experiment that forced another Lok Sabha election in a couple of years in 1980. The Congress was back with a bang and treading the path shown by the Janata Party, it too followed the conflictual model dismissing the Janata Party governments in states using Article 356 of the constitution. Thus, whether it was Janata Party or Congress, both reinforced the conflictual model of federalism with a handy tool of the constitution Article 356. It is in this context that the SR Bommai vs Union of India case - first heard by Karnataka HC and dismissed in 1989 and then taken to SC that heard in 1993 and decided in 1994 - enunciated path breaking instructions to the Union Govt on the use of Article 356 making it virtually justiciable since then.

So, one can infer that the conflictual model of Indian federalism had a political or ideological framework in which the constitutional provision of Article 356 provided an operational tool. Whenever, the political/ideological complexion largely differed at the Centre and the states after the parliamentary elections, the conflict produced sparks in the form of dismissal of the legitimately elected governments. In the first phase of cooperative federalism, we had just one Kerala's Left govt of Namboodripad becoming the casualty of ideological conflict between the centre and the state, in the second conflictual phase, we can see umpteen number of cases of states suffering dismissals at the hands of federal governments.

Competitive Federalism

The third phase of federalism seems to have dawned after the onset of *liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation* (LPG) in 1990s when the states were given some liberties in economic spheres and the legal and administrative control of the federal government was loosened by abolishing the requirement of sanctions from the federal government in respect of economic activities and projects undertaken by states. That created a semblance of cooperative federalism where we find two developments. One, there was greater cooperation between the central government on the one hand and state government on the other for taking advantage of the LPG environment. The state governments realised some autonomy in economic domain and realised that there were reduced central interference in their desire to plan, conceptualise and operationalise economic ventures. They were also given some liberty to collaborate with foreign investors and attract FDI though the finalisation surely required some clearance from the federal government. Two, there was also development of horizontal federalism in which states tried to cooperate with each other individually or collectively for mutual advantages. This had the effect of developing collectivism among states and giving them a sense of increased strength vis-à-vis federal government.

With the arrival of Narendra Modi at the federal government, the political/ideological divide between the federal government and non-BJP run state governments sharpened. But because Modi had the background of being the chief minister of Gujarat for a long, he knew where the shoe pinches and made some radical changes in collective forums like abolishing Planning Commission, reforming National Development Council and various other institutions, the centre-state relations continued to be largely cooperative. However, Modi injected a new component in centre-state relations by bringing in an element of competition among states and also between the centre and the states. The entire purpose was to motivate the states to improve the quality of service delivery and development in their respective states. That was expected more in the centrally sponsored schemes and various other indicators of development.

But the emergence of these federal models had not been sequential and segmental in a neat historical timeline. Broadly, the sequence had been from cooperative through conflictual to competitive federalism. However, all the three federal tendencies could be seen to co-exist in Indian federalism irrespective of the political or ideological disposition of governments at the centre and in the states.

West Bengal Case

In some cases as West Bengal and Kerala, we can see the negative conflictual federal model right

from the beginning. The conflictual federal model was the dominant model in W. Bengal despite the fact that the state was then ruled by Congress till 1967. So, in the case of West Bengal, the conflictual model existed in spite of political and ideological congruence at both places - New Delhi and Kolkata during a period when the country was experiencing 'cooperative' federal model during 1947-67.

In the case of Kerala, which was created as a new state through linguistic reorganisation of states in 1956, the first elected government was a communist government under chief minister EMS Namboodripad as early as 1957. But the Congress forced 'conflictual model' on Kerala when the Namboodripad government was dismissed. During 64 years of its existence so far, Kerala had intermittently communist governments for 37 Years. Similarly, in West Bengal, the Left Front communist governments remained in office at a stretch of about 34 years from 1977 to 2011 uninterrupted. These two examples provide an ideological dimension to the federal relations between the Centre and states and were mainly responsible for the rise of 'conflictual model' of federalism in India. We propose to focus only on the evolution of federalism in West Bengal.

The paper examines the passing of the federal relations in West Bengal in the negative domain and argues that the conflictual model came to stay during all the three major ruling dispensations - from Congress through Left Front to the present TMC regime. It is important to remember that even during a long and continuous communist led Left Front rule for 34 years, the conflictual model remained within the confines of the constitutional framework and despite occasional intense heat over issues like Governor's appointment, fiscal matters or state autonomy, it never overshot the boundaries of constitutional resolution mechanisms. At every constitutional platform like the Planning Commission, NDC, Inter-state council, Finance Commission etc, the West Bengal communist government fought tooth and nail to oppose central policies or took the matters to highest Judiciary. But, there was not an attempt to abuse the central government, the Prime Minister, federal constitutional institutions including the Election Commission or the Supreme Court.

What is intriguing is the fact that the TMC government had dislodged the communists, thereby negating the communist ideological disposition of the voters of West Bengal and taken a new ideological position that moved away from the Left and towards the centre, and yet its posturing against the Rightist Union Government hardened so much, surpassing even that of the Left-Front. It transcended beyond 'conflictual model' to a 'combative model' that surprised all.

Not being clear on its ideological fundamentals, the TMC adopted two ideological postures - one, pro-Muslims - as Muslims formed a very sizable section of the electorate of West Bengal and, two, anti-BJP, that degenerated into anti-Hindu posturing of the TMC leading to bitter polarisation during the 2021 Assembly elections. The BJP being in power at the Centre, its leaders, especially PM Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah became targets of Mamta Banerjee's ire. That ire resulted in the use of harsh, impolite and, at times, indecent language against the BJP leaders including the PM. The entire persona of Mamta Banerjee and the TMC government in West Bengal came to be seen as if they were at war with the union government. The huge rallies of Modi, Amit Shah and other BJP leaders in West Bengal during election campaigns, and the defection of several TMC leaders to the BJP, added to Mamta's ire. Many anticipated that West Bengal may get a BJP government in 2021.

The BJP performed very well in 2021 assembly elections and increased its vote share substantially as compared to 2016 assembly elections, but the TMC managed to retain its high vote share due to opposition parties joining hands to defeat the BJP, and, thus, returned to power a third time. It was unfortunate that Mamta's ire against the BJP and union government turned against innocent voters who were seen as having voted the BJP. The TMC goons indulged in large scale arson and looting post poll taking the West Bengal's relations with the union government to a new low. It appeared as if West Bengal government was at war with the Union Government not complying with central orders and directives, and leaving no occasion to offend, abuse and refuse the central government. The West Bengal Governors usually had uncomfortable times, but the present Governor Jagdeep Dhankar felt so helpless at the government sponsored violence in the state. That was unheard of in the political history of federalism that a winning government sponsored

post-poll violence against those whom they thought voted against the government. During election campaigns, she made menacing use of a jibe '*khela hobe*' that implied that something awful was being schemed and the way BJP workers and voters were identified and violently harmed after she won was a testimony to what she meant by '*khela hobe*'.

Petitions were filed in the Supreme Court for direction to the Centre to deploy central forces including armed forces, to rescue the collapsing law and order situation in the state and constitute an SIT under the chairmanship of a retired Judge of the SC to examine the involvement of politicians into the 'alleged targeted pogrom' in West Bengal. There were cases of TMC goons indulging in arson, looting, murders and rape under police neglect, if not patronage. It was alleged that the miscreants had turned West Bengal in to a 'lawless zone' [News 18, 2021].

Combative Federalism

West Bengal is a unique state in the sense that it carries a huge baggage of the first and second partitions of Bengal in 1905 and 1947 respectively, the fierce regional pride in Bengali culture, literature and language, political radicalism since late 19th century, shifting of capital from Calcutta to New Delhi, huge influx of refugees from East Pakistan and emergence of Communism as a dominant political force that ruled the state for three decades since 1977 (Jha, Mishra, 1993).

Communism argues for centralisation of power and authority and is opposed to any decentralisation and division of power as in federalism. However, despite theoretical animosity between Communism and federalism, communist parties in West Bengal adjusted themselves to Indian federalism realising the diversity and pluralities of the society (Bhattacharya, 2001). How the communists oriented to Indian federalism is interesting to study, but the way a non-left party TMC headed by Mamta Banerjee had taken a combative posture against union government, transcending the conflictual model is quite intriguing. Is the combative posture vis-à-vis the Union government taken by Mamta's TMC a political strategy to score over communists by arousing the local and Bengali sentiments on the one, and keep alive the traditional aggressive posture of the state and put the union government on the defensive, on the other? Thus, is TMC trying to browbeat Left front communist parties and Right winger BJP at the same time through its combative posture against Union government?

That meant that West Bengal had always a very different flavour of federal relations with Centre. Even when the Congress ruled the state (1947-67), we find tension in state's relations with Centre. The states' memorandum before the Third Finance Commission is a pointer. The state challenged the 'Coal Bearing Areas (Acquisition and Development) Act 1957 in the Supreme Court. The state had earlier criticised the recommendations of the First Finance Commission in respect of the divisible pool of the centrally levied taxes, especially the Jute Export Duty that caused revenue loss to WB (Jha, Mishra, 1993).

With the arrival of United Front Government in 1967, the centre-state relations deteriorated further due to ideological differences between the left in West Bengal and centrist Congress in New Delhi over matters related to financial autonomy, role of Governor, deployment of CRPF and law and order and IAS officers. With the Left Front in power in 1977 and a non-congress government at the Centre post-Emergency, the West Bengal Chief Minister Jyoti Basu submitted a 16 point memorandum to restructure the VII schedule of the constitution that divided powers between the centre and states (Jha, Mishra, 1993).

So long as the Congress was in power at both the places till 1967, the conflict did not take agitational or confrontationalist shape but was either resolved within the constitutional framework or at the organisational level within the Congress party. But Jyoti Basu's coming to power did two things; one, it changed the texture of agenda of discussion on greater financial autonomy to states by bringing some sort of consensus among states; two, it made Basu an undeclared leader of states in respect of restructuring Union-States relations within the constitutional framework (Jha, Mishra, 1993).

During the decade of 1980-90, Indira Gandhi was back to centre with a bang but the regional forces also got strengthened. With the coming of a Communist government in Tripura, Basu's voice got strengthened vis-à-vis Centre that encouraged other non-congress states to demand restructuring of federal relations. During this decade in West Bengal, however, Governor's Role, Gorkhaland, Haldia Petro Chemicals Project, the Bakreshwar Thermal Power Project, food grains etc issues became a bone of contention between Union and the state. However, when National Front government of VP Singh came to power in New Delhi in 1989, the centre's relations with West Bengal were at its best as confessed by **Basu himself (WB Papers 1991)**. However, in spite of Left Front's differences, and after lot of confabulations between Centre and state, the Gorkhalad accord could be signed on 22 August 1988.

The combative federal model is of recent origin, as late as assembly elections in 2021. This mode of federalism transcends the conflictual model and assumes a very harsh, aggressive and collisional posture by a state government vis-à-vis the federal government. The state of West Bengal under the chief ministership of Mamta Banerjee suddenly posited itself against the federal government and its leader PM Modi that created a very poor and negative impression of centre-state relations in respect of West Bengal.

TMC Relations with Union

Mamta and TMC were in NDA during 1998-2006 and Mamta served as Railway Minister in Vajpayee's cabinet. In 2000, she and her colleague resigned from cabinet over hike in petrol prices but later withdrew resignation. In March, they quit over Tehelka sting. In 2004, she returned to NDA and became the coal minister and remained till NDA was in power. In 2009, she joined UPA and on 20 May 2011, she became Chief Minister of West Bengal. She deserted UPA in 2012 reducing it to a minority [**Economic Times, 2016**].

There was a time when Mamta and Modi shared good relations and even praised each other. While replying to the Motion of Thanks on the President's Address to Parliament in 2014, PM Modi said, "My sister Mamata is working really hard to bring West Bengal out of the evils of 35 years. We respect her". Earlier, even Mamta Banerjee praised Modi when he was CM of Gujarat. Addressing the 85th annual general meeting of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI) in December 2012, she said, "Gujarat has been nurtured and it is progressing". In June 2015, Mamta even joined Modi's entourage to Bangladesh (**The Print, 16 May 2019**). Even as late as May 2020, PM Modi commended Mamta's handling of the 'Amphan' cyclone devastation in rehabilitating people and announced Rs 1000 crore relief to the state of WB promising all support (**Hindustan Times, 22 May 2020**).

But Mamta is mercurial in temperament. She has a tendency to accuse parties in Power. She accused Left Front government in West Bengal for spying on her, a charge that she replicated against Manmohan Singh's UPA government and Narendra Modi's NDA governments. She was herself accused of spying through electronic surveillance by no less a person than the Governor of West Bengal Jagdeep Dhankar. The charge was replicated by many politicians (**The Print, 6 November, 2019**)

On 31 May 2021, Mamta took an extremely combative posture on West Bengal Chief Secretary Alapan Bandopadhyay refusing to release him on the askance of the Union Government who was due to retire and gave him a three-month extension to address cyclone and covid situation in WB. Even earlier, in February 2019, Mamta went on sit-in demonstration against CBI interrogating Kolkata police commissioner Rajeev Kumar in Saradha chit fund case. She reinstated him after 2021 victory. During her 10 years rule, she often took combative posture refusing to spare IAS/IPS officers for central postings. The entire game plan is to convert the row into a federal one [**Hindustan Times, 31 May 2021**].

Many leaders like Arvind Kejriwal, Chandrababu Naidu and Sharad Pawar did try to challenge Narendra Modi as Prime Minister, but they were all shown their mettle by the people. Mamta has a vast experience of both the state and the centre. She also entertained the idea of one day becoming the PM and tried to harden her postures from conflictual through allegational to combative. Her personal defeat was overshadowed by her party's massive win in West Bengal. The turning point in Mamta-Modi relations was the 2016 assembly

elections in West Bengal. That poll signalled that BJP would be the most formidable rival of TMC in future polls. Modi attacked the state government on 'Sharda' and the 'Narada' scams to which Mamta termed him as "expiry babu" needing a "slap of democracy" and compared him to Ravana. The 2019 LS polls where BJP polled very heavy votes, further enraged Mamta (**India Today, 2 June 2021**).

The West Bengal Chief Minister Mamta Banerjee not only took a combative posture on matters pertaining to West Bengal, but she also adopted that posture against the central government and its leaders, including the Prime Minister, on matters which did not concern her state. For example she took an extremely combative posture on the National Capital Territory of Delhi (Amendment) Bill that was about Delhi. She tried to make it a national issue and assume leadership role by making that bill a 'big federal issue'. She wrote letters to leaders of various political parties-

"I am writing this letter to you, and to several leaders of non-BJP parties, to convey my serious concerns over a series of assaults by the BJP and its government at the Centre on democracy and constitutional federalism in India" (**The Tribune, 31 March 2021**). She termed the bill an "extremely grave" development: "With this law, the BJP government at the Centre has snatched away practically all the powers of the democratically elected government of Delhi, and vested them in the hands of the Lt Governor, a nominee of the Centre. The Lt Governor has been made the undeclared Viceroy of Delhi, acting as a proxy for the home minister and the prime minister" (**The Tribune, 31 March 2021**). Earlier, at an election rally, she squarely blamed the BJP and the Election Commission, saying that the Bharatiya Janata Party was plotting to kill her. She went on to blame the Election commission of India (ECI) for having a bias towards the saffron party and covering up their actions (**RepublicWorld.Com: 16 March 2021**).

In that letter, her blatant combative posture was directed not only against the Union government but also the BJP and the Prime Minister Modi. She charged the BJP government of "brazenly and vindictively misusing" such institutions as CBI, ED against leaders and functionaries of non-BJP parties for its own partisan political ends and "unleashing" the ED to conduct raids on non-BJP governments viz. TMC and DMK. She also took a dig at the central government for "deliberately" withholding transfer of funds to non-BJP states "so that we face problems in implementing our development and welfare schemes to benefit common people". Mamta Banerjee lambasted the Centre's effort to "deactivate" every single platform like Planning Commission, National Development Council and Inter-State Council-available to state governments to put their demands, needs, concerns and views before the central government (**The Tribune, 31 March 2021**). Mamta accused BJP of engineering defections forgetting that when she came to power in 2011, a spate of defections happened from Left Front to the TMC. About 13 MLAs from Left Front (CPIM, Forward Block, RSP etc) and Congress defected to TMC shortly after 2011 polls. (**Economic Times, 23 July 2014**). The trend continued till the arrival of assembly polls when it got reversed and as many as 34 TMC MLAs joined the BJP out of which 13 were given tickets to contest as BJP MLAs (**Business Insider India, 25 March 2021**).

The West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee also attacked the BJP, "The BJP has amassed unlimited resources from questionable sources, which it is using to topple duly elected non-BJP governments and to engineer defections in non-BJP parties"... "It wants to dilute the powers of state governments and downgrade them to mere municipalities. In short, it wants to establish a one-party authoritarian rule in India" (**The Tribune, 31 March 2021**). The West Bengal Finance Minister alleged that the state of West Bengal had been denied its share of central assistance to the tune of 50,000 crore. If that is pegged with the budget for 2020-21, the dues would escalate to 90,000 crore (**Business Standard, 10 February, 2020**).

In that letter she made an assault on the Prime Minister when she said, "The Modi government's policy of reckless and wholesale privatisation of the nation's assets is also an attack on democracy because these assets belong to the people of India". She closed with very harsh words against the PM, "Overall, the Centre-state relations, and also relations between the ruling party at the Centre and opposition parties, have never been as bad in the history of independent India as they are now, and the blame for this rests squarely with the prime minister's authoritarian conduct"(**The Tribune, 31 March 2021**).

Implications for Indian Federalism

West Bengal is strategically positioned as it shares India's international borders with Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal and, hence, its relations with the Government of India assume great significance. The West Bengal is also very important for the proper implementation of the 'Act East Policy' of India as India faces formidable challenges from its eastern neighbours, especially China. Hence, the state of West Bengal also becomes an epicentre of para-diplomacy in which the local and regional governments also play significant role in shaping up international relations and the foreign policy that shapes it (**Basu & Bhowmick, 2021**).

The transition of West Bengal from being assertive within the cooperative federal model to conflictual and, finally, to combative models are typical to the revolutionary ethos of the state. These federal flavours need not be looked at from the perspective of panic or disapproval as they are all part of a baggage of diversity and heterogeneity in a pluralist democratic polity. That is because the Indian federalism is strong and elastic enough to accept, accommodate and adapt itself to various diverse federal strains at the same time. We should not forget that our federal system is, after all, rooted in a bewildering diversity of over 555 former princely states whom Sardar Patel persuaded into an Indian Union.

Indian federalism can boast of its four models-cooperative, conflictual, competitive and combative-existing simultaneously in the federal domain that may be a befitting rebuttal to KC Wheare who once called Indian federalism as "quasi-federal" (Wheare 1951, p.28). However, the question of centre-state relations has three major components to be impacted-one, the ideology, leadership and political culture. While we may not do anything about ideology as democracy permits competition on ideological basis, we may have to take care of the leadership and political cultural components. Good leaders have to be groomed and a healthy political culture has to be carefully chiselled. How that will happen, is a question of further academic enquiry but surely without a healthy political culture and mature leadership, the conflictual and combative federal models may spill over the entire federal domain and inject so much heat and tension in the centre-state relations that governance at the national and state levels may become very challenging, if not impossible.

West Bengal has the credit of producing many innovations in Indian democracy. The latest in this series is the new *combative federal model* during the 2021 state assembly elections and thereafter seen as a negative strain within Indian federalism. While occasional combative posturing of state government vis-à-vis Union government on some delicate and sensitive issues may be taken as a pinch of salt in our federal system, any overdose of 'combative' posturing may dent the centre-state relations beyond repair and may vitiate the over all democratic framework within which Indian federalism operates.

References

1. Basu, Pratinashree & Bhowmick, Soumya: "As India Acts East, the Role of West Bengal", ORF, Brief No 461, April 2021.
<https://www.orfonline.org/research/as-india-acts-east-the-role-of-west-bengal/>
2. Bhattacharyya, Harihar, 'Indian Federalism and Indian Communism: Conflict and Collaboration', *The Indian Journal of Political Science*, Vol. 62, No. 1 (March 2001), pp. 41-60
3. Business Insider India, '34 West Bengal legislators went from TMC to BJP – only 13 of them got tickets to contest the election for the saffron party', 25 March 2021.
<https://www.businessinsider.in/politics/elections/news/bjp-has-given-tickets-to-only-13-out-of-34-west-bengal-legislators-went-from-tmc-to-bjp/articleshow/81689750.cms>
4. Business Standard: West Bengal dues from Centre more than Rs 50,000 crore: Amit Mitra, 10 February, 2020.
https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/west-bengal-dues-from-centre-more-than-rs-50-000-crore-amit-mitra-120021001216_1.html
5. Hindustan Times, Mamata and her battle against Union government over bureaucrats, 31 May 2021.

<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/cant-send-cs-back-mamata-banerjee-writes-to-pmmodi-101622449068179.html>

6. Hindustan Times, 'Under Mamata Banerjee's leadership': PM Modi's rare praise for Bengal chief minister, 22 May 2020.
<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/west-bengal-is-fighting-well-pm-modi-s-rare-praise-for-mamata-banerjee/story-I0UBEUqOGNKKVnBHI7FyXM.html>
7. India Today, Dutta, Prabhash K., "Mamata vs Modi fights: Noise grows in national politics", 2 June 2021.
<https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/mamata-vs-modi-fights-noise-in-national-politics-for-an-alternative-1809939-2021-06-02>
8. Jha , Rajani Ranjan And Mishra, Bhavana: ' Centre-State Relations, 1980-90: The Experience of West Bengal', *The Indian Journal of Political Science* Vol. 54, No. 2 (April - June 1993), pp. 209-237.
9. *Jyoti Basu Speaks, A Collection of Selected Speeches of Jyoti Basu*, Department of Information & Cultural Affairs, Government of West Bengal, Calcutta, 1991, p. 88.
10. Karleykar, Hiranmay The Rout of The Congress Party – Why it Happene.
<https://www.thecrimson.com/article/1967/3/11/the-rout-of-the-congress-party/>
11. News 18, 'PM Modi Calls Bengal Governor Over Post-Poll Violence', MHA Seeks Report as Mamata Banerjee Appeals for Calm, 4 May 2021.
<https://www.news18.com/news/politics/several-killed-homes-vandalised-in-post-poll-clashes-between-tmc-bjp-in-west-bengal-3705050.html>
12. Republicworld.com: 16 March, 2021.
<https://www.republicworld.com/india-news/politics/mamata-banerjee-attacks-eci-again-in-a-rally-alleges-bjp-has-a-plot-to-kill-her.html>
13. SR Bommai vs Union of India 1994.
<https://indiankanoon.org/doc/60799/>
14. *The Economic Times*, "BJP's Love Hate Relationship with Mamta and Jayalalithaa, 21 May 2016.
<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/bjps-love-hate-relationship-with-mamata-banerjee-and-jayalalithaa/articleshow/52369540.cms?from=mdr>
15. *The Print*, Tewari, Ruhi, "Until just a few years ago, Mamata & Modi actually liked and praised each other", 16 May 2019.
<https://theprint.in/politics/until-just-a-few-years-ago-mamata-modi-actually-liked-and-praised-each-other/236193/>
16. *The Print*, Das, Madhuparna: "Mamata accuses Modi govt of spying but opponents say it's she who made snooping an art", 6 November, 2019.
<https://theprint.in/politics/mamata-accuses-modi-govt-of-spying-but-opponents-say-its-she-who-made-snooping-an-art/316252/>
17. *The Tribune*, 31 March 2021. Accessed on 22 September 2021.
<https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/centre-state-political-relations-never-been-as-bad-in-history-of-independent-india-as-now-mamata-232655>
18. Wheare, K C (1951): *Federal Governments*, p 28.

Pandemic Management and Elections: Impact of COVID-19 on State Assembly Polls in Kerala

**Ashika S Prasad,
Jeffin Thomas Mammen
& Girish Kumar R**

This article seeks to analyse the various pandemic governance measures adopted by the LDF government and how it helped LDF in its electoral victory in the 2021 Assembly Elections. It is divided into three parts-how natural disasters influence elections, Kerala's pandemic governance and the details of post-poll survey, which analysed the public mood to the governance measures taken by the government. The article considers the measures taken by the government before the election and how these measures influenced the electoral outcome.

1. Natural Disasters and Elections

Elections are indispensable in democracy. Elections are mandates of citizen interests and they link government to people. Dahl (1973) articulates election as a mechanism through which political leaders are selected and held to account. This process enables individual participation in the governance and administration of their nation. In a democracy, voters elect their government based on their performance. Election may take place during crisis or disasters such as floods, earthquakes, hurricanes or pandemics.¹ Natural disasters have had huge impacts on elections all over the world. Even though natural disasters are out of one's hands, the response of the government in effectively managing the same more often become crucial in deciding their accountability. Natural disasters create dilemma in a political system and place the capability of the government under suspicion. Politicians are well aware that this results in replacing regimes. Even though the aftermath of disasters will not as such affect the government in power, the modus operandi of the government to nullify the crisis decides their fate in elections (Abney & Hill, 1966). Reeves (2011) reiterates that prompt reactions made by government officials such as providing substantial amounts of emergency relief to the affected population, the electorate reward these efforts. In fact, disaster relief can even improve electoral prospects. According to Franzese (2002) electors usually prefer candidates or political party whom they presume to provide greater material wellbeing and better aggregate economic performance. Downs (1957) put forward a utility-maximizing calculus to show how voters make decisions on whom to vote for. He argues that voters take note of the gain in utility they obtained while voting. They rationally evaluate the utility gain they would receive if the opposition party governed instead of the incumbent. The party that wins the maximum vote in the election is the one which is thought to provide higher utility gain to the people.

During catastrophes, electors want the positive response from the officials in the form of material support like incentives, free ration, reduction in taxes and direct money transfer to their account. Incumbent leaders provide more support in a year prior to an election to signal their competence to the (affected) voters in times of hardship and limit electoral punishment. The incumbent will provide more public disaster support in a year prior to an election for retaining the political power. Most of the studies on impact of catastrophes on election claim that voters punish the government in power in the next election when a natural disaster strikes even when it is beyond the control of the government. These negative repercussions of a disaster can be reduced to a great extent if the ruling party acts quite vigorously in the aftermath. Thus, although electors hold the incumbent to a certain degree accountable for the occurrence of a disaster, they recompense large-scale disaster relief operations delivered by the regime in power. A major part of the disaster support is politically motivated as governments appear to be more generous with disaster relief in election years (Bovan, et al., 2018). Klomp (2019) says voters are myopic, and appraise only the recent past while casting their

votes; this gives incumbents influential incentives to touch voters' behaviour and conduct elections after a catastrophe or crisis. Citizens evaluate the government performance and if the government performs well, people tend to re-elect them and if their performance is dissatisfactory, people vote them out.

Retrospective voting vs. Prospective Voting

Benoit (2006) defines retrospective voting as a type of voting pattern in which voters look back to the past to perceive how the country has progressed under the leadership of the candidate (or political party) in power whereas in prospective voting pattern, voters are oriented toward the future, and includes assumption about how the nation is likely to do under the leadership of one candidate or political party. In natural crisis, it is retrospective voting, which is favoured by psephologists for analysing effects of a pandemic. Retrospective voting suggests that voters decide whom to vote, based on the incumbent's previous performance. Voters often show retrospective voting behaviour and tend to hold the incumbent government accountable for their actions- either they punish them or reward them (Woon, 2012).²

Retrospective voting perspective enables voters to rationally compare the past results of the ruling party with the counterfactual scenario of how the opposition would have performed. In addition to this, retrospective approach also stipulates that the motivational power of the retrospective voting mechanism is for authority to also stay alert and vigilant to the handling of "new and unexpected events that arise between elections" (Ferejohn, 1986). As Prezeworski (1999) has put it, "those incumbents who act in the best interest of citizen's win re-election and those who do not, lose them". Powell (2000) articulates that retrospective voting benefits representation mainly in two ways. At the first level, 'throwing a rascal out is per se a good thing' because it can stop exploitations of governing power. More importantly potential sanction may control the behaviour of a current representative who is afraid of being rejected. In other words, an incumbent who values re-election may be forced to work on behalf of the electorate when she anticipates that retrospective voting will occur in the next election. Retrospective voting is interpreted as voting in a short-sighted manner by letting the past determine the future, rather than looking forward, as in prospective voting. Retrospection theory also says that incumbents ought to at least be motivated to exhibit behaviour that maximizes their possibility of re-election. For this reason, it should be in their interest to convey a public image that is representative of some majority (Ericksson, 2017).

Gasper and Reeves (2011) explained two frameworks to explain retrospective voting- the responsive electorate and attentive electorate. In responsive electorate, voting behaviour is influenced by events such as natural disasters beyond the control of the incumbents. But in attentive electorate, voters judge the incumbents based on how they presided over the crisis, rather than situations beyond their control. A study made by Cole, Healy and Walker (2012) reveals that in India, voters punish the government for monsoons, but the punishment is less if the response to the crisis is strong. The spread of the corona virus and various government responses may have a noteworthy impact on what is known as the *electoral cycle*, or the set of stages and procedures involved in the conduct of elections. The three periods associated with electoral cycle are (i) the pre-electoral period involves training, information, and voter registration, (ii) the electoral period includes nominations, campaigns, voting, and results, and (iii) the post-electoral period comprises review, reform, and strategies (Landman & Splend, 2020).

2. Managing the Pandemic - The Kerala Model

Kerala offers a conducive environment for the Covid 19 Pandemic to be highly contagious, given its high density of population, substantial inflow and outflow of humans, higher percentage of aged population and high degree of morbidity. These favourable conditions for spread of the Pandemic are arrested with the help of settlement pattern (disbursed settlement pattern in the urban Kerala), social capital in the form of PRI system, educated population and the apolitical unified response to a crisis by the community, public health care network from bottom to top, professional leadership at bureaucratic/administrative level, political leadership etc. Kerala, that ranks eighth in percapita income among states in India, ranks first in health care.

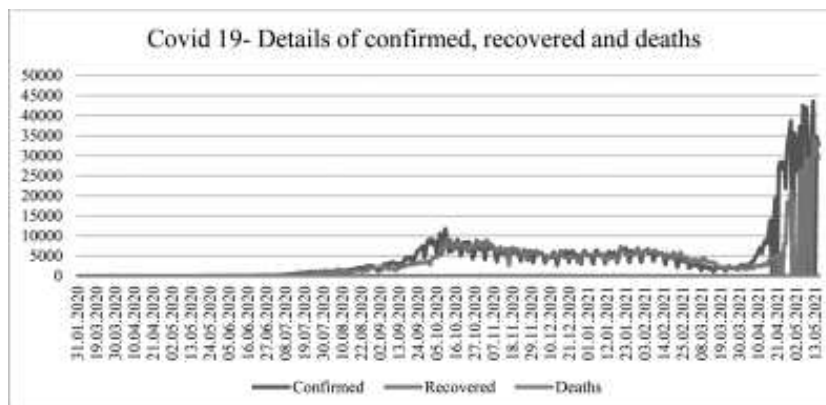
It stands apart in its efforts to mitigate the pandemic and flatten the curve. This is attributed to the primacy that Kerala government attached to its social sectors and investment on health infrastructure as a government policy irrespective of their political leanings. The availability of facilities for primary health care, their accessibility, the very high degree of awareness and acceptability made Kerala model a success. The effective implementation of pandemic governing policies in Kerala was achieved through continuous institutional innovation at different levels of governance. Decentralized governance through LSGs and community engagement strengthened the primary care, and provided better primary healthcare infrastructure and led to better accountability. Strong relationships between education, literacy, and health made social capital impressive. Kerala model of Development, which has been relying on high social indicators, high literacy and decentralised governance enabled the Government to devise an effective Covid management plan. Kerala exhibits low Case Fatality Rate (CFR) compared to other states in India, which can be attributed to its robust public health system, and its rich legacy of multi-pronged battle in the health sector (Kumar, 2020).³

During the new millennium, Kerala experienced substantially high occurrence of various infectious diseases such as dengue and chikungunya. Kerala worked in consonance with the central Government and WHO guidelines, and developed governance structures and requisite skillset among health workers with timely improvements to handle public health emergencies. Kerala designed and restructured its public health care system through a demand driven approach, ie, the community was educated and could demand services ensuring a 'synergy between what the community wanted and what the government or market supplied'. The inputs constantly came from the bottom to rebuild the system.⁴ Decentralisation and involvement of LSGs at the bottom level of health governance not only enabled the institutions to reach the community swiftly but also provided the LSG representatives mostly belonging to the LDF to have vigorous involvement with the voters prior to election. During the government's tenure (2016-2021) Kerala's effective pandemic governance can be traced to the Nipah outbreak in 2018.

A nationwide lockdown was announced on 24th March 2020 by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) under the Disaster Management Act, 2005 after the outbreak of COVID-19. Initially the lockdown was for 21 days, which was later extended twice until May 17 2020. Social distancing was the norm during the lockdown phase. The range of responses from the State Governments to implement Centre's directive unravels existing inequalities in their health infrastructures as well as health governance. Despite low per capita income Kerala developed a reputation for exemplary health outcomes by *focusing on primary care, designing and executing disease prevention and health promotion programmes, integrating social and epidemiological determinants to health care and applying technology to improve healthcare delivery*. The figure below shows the details of Covid confirmed cases, recovered cases and deaths in Kerala from January 2020 to May 2021.

In this article the authors present Kerala's pandemic governance during Covid 19 in five phases.⁵ During the incipient phase (January 31, 2020-20 May 2020), the government effectively controlled the corona virus and made rules and guidelines in accordance with international organizations such as World Health Organization (WHO) and Union health ministry and home ministry. During the second phase (May 21 to September 1), the priority was given to receiving return migrants along with controlling and fighting Covid-19 pandemic, so this phase can be named as phase of pandemic and return migration governance. The third phase (September 2-October 11), will narrate the pandemic situation and the rise in number of confirmed and recovered cases during Onam festival. In the fourth phase (October 12, 2020 - February 28 2021) Kerala's pandemic case graph has been plateauing without big surge. The fifth phase (March 1st to May 15, 2021) will cover the pandemic governance during the pre-electoral period, electoral period and the post electoral period.

Figure 1: Covid 19 details, January 31, 2020- May 2021

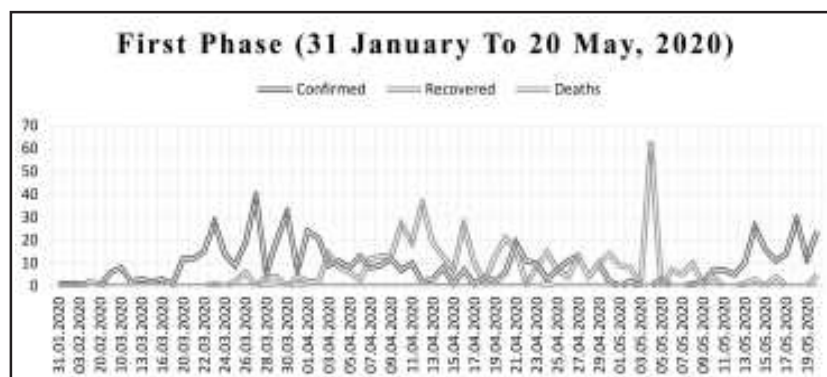


Source: Chart compiled by the authors based on the data from Covid 19 Dashboard <http://covid19.kerala.gov.in/dboard.php>

The graph shows a non-linear trend of confirmed and recovered Covid cases before elections. The present study analyses the impact of various governance measures taken by the State government and the major political developments in each phase.

The First Phase (30 January - 20 May, 2020)

Figure 2: First Phase (Jan30-May-20)



Source: Chart compiled by the authors based on the data from Covid 19 Dashboard <http://covid19.kerala.gov.in/dboard.php>

The first Covid case in the state was reported on 30 January 2020. Following that, two more cases were reported on 2nd and 3rd February 2020. A health emergency was declared in the state and the incoming travellers from China were kept under surveillance. The effective implementation of social distancing was achieved through continuous institutional innovations at different levels/layers of governance. WHO(2020) lists the following measures for containing Covid 19 which aims at isolation and proper care of infected persons at the district hospitals; surveillance to pick up cases early, observation of those who have tested positive and tracking the contacts by releasing the travel and contact route map (flow chart) of those who have tested positive; vigilance against spread from known epicentres through the triple lock down system - general lock down for the entire district; second lockdown for the containment zones; and the third focusing on the primary and secondary contacts in the containment zones-, use of media, especially electronic and social media and enquiries made twice daily to those under quarantine from call centres; electronic Data management system and transparency in sharing information; decentralised governance for health, Community kitchen, etc. These strategies were effectively adopted by the Government of Kerala to fight the pandemic (Kumar 2020).

The Pandemic opened up a lot of opportunities for the LDF government in Kerala. They succeeded in tactically utilizing the opportunities to ensure success in the polls. The daily press briefings endeared the Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan to the common man. The Chief Minister was criticized earlier for not

addressing the media even after two years of assuming office (Balan, 2020). The opposition accused the government of giving over emphasis to daily press meetings, instead of focusing on Covid 19 prevention. But the people found the CM delivering the details more credible and reliable than any other source of information. The daily media briefings also made people believe that the government was working transparently.

As of April 2020, around 1316 Community kitchens started functioning in the state, providing food to over 2 lakh people per day (Krishnakumar, 2020). The beneficiaries of the community meals were identified through Panchayat ward members or councillors and Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers. They prepared the list of the needy by visiting each house. Soon after the announcement of the decision to open community kitchen by the Chief Minister many youth volunteers and Kudumbashree members took the initiatives and supplied free food to the needy, including migrant workers, homeless and the marginalised sections.

Another master stroke by the government was the distribution of free ration kits. The pandemic and the subsequent lockdown hit the commons, especially the daily wage workers so badly that they became penniless. Without job or income, managing daily meals became impossible for them. It was in this context that the LDF government brought in the idea of free food kit distribution to all. In the first phase starting from April 2020, free food kits were given to people holding Antyodaya-Anna Yojana ration cards (The News Minute, 2020). The kit distribution began as 'survival kits' during initial phase of lockdown, then the 'Onam kit' and the 'welfare kit' in the following months (Kallungal, 2021). The CSDS survey found that the food kit was a great relief for the people. Even though the quality of the items delivered was questioned by some, majority were satisfied with the kit.

Amidst these governance successes, there were also instances when the government came under harsh criticism. The controversy associated with the Sprinkler deal was a blemish on the image of the government. The opposition came out with the possible misuse of health data of patients which was also a breach of their privacy since data is appropriated without the consent of the individuals (Varma, 2020). Government was accused of corruption by pointing out the impropriety in handing over the data to a US firm while Kerala has its own institutions like Centre for Development of Imaging Technology (CDIT) and the Kerala State IT Mission (Varma, 2020). But the government denied any irregularities in the deal and attacked the opposition of 'trying to stir up controversy' (Smitha, 2020). In order to reaffirm its transparency, the documents related to the deal was made public by the government. According to Ericksson (2017), usually, crises or calamities tend to ignite the opposition and the media to criticize and scrutinize the response of ruling party. But Covid 19 was an unprecedented crisis, as a result, the controversies did not affect the majority public as such issues were of lowest concern during the pandemic period.

The Second Phase - May 21 to Sep 1, 2020

Restrictions were eased during the second phase. The state saw an influx of expatriates from abroad and returnee migrants from other states who left the state at the beginning of Covid-19. Around three lakh labourers who left Kerala through Shramik trains started to return. Governance measures included proper registration and screening of 'guest' labourers. As part of the 'Vande Bharat' mission and Operation 'Samudra Setu' initiated by the Central Government to bring back Indians stranded in different countries, Kerala had to be ready to receive the Non-Resident Keralates (NRK) returning from foreign countries. While return migration due to the pandemic exposed the impassive attitude of many states towards migrants, Kerala welcomed its NRK returnees and inter- state migrant workers (known in the state as guest workers) who left the State at the beginning of Covid 19 with its migrant friendly policies (Jacob, 2020). The three coastal villages in Thiruvananthapuram city- Poonthura, Manikyavilakam and Puthenpally experienced community spread. Similar clusters appeared in Chellanam and Aluva in Ernakulam. Cluster containment strategies were administered in this phase. A potential state-wide shutdown was under consideration owing to the formation of around 450 containment zones in the state.

Table 1: Details of the Emigrant returnees up to December 2020

Country	Number of returnees
United Arab Emirates	189295
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia	59608
Oman	33998
Bahrain	14611
Kuwait	21222
Qatar	36224
Others	22120
Total	377078

Source: (Dinoop & Vijayan, 2021)

Table 1 shows the number of return migrants from different countries. A total of 377078 people returned to Kerala from various countries. Most of the returnees were from the Gulf countries. UAE (189295) stands first in the number of emigrant returnees followed by Saudi Arabia (59608) and Qatar (36224). The Kerala government launched online registration portal of return migrants (those who lost jobs, senior citizens, pregnant women, students and who were on a visiting visa) who wished to return to Kerala, from different parts of the world due to pandemic. The returnees were given rupees 5000 by the government to meet their immediate expenses. The government provided 14 crores as a subsidy on capital or interest for more than 700 projects to encourage return migrants to start their own business and livelihood (Dinoop and Vijayan, 2021). Through the popular policies taken during the first phase, the government was able to instil trust and respect in the people. Pandemic governance necessitated social isolation and a control on people's movements. While there was hue and cry for freedom of movement and anti-lockdown protests in different parts of the world, people of Kerala were cooperative with the government instructions. People followed lockdown restrictions unhesitatingly because the government assured them a safe living, ensuring proper delivery of essential supplies, medicines, teleconsultation through 'e-sanjeevani' portal and psychological support through various programmes⁶. As Tharoor (2020) quoted, Kerala's restrictive measures were far more humane than other states.

A targeted containment strategy, reverse quarantine, focussing on the vulnerable group was launched in June. People above 65 years of age and people with comorbidities were separated from their family members and quarantined to avoid possible infection. They were ensured food, medicine and psychological support by family members and local body members to cope up mental stress due to sudden withdrawal from public spaces (Gulia & Kumar, 2020). As lockdown has impacted people's lives, the government asked the Kerala State Electricity Board for concession on bill payment to the consumers. No surcharges were applied for delayed payments during the period of lockdown and consumers could pay the bill as instalments (The Hindu, 2020). This was a great relief to people. Another incident that boosted the image of the government was the United Nations recognition to Health Minister K. K. Shailaja. The UN honoured her for her exemplary efforts to flatten the curve of Covid 19 in Kerala. International media nicknamed her as the "rockstar health minister" or "coronavirus slayer" (Guardian, 2020).

The second phase also saw, several heated political debates. In the gold smuggling case the CM's office itself became the centre of criticism. All the fingers were pointed at the CM's involvement in the case as the CM's Principal Secretary was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate. Demanding the resignation of the CM, the opposition staged protests. The people in Kerala supported the LDF government for its tough stance towards the centre against such discrimination. This created an image in front of the people that the government is daring enough to protect its people's interest.

The Third Phase (September 3- October 11, 2020)

During this phase, a spike in Covid cases was witnessed. The centre accused Kerala for its gross negligence during Onam celebrations which led to the increase in cases. The government introduced various schemes for welfare keeping an eye on the local body elections to be held in December. Separate assistance and relief schemes were implemented to support each sector of the economy. Fund was allocated from the CM's Disaster Relief Fund to support fisherman who lost their jobs during the lockdown. Similarly, 'VyavasayaBhadrata' scheme was launched under the Department of Industry to support Small and Medium Enterprises. Monetary assistance, interest concession, extension for payment of interest, waiver of rent, interest subsidy for MSMEs etc were the facilities under the scheme. Financial assistance was given to all labourers as well (The Hindu,2021).

The interests of the students were also taken care of. To equip the students for online education, a micro credit scheme called KSFE Vidyashree was implemented with the help of KSFE and Kudumbashree. Under this scheme, students could buy laptops under subsidised prices and payment could be done in instalments. This initiative proved to be a step towards bridging the digital divide in the state (*KSFE Kudumbashree Vidyashree scheme*).

In September, the government launched a 100-day action plan, '100 days, 100 projects' campaign. As part of this campaign, welfare pensions were raised to 1400, an increase by rupees 100 (Mathrubhumi, 2020). It was one of the promises the party made when it came into power in 2016. As state assembly election was approaching, such actions made people believe that the government was keeping all the promises it made even in the middle of the crises bolstering prospects for the party in the coming election.

Serious allegations against the government arose alongside the government's accomplishments. The Livelihood Inclusion and Financial Empowerment Mission (LIFE), the housing project for the homeless and the poor, one of the flagship projects of the government was alleged to be corrupt. The government signed the LIFE Mission contract with the UAE based NGO Red Crescent. The credibility of the project was put under suspicion when CBI registered a case for violation of Foreign Contribution (Regulation) Act under this project. This controversy too did not seem to have affected the people's affinity towards the government.

The Fourth Phase (October 12-February 28, 2021)

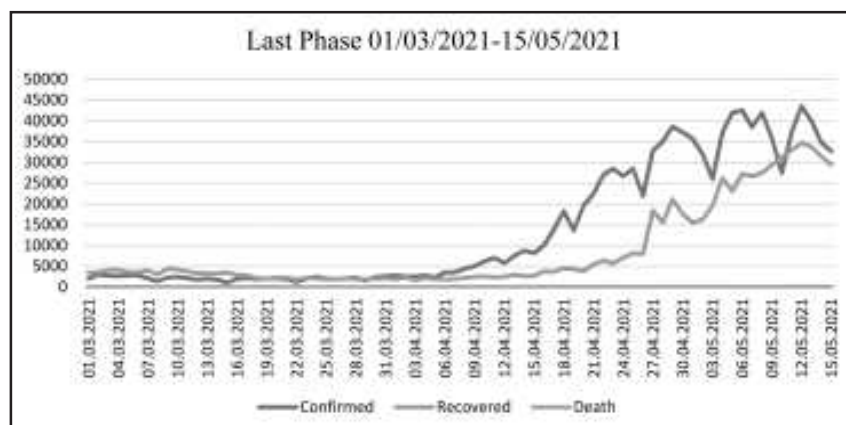
In the fourth phase, Kerala's pandemic case graph began plateauing. From 11,755 cases reported on October 10, 2020, the number of Covid cases dropped to 6,200 cases in the third week of November with better recovery rate. The state introduced 'nano' containment zones with reduced area to mellow down the economic consequences. Doubling interval of the cases has also increased. During mid-September, the doubling time was 23.2 days; In the first week of October, it was 17.2 days; the doubling period increased to 41.1 days in the third week of November. About 50,000 to 60,000 samples were tested daily and the test positivity dipped from 18% to 11.2%. In December, Kerala went for the local body elections. The manifesto of LDF focussed on employment generation and houses for the needy who are not enrolled under the LIFE Mission. They also promised to increase welfare pensions to rupees 1500 from January 2021 and pension for all above the age of 60 years (Mathrubhumi, 2020). The manifesto urged all the voters to ensure the victory of LDF so that the state's interests are protected. Meanwhile, a series of allegations and controversies over the Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Board (KIIFB) took center stage. The CAG of India alleged off budget borrowings and external commercial borrowings through masala bonds by the state through KIIFB without the centre's permission (Radhakrishnan, 2021). The government responded that the KIIFB was a corporate entity and the external borrowings are not done by the state, but by the corporate, which was not a violation of constitution as contended by the CAG. The then Finance Minister Thomas Issac called the CAG report as an attempt to hamper the growth of the state and a joint agenda of the BJP and Congress to defame the government (Balan, 2020).

This victory helped the LDF government to understand the anguishes and aspirations of the common man during the pandemic. As a result, they decided to continue the free kit till the assembly election. The government in power realised what Klomp wrote in (2021) that voters appraise influential incentives when casting their votes.

The number of daily-reported Covid cases increased gradually in January. The Test Positivity Rate was 10.6% in the end of January. By mid-January, as promised, the government started delivering free vaccine. In the initial stage, health workers and frontline workers were given priority. The next categories to receive vaccine were persons above 60 years of age and persons above 45 years of age with comorbidities. For the general public, above 45 years' vaccination began on April (Statistics. n.d). As the State Legislative assembly elections were approaching, the government upheld development and welfare as its prime motto. The issue over Kerala PSC ranklist came as a black mark on the government just before the election. Protests arose all over Kerala as the government cancelled around 147 PSC rank lists. Protesters including rank holders and Youth Congress members alleged back door appointments in various posts which was originally to be filled by the rank list. In response, the government argued that appointments cannot be made from an expired rank list. The government also accused Congress of 'creating unrest' by 'encouraging violent politics' (*The Economic Times*, 2021).

The Fifth Phase (March 1st to May 15)

Figure 3: The last phase (March 1st to May 15)



Source: Chart compiled by the authors based on the data from Covid 19 Dashboard <http://covid19.kerala.gov.in/dboard.php>

The chart shows the number of confirmed, recovered Covid cases and deaths reported during March 1 to May 15, the period immediately before and after the election. The Legislative Assembly elections in Kerala was held on 6th April 2021. The graph clearly indicates the upsurge in Covid cases immediately after the election. The number of confirmed cases reported on the day of election was 3502, followed by 4353, 5063 in the coming days which increased to 10031 in the second week of April to around 28000 in the third week. This sudden hike in the daily confirmed cases raised many doubts regarding the accuracy of the statistics released by the government before the election. The opposition had repeatedly alleged that the government was not revealing the exact Covid case statistics to project government's Covid containment strategy as the best. The government, countered the allegations stating that the opposition aims to undermine the reputation of the government. The pandemic led to a greater assertion of power by the ruling government. 'Unprecedented times require unprecedented measures'- this maxim is frequently used by the government to exert its authority over the people. Constructive opposition is the cornerstone of a democracy. Protests against the government were at times suppressed by citing the breach of Covid protocol.

Contrary to the allegations, the ruling party, returned to power with a wide margin of seats in the assembly. From the tagline 'LDF Varum Ellam Sheriyakum' (Ldf will come, everything will be sorted out) in 2016, in the 2021 elections the government came up with a new tagline 'Urappanu LDF' (LDF is assured)

with the sub phrases ‘Urappanu Vikasanam’, ‘Urappanu Aarogyam’, ‘Urappanu Jnaakshemam’ (meaning LDF guarantees development, health and welfare) (Mathrubhumi, 2021). While the Congress tried to beat LDF government by raising the issues of corruption and entry of women in Sabarimala etc, LDF used development and social security measures as their catchphrase. Through its cleverly crafted campaign, LDF government assumed office for the second consecutive term.

During the three periods associated with electoral cycle identified by Landman&Splendore (2020), the CPM led left democratic front got an upper hand in conveying the various efforts taken by them. The number of confirmed Covid cases during the pre-electoral period and electoral period was very low. These sudden decrease in the confirmed Covid cases may be a part of government’s political agenda to create an image of the government performing its best to contain the pandemic. In earlier phases of Covid 19 the government criticised the opposition while they were organizing protests against various allegations. One of the reasons for their criticism was opposition’s failure in following Covid 19 guidelines. But during the electoral period all the political parties including the ruling party organized massive campaigns. The most systematically led campaign was that of the CPI(M) which has strong cadre base. This careless attitude may be a reason for the upsurge in confirmed Covid cases after the assembly election.

3. Survey Findings

The findings presented here are from the post-poll survey jointly conducted by Centre for Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and the University of Kerala after elections to the State Legislative Assembly. The survey was conducted among 3424 voters in 140 polling stations of 35 assembly constituencies. It was conducted from April 7 to April 13. The sampling design used by CSDS for this survey was multi-stage systematic random sampling. In this part, we will be analyzing/ interpreting the responses of respondents about the questions related with Covid 19 management in Kerala. This part also narrates the experience of surveyors, who were visiting the fields for the survey, opinions of expert and first - hand information from the people regarding Covid management of the government. Out of 3424 respondents of the survey, 10.8% belong to the age group up to 25 years, 629 18.4% respondents belong to 26-35 age group, 17.8% belong to 36-45 age group, 20.7% belong to 46-55 age group and 32.2% respondents belong to the age group 56 years and above.

Table 2 - Distribution of free food kits

The survey made an analysis of free food kits received by the household, distributed by the government. The results are given below:

<i>Did your household receive monthly free food kit distributed by the government at least once?</i>	
Yes	93.6%
No	3.4%
Chose not to avail of it	3%

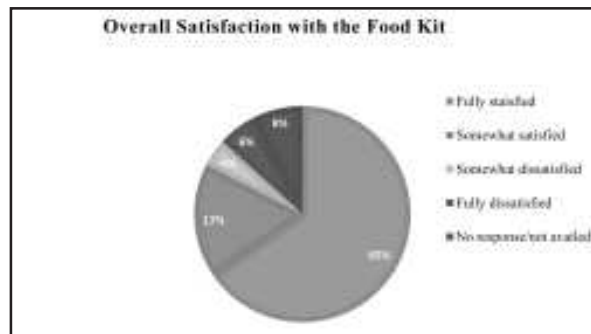
<i>How many kits have you received/availed of by now?</i>	
1-4	209
5-9	2079
10-13	876

Source: CSDS Survey 2021

In this survey, 93.6% of the respondents acknowledged that they received the monthly food kits at least once. The respective percentage for those who did not receive and chosen not to avail of it are 3.4% and 3% respectively. Another question to find the number of kits received by the respondents revealed that 2079 out of total of 3424 respondents received 5 to 9 monthly kits distributed by the government and 876

respondents received more than or at least 10 kits during the pandemic situation. These numbers points to the effective public distribution system of the government during the pandemic.

Figure 4 - Overall satisfaction with the food kit



Source: Figure worked out from CSDS Survey 2021.

When the respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with the food kit being given to deal with Covid-19 over the last year, 65% of the respondents rated as fully satisfied. Seventeen percent of the people were somewhat, satisfied and only a small section 6% turned to be fully dissatisfied with this initiative. Eight percent of the total respondents were ‘somewhat satisfied’ with the monthly kit. From the above figure, it became clear that only 4% expressed some element of dissatisfaction with the given food kit.

Table 3- Rating of steps taken by government in pandemic situation.

<i>How would you rate the steps taken by the state government to deal with the situation arising out of Covid19 over the last one year?</i>	
Response	Percentage (%)
Very good	46.1
Good	26
Average	21.3
Bad	4.4
Very bad	0.7
No response	1.4
Total	100

Source: CSDS Survey 2021

The above table shows that more than two-thirds (72.1%) of total respondents rated the overall steps taken by the State government to deal with the situation arising out of pandemic COVID-19 over the last year, as good. Another 21% opined that these steps were average. Only a small per cent (5%) considered it completely helpless. Another interesting fact is that 46.1% rated the performance of government in pandemic management as very good.

Table 4: Rating of medical facilities in government hospitals

<i>Do you think that the medical facilities in government hospitals have improved or deteriorated?</i>	
Response	Percentage (%)
Improved	73.2
Deteriorated	17.3
Remained same	5.0
No response	4.5
Total	100.0

Source: CSDS Survey 2021

The table above shows the people's view on facilities in government hospitals. Seventy three percent opined that the medical facilities in government hospitals improved during the tenure of the LDF government while only 17.3% held that the facilities deteriorated. Another 5% did not find any change in the condition of government hospitals. The better conditions of the government hospitals were a major factor during the Covid 19 pandemic that influenced the voters.

Table 5: Benefit from Pension scheme

<i>During the last five years have you or a household member benefited from or availed any pension scheme, old age, widow, disability, labour etc.?</i>	
Response	Percentage (%)
Benefited	48.5
Not benefited	40.0
Not eligible	10.7
No response	0.8
Total	100.0

Source: CSDS Survey 2021

The survey indicates that 48.5% of the people benefited from any of the pension schemes-old age, widow, disability or labour pensions. 40% did not receive any benefits of the pension scheme. The government could gather the support of the beneficiaries of the pension scheme through hike in pensions at the time of election.

Table 6: LDF-UDF Government Comparison

<i>If you compare the present LDF government of Kerala with the previous UDF government, which according to you has been better?</i>	
Category	Percentage (%)
Present LDF government	45.4
Previous UDF government	28.3
Both equally good	10.1
Both equally bad	8.7
Can't say	7.5
Total	100.0

Source: CSDS Survey 2021

The voters were asked to compare the performance of the LDF government headed by Pinarayi Vijayan and the previous UDF government led by OommenChandy. Forty five per cent of the voters were of the opinion that the LDF government led by Pinarayi Vijayan was better than the previous UDF government; 28.3% supported the previous UDF government while 10.1% held that both are equally good.

Table 7: Chief Minister Projection

<i>After the assembly elections, whom do you want to see as the next Chief Minister of Kerala?</i>	
	Percentage (%)
Pinarayi Vijayan	36.2
OommenChandy	17.8
K K Shailaja	3.0
Ramesh Chennithala	2.5
E. Sreedharan	1.8

Source: CSDS Survey 2021

The table indicates that 36.2% of the voters wished to see Pinarayi Vijayan as the next Chief Minister while 17.8% wanted OommenChandy to be the next Chief Minister. K KSahilaja received 3% votes, which was more than the then opposition leader Ramesh Chennithala received (2.5%). The popular attraction towards the LDF leaders is an outcome of the populist measures taken by them. The surveyor who collected details from the Pathanamthitta district shared some interesting experiences of the old age population in the district during COVID days. Pathanamthitta is traditionally a stronghold of Congress-led UDF, but the old age population is satisfied with the welfare measures taken by the LDF government during the Covid crisis and according to them the presence of government machinery and welfare measures helped them to overcome the loneliness during these days. While some among them wanted to vote for UDF candidates in their respective state assembly constituency, they wanted Pinarayi Vijayan as the chief minister. Some others who are traditionally Congress voters, surprisingly wanted a continuation of the LDF government. Another surveyor from Thodupuzha constituency, Idukki said that the people of Thodupuzha had been voting for P.J. Joseph for years, but to the question, if they thought that the LDF would get a second term, they said yes. The experiences from the survey validates what Key (1955) articulated, critical events such as economic or natural disasters pull voters out of their normal voting patterns and enable them to rethink their political orientation. Most of them are appreciative and grateful for the welfare kit they received. They were so satisfied with the way Health Minister K. K. Shailaja handled the crisis, that some of them even wanted her as the next Chief Minister. The free food kits and initiatives through Kudumbashree earned the support of the women population. People also opined that no other government has done this much for them in the recent past.⁷

People's affinity towards the LDF government is evident from the table below. About half of the voters (50.6%) suggest that the LDF government in Kerala should get another chance in the 2021 legislative assembly election. While 27.1 % said that the LDF will not get reelected, 15% of the voters were not sure about this.

Table 8: Chances of re-election

<i>Should the LDF government of Kerala get another chance?</i>	
Response	Percentage (%)
Yes	50.6
No	27.1
Can't say	15.0
No response	7.3
Total	100.0

Source: CSDS Survey 2021

Most of the surveyors from Northern districts share similar interesting experiences. They are satisfied with the government's handling of the Covid pandemic. Muslim voters feel Pinarayi Vijayan is a strong reliable leader who stands always with them (eg: CAA protest and pandemic driven crisis). Return migrants are also happy with the government's response to their plight after pandemic -related confinement and job loss. One of the respondents from the Thirurangadi constituency was a Gulf returnee. He was traditionally a UDF supporter, but was happy with the way in which the government helped them from the beginning of the pandemic till the election time. The government pressurised various authorities for facilitating their return and provided quarantine facilities to the returnees. Most of them are unskilled workers and lost their job and income, they consider the kit given by the government as a timely intervention and that helped them to come out of poverty. Voters across the state irrespective of caste, political ideologies, place of dominion, gender are somewhat satisfied with timely responses of State government in curbing Covid 19 crisis.

According to Ibrahim (2021), good governance and successful crisis management helped LDF to retain power for a second consecutive term in the state. The transformation of healthcare centers, upgrading of public schools to smart schools, providing regular food kits to all during the flood-affected periods and the implementation of a pension scheme for the elderly played crucial role in the victory of the LDF government (2021). Attri (2021) says the work done by the LDF government during the pandemic especially the monthly free kit and welfare pension schemes helped them to create a great impression on the majority of the voters and the majority of them benefitted directly or indirectly from the government's schemes. This work surely translated into votes for the LDF. Govind (2021) articulates that goodwill created through social security actions and supply of food kits through ration shops helped the government to retain electoral victory. LDF bucked a decades-old trend in Kerala due to the welfare measures, the Pinarayi factor and good governance. These factors helped them to overcome the allegations of corruption (Shastri et al., 2021). Lives and livelihoods assumed greater significance than allegations of corruption and nepotism in the Kerala election. The victory of LDF can be attributed to the governments performance; during the two floods, health challenges like pandemic and other welfare measures such as social pensions and free monthly food kits (Sreenivasan, 2021). This election is an example of how timely delivery of welfare schemes and development measures can diminish the gravity of the several sensational allegations, including gold smuggling, dollar smuggling and favouritism.

In summary, the worst affected section of population due to the Covid 19 induced lock down were the daily wage labourer's, migrants, families of expatriates and old age people. When the lockdown began, the life of daily wage labourers became very hard. To mitigate their suffering LDF government came up with the innovative idea of providing food kits to all ration card holders in the state. The community kitchens were also beneficial for the old age population and the Covid affected individuals. The timely welfare schemes and development activities helped the common people to overcome poverty, loneliness and other trauma caused by the pandemic. The survey reveals that people of Kerala used utility maximizing calculus propounded by Downs (1957) while voting in the Kerala Legislative Assembly election 2021.

Conclusion

Retrospective voting behaviour has clearly come into play in the 2021 Kerala assembly election. The Left government ensured that no one was left hungry during time of distress. The Left fought on the plank of development, but it won votes with its prompt and able handling of the Covid-19 pandemic. During the first phase the government focused on containment policies and ensuring food for all through community kitchens, free ration etc.,. In the second phase through return migrant friendly policies, geriatric care welfare pensions, educational assistance and other relief schemes the government became popular. All these had a huge impact on the local polls held in December, during the fourth phase. Vaccination started in the phase preceding the assembly election. The measures adopted in all the phases culminated into the electoral victory of the government in May. The survey analysis substantiates this. Even the traditional UDF voters voted for the LDF on account of their satisfaction with the performance of the government like supply of free food

kits and social welfare pensions. Testimonies by voters from different parts of Kerala also point to the reasons for the LDF victory. The pro-left narrative built around the LDF with government's welfare measures, including the distribution of essential grocery items during the pandemic and increasing the welfare pension mattered to people more. They rewarded the left front to override the impact of scams, the investigations by various central agencies, and Sabarimala issue. The Covid-19 pandemic has, in fact prompted the LDF government to provide social security through generous and perennial government support which enhanced the capability of the common man. During the first phase the government focused on the effective management of the pandemic. The out break of the Covid pandemic seemed to be a blessing in disguise for the LDF government. They took it as an opportunity to create an impression that the government is with them during a crisis. The government realised that adopting prompt strategies to manage the crisis would benefit them in elections. This is the reason for the shift in the government's focus towards winning the elections during the last phase. Several allegations pointed towards a possible anti-incumbency wave, but the efficacious delivery of services by the government made the people reward them.

Notes

1. Opinions differ over considering Covid 19 as a natural disaster. Pandemics are classified as a natural hazard by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies; Seddighi (2019) follows definition given by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies. However, Revet (2021), says that even if the virus is naturally occurring, this pandemic cannot be more "natural" than disasters caused by tsunamis, hurricanes, or floods. However, the authors would go with the former view that treats COVID-19 as a natural disaster.
2. The widely debated argument that the Shark attacks at New Jersey reduced the vote share of incumbent President Woodrow Wilson in the 1916 elections can be cited as an example for retrospective voting (Gelman, 2019). Similarly, Donald Trump's unscientific and insensitive approach to Covid management created dissatisfaction among the Americans which resulted in Trump's loosing in the 2020 Presidential elections. While Americans punished Trump for his way of handling the pandemic, in Kerala voters rewarded the LDF government with a second term.
3. Cases of Kyasanur Forest Disease (KFD) and bird flu (avian influenza) have been reported in 2020 from Wayanad and Kozhikode districts (Sudhi, 2020). Similarly, Nipah outbreak that claimed 17 lives in Kozhikode in 2018 was effectively contained
4. Examples included the Palliative care movement and State's Palliative Care policy (2008) that focused on community-based home care initiatives began as a grassroots non-governmental effort in the northern district of Kozhikode in 1993. Later, it introduced an electronic health record system enabling patient tracking and follow-up, regular NCD screening for all adults aged 30 or older.
5. The authors adopt the methodology adopted by Kumar (2020); however, the authors added two more phases to extend the period till assembly elections, which was held in April, 2021.
6. Programmes include:
 - I. 'Chiri helpline' launched by Students Police Cadets for the wellbeing of children during the pandemic. The project involves expert psychologists, counsellors and teachers providing assistance to children.
 - II. 'OttakkallaOppamundu' initiative to address mental health problems of the people during the pandemic.
7. The surveyors have shared some interesting experiences in their field visits. They are also listed here. Surveyors from Trivandrum district share their experience and according to them most of the voters are satisfied with free ration kits, various welfare schemes, and Covid-19 pandemic governance. Even though voters in the Kovalam constituency are happy with pandemic governance, they are unhappy with the deep-sea fishing contract of the state government. Our surveyor from the Kundara constituency in Kollam District shared her experience. To her most of the people are satisfied with the welfare

measures of the Left government, but they are not happy with their MLA, who is the Fisheries Minister because of her role in the recent controversy over deep sea fishing contract. Usually, Kundara is a strong LDF bastion but based on the responses from electors, the candidate selection of Congress-led UDF changed the entire narrative along with the recent allegations against the Fisheries Minister. Electors opined that both fronts have an equal chance in winning.

References

1. Abney, F. G., & Hill, L. B. (1966): Natural disasters as a political variable: The effect of a hurricane on an urban election. *American Political Science Review*, 60(4), 974–981. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1953770>
2. Attri, V (2021, May 7): *Kerala assembly elections: Votes for tackling the coronavirus*. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/kerala-assembly/kerala-voted-ldf-for-tackling-the-coronavirus-finds-csds-lokniti-survey/article34502863.ece>.
3. Balan, S. S (2020, November 18): *Explainer: The CAG report on KIIFB and the row involving Thomas Isaac*. The News Minute. <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/explainer-cag-report-kiifb-and-row-involving-thomas-isaac-137910>.
4. Balan, S. S (2020, September 6): *COVID-19, corruption charges and politics: Pinarayi completes 100 press briefings*. The News Minute. <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/covid-19-corruption-charges-and-politics-pinarayi-completes-100-press-briefings-132447>.
5. Balan, S. S (2021, March 20): *Pinarayi government's pandemic food kits have struck a chord with people*. The News Minute. <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/pinarayi-government-s-pandemic-food-kits-have-struck-chord-people-145620>.
6. Bovan, K, Banai, B., & Banai, I. P. (2018): Do natural disasters affect voting behavior? evidence from Croatian floods. *PLoS Currents*. <https://doi.org/10.1371/currents.dis.cbf57c8ac3b239ba51ccc801d3362c07>
7. *Chennithala resigns from Life Mission Task Force, demands CBI probe into irregularities*. The News Minute. (2020, September 23). <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/chennithala-resigns-life-mission-task-force-demands-cbi-probe-irregularities-133736>.
8. Cole, S., Healy, A., & Werker, E. (2012): Do voters demand responsive governments? evidence from indian disaster relief. *Journal of Development Economics*, 97(2), 167–181. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jdeveco.2011.05.005>
9. Dahl, R. A. (1973): *Polyarchy Participation and Opposition*, Yale Univ. Pr.
10. Dinoop, K., & Vijayan, S. (2021, January-June). Migration Governance and the Pandemic: A Multilevel Governance Approach. *Journal of Polity & Society*, 13(1).
11. *Dyfi in the battle against covid-19 pandemic*. Peoples Democracy. (n.d.). https://peoplesdemocracy.in/2020/0426_pd/dyfi-battle-against-covid-19-pandemic.
12. Franzese, R. J. (2002): Electoral and partisan cycles in economic policies and outcomes. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 5(1), 369–421. <https://doi.org/10.1146annurev.polisci.5.112801.080924>
13. Free ration distribution in Kerala from April 1. The News Minute. (2020, March 31): <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/free-ration-distribution-kerala-april-1-121548>.
14. Gasper, J. T., & Reeves, A. (2011): Make it rain? retrospection and the attentive electorate in the context of natural disasters. *American Journal of Political Science*, 55(2), 340–355. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2010.00503.x>

15. Gelman, A. (2019, April 18): Do shark attacks swing elections? The Washington Post. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/10/28/do-shark-attacks-swing-elections/>.
16. Gok Dashboard: Official kerala covid-19 statistics. GoK Dashboard | Official Kerala COVID-19 Statistics. (n.d.). <https://dashboard.kerala.gov.in/covid/vaccination.php>.
17. Govind, B. (2021, May 3): *Rainbow coalition, social engineering helped LDF*. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/rainbow-coalition-social-engineering-helped-ldf/article34473348.ece>.
18. Guardian News and Media. (2020, May 14): *The coronavirus slayer! how Kerala's Rock Star Health minister helped save it from covid-19*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/14/the-coronavirus-slayer-how-keralas-rock-star-health-minister-helped-save-it-from-covid-19>.
19. Gulia, K. K., & Kumar, V. M, (2020): Reverse quarantine in Kerala: Managing the 2019 novel coronavirus in a state with a relatively large elderly population. *Psychogeriatrics*, 20(5), 794–795. <https://doi.org/10.1111/psyg.12582>
20. Ibrahim, K. M. S. (2021, May 3): *Assembly polls 2021: Good governance and Successful crisis management HELPED ldf Sweep Kerala*. <https://www.outlookindia.com/>. <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/heres-why-the-ldf-swept-kerala/381871>.
21. Jacob, J (2020, May 26): *How Kerala kept its migrants happy*. India Today. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/how-kerala-kept-its-migrants-happy-1682209-2020-05-26>.
22. Kallungal, D (2021, March 31): *LDF govt's last food kits to be given away by weekend*. The New Indian Express. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/thiruvananthapuram/2021/apr/01/ldf-govts-last-food-kits-to-be-givenaway-by-weekend-2284181.html>.
23. Kapoor, A (2020: October 10). Humble roots to global fame, Covid Warrior KK Shailaja's extraordinary story. Moneycontrol. <https://www.moneycontrol.com/news/politics/humble-roots-to-global-fame-covid-warrior-kk-shailajas-extraordinary-story-5942521.html>.
24. Key, V. O. (1955). A theory of critical elections. *The Journal of Politics*, 17(1), 3–18. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2126401>
25. Klomp, J. (2019): Election or disaster support? *The Journal of Development Studies*, 56(1), 205–220. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2019.1585811>
26. Krishnakumar, R. (2020, April 2): *Kerala starts free food Grain SUPPLY; seeks a month's salary from government employees*. Frontline. <https://frontline.thehindu.com/dispatches/article31229663.ece>.
27. Kudumbashree. (n.d.). *KSFE kudumbashree vidyashree scheme*. Kudumbashree. <https://www.kudumbashree.org/pages/871>.
28. Kumar, R.G. (2020): Pandemic Governance and Public Health System: The Kerala Model of COVID 19 Prevention. *International Journal of Politics and International Relations*. Vo. 13.2 2020
29. Landman, T. (2013): *Human rights and democracy: The precarious triumph of ideals*. Bloomsbury.
30. Landman, T., & Splendore, L. D. (2020:). Pandemic democracy: Elections and covid-19. *Journal of Risk Research*, 23(7-8), 1060–1066. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13669877.2020.1765003>
31. LDF releases manifesto for LSG poll; promises 10 lakh jobs, increase in welfare pension. Mathrubhumi. (2020, November 23). <https://english.mathrubhumi.com/news/kerala/ldf-releases-manifesto-for-lsg-poll-promises-10-lakh-jobs-increase-in-welfare-pension-1.5228518>.

32. *LDF releases new tagline for election campaign*. Mathrubhumi. (2021, February 28). <https://english.mathrubhumi.com/news/kerala/ldf-releases-new-tagline-for-election-campaign-1.5477780>.
33. Powell, B. G. (2000): Elections as instruments of democracy: Majoritarian and proportional visions. *Choice Reviews Online*, 38(04). <https://doi.org/10.5860/choice.38-2390>
34. Przeworski, A. (1999): Minimalist Conception of Democracy; A Defence. In Hacker-CordoinCasiano& I. Shapiro (Eds.), *Democracy's value*. essay, Cambridge University Press.
35. Radhakrishnan, S. A. (2021: January 18). *KIIFB borrowings have no legislative nod: CAG report*. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/kiifb-borrowings-have-no-legislative-nod-cag-report/article33600579.ece>.
36. Reeves, A. (2011): Political disaster: Unilateral powers, electoral incentives, and presidential disaster declarations. *The Journal of Politics*, 73(4), 1142–1151. <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0022381611000843>
37. Shastri, S., Ibrahim, K. M. S., Attri, V., & Kumar, R. G., (2021, May 7): Kerala assembly ELECTIONS: How the left Front Bucked a decades-old trend in Kerala. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/kerala-assembly/how-the-left-front-bucked-a-decades-old-trend-in-kerala/article34502739.ece>.
38. Smitha, N. (2020, April 21): *Kerala's covid19 success story turns controversial over data deal With sprinklr*. Deccan Chronicle. <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/210420/keralas-covid19-success-story-turns-controversial-over-data-deal.html>.
39. Social welfare pension increased by rs 100, Finance Department Releases Order. Mathrubhumi. (2020, September 7). <https://english.mathrubhumi.com/news/kerala/social-welfare-pension-increased-by-rs-100-finance-department-releases-order-1.5034670>.
40. Sreenivasan, T. P. (2021, May 3): *Kerala exceptionalism Prevails: Thiruvananthapuram news - times of India*. The Times of India. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/thiruvananthapuram/kerala-exceptionalism-prevails/articleshow/82364502.cms>.
41. Sudhi, K. S. (2020, March 17): *Kerala's battle against Zoonotic Diseases*. The Hindu. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/keralas-battle-against-zoonotic-diseases/article31070784.ece>.
42. Tharoor, S. (2020, May 11): *The Kerala model*. Project Syndicate. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/kerala-model-for-beating-covid-19-by-shashi-tharoor-2020-05>.
43. The Hindu. (2020, June 17): *No disconnection for non-payment of charges: KSEB*. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/no-disconnection-for-non-payment-of-charges-kseb/article31854009.ece>.
44. The Hindu. (2021, January 21): *Interest subvention to benefit thousands of msms*. The Hindu. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/kozhikode/interest-subvention-to-benefit-thousands-of-msms/article33630090.ece>.
45. Varma, V. (2020, April 21): *Explained: What is the Sprinklr Row Kerala Govt's COVID-19 response is embroiled in?* The Indian Express. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/what-is-the-sprinklr-row-kerala-govts-covid-19-response-6371205/>.
46. *Why people in KERALA voted so differently in three elections over two years*. The News Minute. (2021, May 5): <https://www.thenewsminute.com/article/why-people-kerala-voted-so-differently-three-elections-over-two-years-148375>.
47. Woon, J. (2012). Democratic accountability and retrospective voting: A laboratory experiment. *American Journal of Political Science*, 56(4), 913–930. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-5907.2012.00594>.

48. World Health Organization. (n.d.). *Responding to covid-19 - learnings from Kerala*. World Health Organization. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/india/news/feature-stories/detail/responding-to-covid-19-learnings-from-kerala>.
49. *Youth Congress intensifies protest overpsc rank list issue*. The Economic Times. (2021, February 16): <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/youth-congress-intensifies-protest-over-psc-rank-list-issue/articleshow/80990054.cms?from=mdr>.

Voters' Perception on Governance and State-Centre Political Congruence: An Analysis of the Puducherry Legislative Assembly Election of 2021

**Avinandan Choudhury
& Periyakrishna Moorthy**

This article tries to discern the various factors that led the people to vote in the manner in which they did or in other words to ascertain the rationale of the governed in selecting who shall govern them. Here we argue that it is the People's verdict on the 'governance of the incumbent' or rather their 'perception of the governance record' that shaped the poll results in the Union Territory this time. The confrontational politics between the Congress Chief Minister and the Lt. Governor and the resultant administrative stagnancy led to a negative perception on governance provided by the Narayanasamy government and motivated the people to vote for State Centre congruence. We also state that the election manifestoes of BJP, AINRC and DMK were better in placating the sentiments of the people of Puducherry in comparison to the Congress which further sealed the electoral battle in NDA's favour.

In this article the authors focus on the legislative assembly election in the union territory of Puducherry. The key issues that shaped the people's mandate that handed the reins of the government to the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in which the All India Namathu Rajiyam Congress (AINRC) played the lead role is analysed. The NDA consisted of the AINRC, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK), whereas the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) consisted of Indian National Congress (INC), the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), Communist Party of India (CPI) and Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi(VCK).

In a democracy the mandate of the people give the "ultimate seal of legitimacy" (Padmanabhan 2021: 217). The article tries to discern the various factors that led the people to vote in the manner in which they did or in other words to ascertain the rationale of the governed in selecting who shall govern them. Here we argue that it is the People's verdict on the 'governance of the incumbent' or rather their 'perception of the governance record' that shaped the poll results in the Union Territory this time. The confrontational politics between the Congress Chief Minister and the Lt. Governor and the resultant administrative stagnancy led to a negative perception on governance provided by the Narayanasamy government and motivated the people to vote for State-Centre congruence. Apart from the administrative limbo, the defection that shook the UPA government in the Union territory also painted a sorry picture of the Congress party in people's mind. The relatively favourable view among the people regarding the central government also motivated the people to vote in a strategic manner to bring state-central political alignment. We also state that the election manifestoes of BJP, AINRC and DMK were better in placating the sentiments of the people of Puducherry in comparison to the Congress which further sealed the electoral battle in NDA's favour.

Election and Electorate's Perception on Governance

In India, the election results are significantly shaped on how the electorate perceive the works of the incumbent government. Choi (2009) contends that the Indian electorates have a keen sense of balancing the benefits of various parties and coming to a strategic realisation regarding which political dispensation can give a better deal. Verma (2012) on the other hand argues that many surveys showed that voters' satisfaction with governance may not handover electoral victory to the incumbent. There are wide ranging issues and

sentiments that shape the subjective take of the electorates and their perception of governance. Moreover their assumption on how their aspirations will be accommodated also plays a significant role in moulding the people's mandate.

Allurement and Freebies

A significant part of political campaigns are shaped around allurements and freebies. This reflects the lack of confidence of political parties in their past performance and these freebies presents an easy way of influencing the people who mostly come from modest background. Indian parties rarely have to face the scrutiny of their funds or lack public accountability and this raises questions on how party funds are used during elections (Sridharan & Vaishnav 2018). Constitutional and judicial bodies also play a very prominent role in conducting free and fair election. The role of the Election Commission is critically important in maintaining the sanctity of the electoral process. Since T.N Seshan became the Chief Election Commissioner, the election commission has not shied away from asserting its authority in conducting election as per the due process (Ansari 1994, Gopalaswami 2020). Despite these positive developments, the criminalization of politics and corrupt electoral practices remain rampant.

In Tamil Nadu, a state bordering Puducherry with which it shares linguistic and cultural characteristics, distribution of money and freebies has been witnessed time and again. The alleged Thirumangalam formula of DMK is seen as a classic case of enticing voters through distribution of cash in the South (Kapur & Vaishnav 2018). The AIADMK also got married in cash for votes scam in Sathankulam and in the 2016 Tamil Nadu election more than 100 crore was seized by the Election Commission of India. Puducherry, the tiny sibling of Tamil Nadu, also has its share of cash for vote related controversy with crores of rupees and materials intended for inducing voters being confiscated by the police ("Poll Officials Seize" 2021). There has also been serious accusations on political leaders for distributing cash and even gold coins for votes (Dominique 2021). This culture of financial and material allurements is emerging as a bane for India's electoral democracy as it incentivizes populism rather than good governance record (Guha 2008, Subramanian 1999). But it has been noted by scholars that the masses have seen through these election gimmicks and though they may often accept freebies but vote strategically to elect those parties which will be in a better position to provide better governance.

Civil Society and Awareness Among the People

Civil society, Election Commission of India and other public institutions can play a very important role in calling out various corrupt practices of the political parties so that the people are well aware of the conduct of their political representatives. The Civil society can collectively apply pressure on the government and political parties to thwart corruption and anti-democratic practices making democratic structures strong, impartial and fair in nature (Taylor 2004).

In this regard the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) has emerged as one of leading civil society initiatives on highlighting the use of money power, allurements and illegal practices during elections. In the recently concluded assembly election in Puducherry, 17 percent of all the candidates were facing criminal charges. In an enquiry the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) found that 9 percent of all the candidates had serious criminal cases against them ("Puducherry Assembly Elections" 2021).

It was found that out of the total candidates facing serious criminal charges 5 belonged to DMK and 2 each from AIADMK, BJP, Congress, DMDK and 1 from AINRC. Apart from them two independent candidates also had serious criminal cases against them. Citing these data the state coordinator of the ADR Puducherry Election Watch retorted that it "clearly shows that political parties have no interest in reforming the electoral system and our democracy will continue to suffer at the hands of lawbreakers who become lawmakers" ("Puducherry Assembly Elections" 2021).

The publication of these data helps bring awareness among the voters and shape a more informed

perception on the various candidates. Civil society along with a strong Election Commission that is not hesitant in asserting its constitutionally mandated powers can play central role in decriminalizing political elections and shape public perceptions on governance. These help the voters in making a strategic assessment on the choices of candidates and political parties and vote accordingly (Padmanabhan 2021: 221).

Padmanabhan (2021: 222) argued that in the state of Tamil Nadu, which shares many commonalities with Puducherry, the 2011 and 2016 state elections and 2014 and 2019 National elections showed that people have factored in the governance track record while deciding their vote. The ADR surveys on governance done in 2014, 2016 and 2018 indicate that electorates have often rewarded the party on whose governance model they have a positive perception (ADR 2014, ADR 2016). The efficient implementation of various progressive and developmental schemes, improvements in infrastructure providing public utility, good law and order situation, employment and education are some of the key areas upon which public perceptions largely depended. Many of these sectors are judged by local parameters or in other words the experiences of the local populace (Nadkarni et al 2018).

State-Centre Dynamics

Governance and delivery of schemes entails complex but coherent interplay among officials and stakeholders at local, district, state and central levels. Thus often governance and policy implementation suffers due to friction in state-central relations. The access to larger funds at the centre make the central government to implement larger and ambitious developmental and progressive projects. This creates insecurity among opposition parties since they believe that the central schemes can give an edge to the party which is in power at the centre during the state elections. It has been argued that since 2014 the BJP led dispensation in New Delhi has been spectacularly successful in claiming full credit for centrally sponsored policies and schemes even though their efficient implementation requires contributions from state and local authorities (Aiyar & Tillin 2020: 121). This argument has been supported by some surveys where the centre was able to claim the lion's share of credit for the successes of governmental policies (Deshpande et al 2020). This emerging trend of greater centralization in credit-attribution has created fissures in central-state relations where state administration has been less motivated to co-operate.

Many scholars have also brought out some hypotheses where the state government led by parties which are in power in the centre were able to use funds for various developmental schemes and projects more efficiently (Khemani 2007). It has been argued that the voters are able to deduce this pattern where state-central political congruence can lead to better governance and efficient delivery of schemes. Especially in India, it has been noticed that people have voted increasingly for the parties that are ruling at the centre or has better ties with the central government (Aiyar & Tillin 2020).

A Brief History of Puducherry Legislative Assembly Elections

Puducherry has a unique history by virtue of being an erstwhile French colony. When in 1947 India achieved Independence, Puducherry remained a colonial possession of France. The Independence of India gave rise to nationalist sentiments in the French India. After various protests and political maneuverings, an agreement was reached between the French and the Indian authorities that led to the de facto union of Puducherry with India in 1954. A formal De jure union however occurred in 1962 and Puducherry became a Union territory.

The first election in free Puducherry took place in the June of 1955 to constitute the first Pondicherry Representative Assembly. The voting was conducted on the basis of Adult Franchise, which was prescribed in the State of Pondicherry Order, 1955. The electorates were divided into 39 constituencies out of which Congress party won in 20 seats, thereby securing a narrow majority. The People's Front (Communist) won 16 out of 34 seats that they had contested.

The Congress government was marred by political instability and factionalism which ultimately led

the then Chief Commissioner L.R.S. Singh to dissolve the Assembly in 1958. Another election was held in 1959 to form the Second Pondicherry Representative Assembly.

In July 1963 the Government of Union Territories Act passed by the Indian Parliament came into force and the system of governance existing in other parts of India was implemented in Puducherry. According to the Union territory Act 1963, Pondicherry was to be divided into 30 electoral constituencies. The Pondicherry region comprised of 21 seats, Karaikal region consisted of 6 seats, 2 seats in Mahe and 1 seat in Yanam. The constituencies were delimited by the Delimitation Commission. Out of these 30 constituencies, 5 were reserved for Schedule Caste candidates.

Table 1- Pondicherry Legislative Assembly Election Results till 2016

Year	Election	Winning party/coalition
1964	First Election	Congress Party
1969	Second Election	DravidaMunnetraKazhagam
1974	Third Election	All India Anna DravidaMunnetraKazhagam
1977	Fourth Election	All India Anna DravidaMunnetraKazhagam
1980	Fifth Election	DravidaMunnetraKazhagam
1985	Sixth Election	Indian National Congress
1990	Seventh Election	DravidaMunnetraKazhagam
1991	Eighth Election	Indian National Congress
1996	Ninth Election	Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam / Indian National Congress
2001	Tenth Election	Indian National Congress
2006	Eleventh Election	Indian National Congress
2011	Twelfth Election	All India N.R. Congress
2016	Thirteenth Election	Indian National Congress

Source: author

The First Legislative Assembly of Pondicherry was formed under the supervision of the then Commissioner S.K. Datta and a council of Ministers was formed under the leadership of Edouard Goubert in 1963. Subsequently in 1964, elections were held to elect the members to the Second Legislative Assembly of Pondicherry where the Congress party was able to get a majority under the leadership of Reddiar. In 1969 Legislative Assembly elections DMK formed the government under the leadership of former congress leader M. O. H. Farook. This was the beginning of a phase where the Dravidian Parties - DMK and AIADMK started dominating Legislative Assembly elections in the then Pondicherry. It was only in 1985 that Congress was able to regain power in Puducherry. There after till 2006 elections, it was mainly the Congress (INC) and the DMK that managed to win elections in the union territory.

Past Few Legislative Assembly Elections in Puducherry

Legislative Assembly Elections in Puducherry have been primarily dominated by Congress, DMK and AIADMK till 2011. In 2011, former congress Chief Minister N. Rangasamy launched his own party named All India N.R. Congress (AINRC) and was able to form the government. Rangasamy's AINRC was in alliance with the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, the Communist Party of India (Marxist), the Communist Party of India and the Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam. The Legislative assembly elections of 2011 saw the AINRC congress contest from 17 seats and ultimately winning 15 seats. The AINRC received 31.75 % of the total votes. The AIADMK which contested in 10 seats managed to win 5 with a total vote share

of 13.75 %. On the opposite side, Indian National Congress contested 17 seats but could manage to win only 7 of them with a total vote share of 26.53 %. The DMK which was allied with the INC contested in 10 seats and won in 2 with an overall vote share of 10.68 %. The BJP which took an ambitious gambit of fighting the elections alone and contested 20 seats but drew a nought. All the BJP candidates had to forfeit their deposits. It is also important to note that among the electorates the women have a larger share of votes in Puducherry and only 6 women candidates contested but none won in 2011. Women continues to remain severely underrepresented in the Puducherry Legislative assembly.

Table - 2 Tally of Major Political Parties in 2011 Elections

Political Party	Contested Seats	Seats Won	Vote Percentage
AINRC	17	15	31.75
AIADMK	10	5	13.75
INC	17	7	26.53
DMK	10	2	10.68

Source: Election Commission of India

In the 2016 legislative assembly elections, the INC and the DMK were in an alliance and contested 21 and 9 seats respectively. The AINRC could not maintain its previous alliance with the AIADMK and both the parties contested the elections separately. The BJP too contested the elections without any allies. The INC performed well to win 15 seats amassing 30.60 % of the total votes. The DMK could only win 2 seats out of the 9 seats contested with a vote share of 8.85 %.

While the AIADMK contested all 30 seats, it could win only in 4 constituencies with a vote share of 16.82%. The NR congress, though it performed comparatively better than its erstwhile alliance member by amassing 28.12 percent of total votes, it could only manage to win 8 seats. BJP which contested all the 30 seats again failed to win a single constituency and lost deposits in 29 constituencies.

Table -3 Tally of Major Political Parties in 2016 Elections

Political Party	Seats Contested	Seats Won	Vote Percentage
INC	21	15	30.60
DMK	9	2	8.85
AINRC	30	8	28.12
AIADMK	30	4	16.82

Source: Election Commission of India

The fact that AINRC and AIADMK collectively got 44.94 % of total votes, as against INC and DMK's combine of 39.45 %, gives the impression that had they been in an alliance then perhaps AINRC and AIADMK could have got better electoral results if not out rightly winning the elections.

Puducherry Politics and Legislative Assembly Elections of 2021

The Narayanasamy government in Puducherry got marred in controversy, intra-party differences and state-centre frictions from the very onset. Narayanasamy, who did not contest the 2016 assembly elections, was allegedly selected as the Chief Minister largely due to close ties with the Gandhi family. This led to severe discontentment among the followers of the then President of the Puducherry Pradesh Congress Committee A.Namassivayam, which ultimately led to sporadic violence in few areas. Though the differences were seemingly sorted out, but later in 2021, on the eve of the Assembly elections, the internal fissures within congress came to the fore when many leading Congress MLAs including A. Namassivayam defected

from congress. Quite a few of the defected leaders joined BJP, chief among them was A. Namassivayam who soon took over the leadership of BJP Puducherry unit during the 2021 elections. The entry of such popular and senior leaders into the BJP greatly bolstered the Hindutva party's electoral profile in Puducherry.

Another constant feature of the Narayanasamy government was the open tussle between the Chief Minister and the Lieutenant- Governor (LG) Kiran Bedi, who was nominated by the BJP. On various issues such as the transfer of officials, selection of State Election Commissioner, nomination of three MLAs to the Assembly, Direct Benefit Transfer Schemes and the use of social media by administrative officials, the Chief Minister clashed with the LG. While initially getting support from unlikely quarters like the MLAs of AINRC and AIADMK, in the later part of his tenure, it was only the Congress and its allied parties that continued their protest against the alleged "murder of democracy" by the LG and her "autocratic manner" ("Reasons for Frictions" 2021, Banare 2021).

From launching a dharna against the LG to sending a multi-party delegation to the President of India in order to complain against the interference of the LG in the administrative matters, the Chief minister Narayanasamy made very public display of dissent against the LG. It gave a perception of stagnancy in terms of administrative matters. Moreover the Supreme Court and Madras High Court notices, that were relatively favourable towards the LG, did no good to the image of Narayanasamy ("Supreme Court issues notice" 2019).

Thus the Congress charge that the LG and the Central government did not allow the Narayanasamy government ("BJP's Manifesto rings hollow" 2021) did not gain much traction among the masses but on the contrary it evoked a picture the incumbent government passing the blame for a lackluster performance in governance. The comments of former Chief Minister N. Rangaswamy and the leader of the AINRC that as Chief Minister Narayanasamy did not make extra efforts to solve the administrative disagreements with the LG further damaged the public image of the Narayanasamy government ("Congress Government was ridden" 2021).

Nonetheless the Narayanasamy government won some laurels in regard to its governance measures. In a Centre's report on good governance Index, Puducherry took the first rank among the Union Territories in sectors such as public health, Judicial and Public security, environment protection and human resource development. It also was in second position in areas such as agriculture and allied sectors. As regards Public infrastructure, commerce and Industries it came third and fourth respectively ("Puducherry tops UTs" 2019). Though Puducherry may have fared well among the various Union Territories of the country there wasn't any significant boost to good governance witnessed and on top of that the constant bickering between the Chief Minister and the LG and the resultant administrative logjam gave an impression of stagnancy. Moreover the state saw the rising unemployment among the masses which got exacerbated due to the Covid-19 related economic restrictions.

Politics of Defection

As the year began the Narayanasamy government received a major jolt when many senior party MLAs defected to the BJP. Five congress MLAs left congress within a short duration and one among them was A. Namassivayam who was soon made the leader of the Puducherry BJP unit. One MLA from the DMK too defected and the Congress-DMK government soon found itself in minority in the Puducherry Assembly. Having only 11 MLAs compared to Opposition's 14, Narayanasamy staged a walk out and submitted his resignation in Raj Nivas when the opposition demanded a motion of no confidence against his government. The failure of the Congress unit in Puducherry to complete their term due to the sizeable defection depleted the party's political capital in the union territory. Though the congress blamed the debacle on BJP's "operation Kamala" and money power, it reflected poorly on the Congress's party cohesion and the man-management skill of both the state and Central leadership of the party. It has to be noted that soon after the visit of Rahul Gandhi, two legislators quit. It reflected the lack of confidence among the party leaders and cadres in the high command. Moreover by not fielding Narayanasamy from any constituencies and removing him from

the Chief Ministerial candidature signaled that the Congress leadership did not back their former Chief Minister and, by extension, the governance he provided.

The victories that those defected candidates notched up in the election showed that the people reposed their faith on the candidates but rejected Congress almost wholly. The turncoats won with greater vote margins against congress candidates as opposed to DMK candidates. While A. Namassivayam won from Mannadipet , another high ranking Congress defector John Kumar's son Richard John Kumar was elected from Nellithope. Similarly K. Lakshminarayanan who defected to AINRC from congress also won from Raj Bhavan constituency. These defections gave AINRC and BJP readymade candidates who have significant following among the voters. Thus these defections can be seen as prequel to the electoral loss that Congress ultimately faced in the Assembly election of 2021.

Perspectives on Election Manifesto

In any election the manifestoes of the political parties set the stage for political debates and discussion. It informs the public of what they can expect if a particular party is voted to power. It also provides vital information for the public to weigh the various pros and cons associated with every party and helps them in making their final electoral choice. Thus understanding the political parties' manifestoes is key to discern what shaped voters' perception and their rationale for voting in a strategic manner.

The Congress manifesto was centred on statehood demand for Puducherry, economy and commerce and education. Apart from promising to achieve statehood, the congress manifesto also committed to include Puducherry in the 15th Central Finance Commission. It announced the Congress's desire to open IT Park and Textile Park in Puducherry and also reopening of Swadeshi and Bharathi Mills (Congress Manifesto, 2021).

It also promised to give students of colleges and higher secondary education access to 60 GB of internet Data and free laptops for students of 10th, 12th standards as well as college students. The Congress also committed to provide Wi-Fi facility for students of rural regions and one free medical checkup for all women annually. It also focused on providing free education from Primary to Research level for students belonging to SC/ST/Backward Class Communities in a phased manner. The manifesto also promised to make Puducherry slum-free and waive loans from Backward Class Corporation and PADCO. It also called for the opening of ration shops that were closed after a directive from the centre (Congress Manifesto 2021).

The manifesto supported the cancelling of NEET exams and it rejected the National Educational policy (NEP). It called for greater efforts in creation of jobs in the UT and to provide reservation to Puducherry students in Medical and Engineering colleges of the Union Territory. It also committed to set up a law university and a separate education board for Puducherry.

On healthcare the manifesto promised to build a "world class" hospital in Karaikal and a State Medical Education University in Puducherry. The Manifesto aligning with the Congress's national politics rejected the three farm laws and promised to increase the agricultural input subsidy from 25000 rupees to 30000 rupees. The manifesto also assured to provide uninterrupted power supply for families that consume less than 150 units and opposed any privatization of Electricity Board. It also provided for an employment allowance of Rs 1000 per month for two years for the unemployed who have completed medical and engineering degrees. It also promised to pay 1000 rupees per month to families led by women and various women centric assistance. The Congress manifesto also declared to increase the financial assistance provided to the Below Poverty Line families and provide free house site patta to landless labourers (Congress Manifesto 2021).

Coming to the BJP, their election manifesto consisted of various promises aimed at women empowerment, education, boosting economic activity and making of Puducherry as a spiritual hub. Promises were made of providing free and quality education to girl students from lower primary to post graduate level and scooters to girl students enrolled in colleges.

The BJP manifesto featured significant measures to empower women. It promised to waive loans taken by Women Self-help Groups due to the disastrous impact of Covid pandemic. BJP also committed itself to providing 50 percent reservation for women in government jobs and in local elections. The manifesto declared that interest free loans upto 5 lakh rupees will be provided to Women Self-help Groups and “free healthcare for women and the setting up of sanitary napkin vending machines at public places, schools, colleges, anganwadis and PDS outlets” was also promised.

Like the Congress Manifesto, the BJP also committed to the idea of setting up of a separate School Education Board for Puducherry. Promising to improve the access to quality education, the BJP manifesto stated that “Kendriya Vidyalaya/ Navodaya Vidyalayas will be set up in all commune panchayats” (BJP Manifesto, 2021).

Another important part of BJP’s election manifesto concentrated on spiritual and Hindu identity of Puducherry. While promising to make Puducherry a spiritual hub, BJP was also committed to free temple donation funds from governmental control. Apart from that “restoration of the glory of Thirunallar Temple by building a temple complex, restoration of Arikamedu Archeological site, historical temples, and holding of an international cultural and spiritual festival annually were among the other promises” (BJP Manifesto, 2021).

Further it was stated that all encroachments on temple lands will be removed and a special Temple Restoration Fund will be set up for renovation and repairs of old temple structures. In order to give a boost to tourism, which is one of the most important economic sectors of Puducherry, the BJP manifesto stated that they “will develop new tourism centres and construct a 150 ft statue of poet Subramania Bharati.” (BJP Manifesto, 2021).

Similar to Congress’s manifesto, the BJP also promised to create more jobs and set up IT parks, Textile Parks. Furthermore the BJP declared that they will build an elevated rail link to Chennai, upgrade the existing Puducherry airport, railway station and start a helicopter/seaplane service between Karaikal and Pondicherry.

The BJP campaign also centred on criticizing the Narayanasamy dispensation for not implementing centrally funded welfare schemes. They also claimed credit for 6000 constructed and 8000 under-construction houses under the housing schemes. The Prime Minister, the chief campaign star for the BJP, declared that 2000 crore of rupees has been sanctioned for the development of Puducherry under the Smart city Programme (Nirmala flays, 2021).

The manifesto of AINRC was centred on the demand for statehood for Puducherry. Statehood was deemed as “the only panacea to tackle the fiscal difficulties and also to maintain the status of an elected government”. The manifesto also promised to raise the age limit for recruitment to government jobs from 30 to 40 as a “one-time relaxation to end unemployment problem” (Statehood only solution, 2021).

Another unique aspect of AINRC election manifesto was their promise to allow exemption from wearing helmets for riders of two-wheeler. The reluctance among a significant number of people in Puducherry in wearing helmet was very evident when the ex-LG Kiran Bedi took to the streets to enforce road safety rules (WATCH: Puducherry LG Kiran Bedi, 2019). Repeated deadlines and governmental notices were issued to make helmet wearing compulsory for two-wheeler riders but still it remained elusive. The presence of this promise of making exemptions from wearing helmets is setting a dangerous precedent where for electoral benefits universally accepted norms on road safety are being ignored.

Other key promises made in the AINRC manifesto were “introducing 10% quota for students from government schools in the engineering, medical and undergraduate courses, 25 per cent reservation for students of the Union Territory in all courses in Pondicherry Central University, grant of solatium of 1 lakh to each family which has lost its member to coronavirus and inclusion of fishermen in the Scheduled Tribe list” (Statehood only solution, 2021).

The DMK manifesto also promised to work from the statehood of Puducherry and one of the highlights of their election manifesto was the commitment to grant citizenship to Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in India which panders to pan-Tamil sentiments in the states of Puducherry and Tamil Nadu (Adil, 2021).

If we analyse the manifestoes of all the major political parties in the Puducherry elections then we find that significant space was accorded for populist and developmental initiatives which depend on governmental largesse. The fiscal health of the Union territory is not in the pink of health as according to the budget of 2020-21 debt servicing alone accounted for 18 percent of the revenue expenditure and other expenses such as salaries and pensions account for 35 percent of the revenue and cost for power purchase also takes about 17 percent of the revenue (Later than ever, 2021). Thus it is unlikely that all the goodies that were promised in the manifestoes will see the light of the day or will be efficiently delivered to the public. The cognizance of this likelihood is quite prevalent among the masses who have witnessed time and again that promises mentioned in election manifestoes often goes unfulfilled. These assumptions coupled with the administrative logjam and Chief Minister-LG tussle witnessed during the Narayanasamy government give rise to the rationale that state-centre congruence can not only negate the state-centre frictions but also give easy access to central funds. Thus this factor may have motivated the people to vote in a strategic way so as to bring the NDA to power in Puducherry.

Opinion polls have shown that the people of Puducherry had more favourable view of the NDA government at the centre than the UPA government in Puducherry. According to the Timesnow-CVoter opinion poll 53 percent of the respondents had positive perception regarding the Modi government at the centre while only 38.6 percent of the people expressed their dissatisfaction. On the performance of the Narayanasamy government, 40 percent of the respondents were either fully satisfied or satisfied to some extent but 45 percent were not satisfied (Puducherry opinion poll, 2021). Similar trends were also seen in a survey carried out by *Patriotic Voter* where only 35 percent of the people had positive views on the Narayanasamy government and 62 percent were satisfied with the Modi government at the centre (Survey Puducherry, 2021). These data reflects that people had overall positive perception regarding the NDA dispensation at the national level and favoured state-centre co-operation by voting for NDA led by AINRC.

While all the key parties had plenty of promises regarding developmental and progressive schemes, the manifestoes of BJP, AINRC and DMK also focused on some religious, ultra-local and ethno-linguistic issues respectively that evoke strong sentiments from significant segments of the population in Puducherry. While BJP took the cause of renovating Hindu temples, making Puducherry a spiritual hub, removing governmental control over donation funds at Temples the AINRC championed the cause of Statehood for Puducherry and even supported exemption from wearing helmets for Two-wheeler riders which remains a popular demands among the people of Puducherry. The DMK's stance on Sri Lankan Tamil refugees and promotion of Tamil Language also evoked strong support from the people. Though the Congress, DMK and AINRC supported the demand for statehood, the negative public perception regarding the governance record of the UPA government led by Narayanasamy meant that people supporting statehood for Puducherry tilted towards the AINRC. Moreover the leader of AINRC N. Rangaswamy enjoys a positive image and good political capital in the Union Territory. This was also reflected in various opinion polls and surveys where Rangaswamy scored far better than Narayanasamy (Survey Puducherry, 2021).

Conclusion

The result of Puducherry Legislative Assembly election reflects the peoples' perception of the government led by Narayanasamy and on the overall functioning of the Congress party at national level. The Congress party's confrontational attitude with LG, the Supreme Court's judgment in favor of Lt. Governor and large scale defections by the members of the ruling party were the key factors in its defeat. The manifestoes of BJP and AINRC promising with usual goodies and for overall development of the union territory helped them gain support from the poor people. It was these factors that helped the NDA alliance to win the election and form the government in Puducherry Union Territory.

References

1. ADR. (2014): *Pan-INDIA Survey Conducted in 525 Lok Sabha Constituencies on Governance Issues*.https://adrindia.org/sites/default/files/All_India_Survey_Report_compressed.pdf.
2. ADR. (2016): *Draft Press Release Constituency Wise Analysis TN.pdf. 1 - 44*. www.adrindia.org.
3. Aiyar, Y. & Tillin, L. ,“‘One nation,’ BJP, and the future of Indian Federalism’, *India Review*, 2020, Vol. 19, No.2, Pp.117-135, DOI: 10.1080/14736489.2020.1744994
4. Ansari, J., ‘CEC T. N. Seshan tightens electoral reform screws to clean up entire election process’, *India Today*. 1994.<https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/19941215-cec-t.n.-seshan-tightens-electoral-reform-screws-to-clean-up-entire-election-process-809973-1994-12-15>.
5. Banare, A. (2021): *LG vs CM in Puducherry: Understanding the question of nomination to UT House*. *The Indian Express*. Retrieved 8 September 2021, from <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/lg-vs-cm-in-puducherry-understanding-the-question-of-nomination-to-ut-house-kiran-bedi-v-narayanasamy-4743345/>.
6. Bevir, M. (2013): *A Theory of Governance*, University of Berkeley.
7. ‘*BJP’s manifesto rings hollow: Veerappa Moily*’. *The Hindu*. (2021). Retrieved 8 September 2021, from <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/puducherry-assembly/bjps-manifesto-rings-hollow-veerappa-moily/article34186005.ece>.
8. *Congress government was ridden with fault lines, leading to its fall: Rangasamy*, *The Hindu*. (2021): Retrieved 8 September 2021, from <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/puducherry-assembly/congress-government-was-ridden-with-fault-lines-leading-to-its-fall-rangasamy/article34173493.ece>.
9. *Congress manifesto pushes for Statehood*, *The Hindu*. (2021): Retrieved 8 September 2021, from <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/puducherry-assembly/puducherry-assembly-elections-congress-manifesto-pushes-for-statehood/article34183386.ece>.
10. Choi, J., ‘Strategic voting in India: Its extent and determinants in the 2004 General elections’, *Asian Survey*, 2009, Vol 49, No. 4, Pp. 609–624. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2009.49.4.609>
11. Deshpande, Rajeshwari, Tillin, Louise and Kailash, K. K., ‘The BJP’s Welfare Schemes: Did They Make a Difference in the 2019 Elections?’ , *Studies in Indian Politics*, 2020, Vol.7, No.2, Pp. 219-233.
12. Dominique, B. (2021): *Puducherry Assembly Election 2021: BJP candidate accused of distributing gold coins, cash to voters*, *The Times of India*. Retrieved 8 September 2021, from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/elections/assembly-elections/puducherry/puducherry-assembly-election-bjp-candidate-accused-of-distributing-gold-coins-cash-to-voters/articleshow/81914785.cms>.
13. Guha, R. (2008): *India after Gandhi*. Picador.
14. Gopalaswami, N. (2020): ‘The election commission of India and general elections’. In A.Sivaramakrishnan, & S. Padmanabhan (Eds.), *Indian democracy: Contradictions and reconciliations*, Sage Publications India Private Limited., pp. 101–117.
15. Kapur, D., & Vaishnav, M. (2018b): *Costs of democracy: Political Finance in India*. Oxford University Press.
16. Khemani, Stuti, “Party Politics and Fiscal Discipline in a Federation: Evidence from the States of India”, *Comparative Political Studies* , 2007, Vol. 40, No. 6, Pp. 691-712
17. Padmanabhan, Sudarsan, ‘To take or not to take: is the freebie culture in Tamil Nadu elections a threat to Indian democracy?’ , *Asian Journal of Political Science*, 2021, Vol. 29, No. 2, Pp. 215-237.

18. *Puducherry Assembly Elections | 54 candidates face criminal charges*, The Hindu. (2021). Retrieved 8 September 2021, from <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/puducherry-assembly/54-candidates-face-criminal-charges/article34201601.ece>.
19. *Poll Officials Seize Rs 2 Crore Cash, 30,000 Set-Top Boxes In Puducherry*, NDTV.com. (2021). Retrieved 8 September 2021, from <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/puducherry-assembly-election-2021-poll-officials-seize-rs-2-crore-cash-30-000-set-top-boxes-in-puducherry-2394362>.
20. Nadkarni, M. V., Sivanna, N., & Suresh, L. (2018):*Decentralized Democracy in India: Gandhi's Vision and Reality*. Routledge.
21. *Nirmala flays non-BJP-ruled States over welfare schemes*. The Hindu. (2021). Retrieved 8 September 2021, from <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/puducherry-assembly/nirmala-flays-non-bjp-ruled-states-over-welfare-schemes/article34174091.ece>.
22. *Puducherry Opinion Poll 2021: NDA likely to sweep Assembly Election; N Rangasamy preferred CM candidate*. TimesNow. (2021). Retrieved 8 September 2021, from <https://www.timesnownews.com/india/puducherry/article/puducherry-election-opinion-poll/736684>.
23. *Puducherry tops UTs in centre's good governance index - ET Government*. ETGovernment.com. (2021). Retrieved 8 September 2021, from <https://government.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/governance/puducherry-tops-uts-in-centres-good-governance-index/72988637>.
24. *Reasons for frictions between Puducherry CM and LG*. ForumIAS Blog. (2021). Retrieved 8 September 2021, from <https://blog.forumias.com/reasons-for-frictions-between-puducherry-cm-and-lg/>.
25. Sridharan, E., & Vaishnav, M., 'Political finance in a developing democracy'. In E. Sridharan, & M. Vaishnav (Eds.), *Costs of democracy: Political finance in India*, Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 15–35.
26. Subramanian, N. (1999): *Ethnicity and Populist Mobilization: Political Parties, Citizens and Democracy in South India*, Oxford University Press.
27. *Supreme Court issues notice to Puducherry CM Narayanasamy over tussle with L-G Kiran Bedi*. The Print. (2019). Retrieved 19 October 2021, <https://theprint.in/india/governance/supreme-court-issues-notice-to-puducherry-cm-narayanasamy-over-tussle-with-l-g-kiran-bedi/245599/>
28. *Statehood only solution to solve fund crunch: AINRC manifesto*. The Hindu. (2021). Retrieved 8 September 2021, from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/puducherry/statehood-only-solution-to-solve-fund-crunch-ainrc-manifesto/article34210635.ece>.
29. Taylor, C. (2004): *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Duke University Press.
30. *WATCH: Puducherry LG Kiran Bedi Schools Motorists About Road Safety, Asks "Where's Your Helmet?" To Each Of Them*. The Republic World. (2019). Retrieved 10 October 2021, from <https://www.republicworld.com/india-news/general-news/watch-puducherry-lg-kiran-bedi-schools-motorists-about-road-safety-asks-wheres-your-helmet-to-each-of-them.html>
31. Verma, R., 'What determines electoral outcomes in India?: Caste, class, or voters' satisfaction with government performance?', *Asian Survey*, 2012, Vol 52, No. 2, Pp 270–297. <https://doi.org/10.1525/as.2012.52.2.270>

Beyond the Paradox of Voting: The Attappadi Model of Deepening Democracy

**Biju Lekshmanan,
Dileep P. Chandran
& Sathyan T.**

The paradox of voting hardly explain the pattern of electoral participation of tribes in Attappadi. There were many physical, social and psychological constraints for inhabitants of remote tribal hamlets in Attappadi to turnout to vote. The community intervention programmes jointly conducted by Electoral Literacy Club (ELC) and Students Police Cadet (SPC) resulted in the surge in voter turnout in these areas in the 2019 (Loksabha) and 2021 (Kerala Legislative Assembly) elections. The participatory nature and sensitivity to social, cultural and psychological needs of target groups led to the success of the Attappadi model of deepening democracy. The success of Attappadi model alludes to the necessity for revisiting existing models of electoral participation which overemphasizes individual level factors.

Introduction

The voter turnout in remote areas of tribal hamlets in Attappadi was very low until 2019 Lok Sabha election. The electoral socialization programmes conducted by the students of Electoral Literacy Club (ELC) and Students Poilce Cadets (SPC)of Government Higher Secondary School, Agali significantly increased voter turnout in these areas. It was the emergence of new perspectives on electoral participation that contributed to the success of the Attappadi model. The Attappadi model of electoral education points to the need to revisit the existing models of electoral participation and to develop a new model sensitive to the socio-cultural needs of micro target groups.

This article evaluates the idea of paradox of voting in the background of succesful model of electoral education programmes in Attapapdi. The First section discusses the idea of paradox of voting and scholarly criticisms against it. It is argued that theories on electoral participation which over emphasize individual level factors is not capable enough to explain the pehenomenon of lower voter turnout among tribes in Attapapadi. The Following sections examine the critical challenges which prevented people in tribal hamlets of Attappadi from participating in the electoral process. It also narrates the successful interventions of students of ELC and SPC in increasing the electoral participation and its impacts among tribes during elections to Kerala Legislative Assembly, 2021 and to Lok Sabha, 2019. Finally the article examines the unique features of Attapapdi model which led to its success. Let us begin with a brief discussion on Anthony Downs's idea of paradox of voting.

Voter's Paradox

Why do people abstain from voting in elections? Scholars who study patterns of electoral participations across the world could not explain the phenoemenon thoroughly. The theories on voter turnout is concerned with the question why people choose to vote or not to vote? The questions of participation in elections and the refusal to do so cannot be explnained with in a grand narrative. However, popular concepts on voter turnout are explained with the help of rational choice theory. Anthony Downs in his classic work *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957) introduced the concept of voter's paradox. Downs (1957) assumed that citizens act rationally in politics. People act to their own benefits in politics. People perceive that they receive utility income from governments and rational people make decisions in politics based on the assessment of the utility they receive during participation.

According to Downs (1957), one votes if the return outweigh costs, decide to abstain if the costs outweigh returns. Costs of voting include time, travel cost etc. Benefits are counted in terms of utility income from government. The very existence of democracy is perceived to be the utility in electoral participation. Downs further argued that the principal cost of time makes voting inherently costly. Hence voting cannot be costless. Downs's explanation of people's rational behaviour in elections are sans anomalies. Decisions are taken after a cost benefit analysis by rational human beings. If the electors are rational and assess the costs and benefits of voting, they may not turnout to vote. But an elector is not as rational as a consumer in the market. In short, people turnout to vote to even if the costs of voting exceed the benefit. This is Downs's idea of paradox of voting.

Since the publication of Downs's work, scholars studying electoral participation seldom concentrated on relation between cost and benefits of voting, rather they emphasized on the habit of voting (Franklin, 2004). Focus was on individual factors like civic duty, ethical values, etc. (Sierra, 2018). It is believed that people turnout to vote because they are motivated to do so. Scholars argue that the sense of civic duty or moral duty urge people to move to polling booths. A dutiful citizen choose to follow their conscience to vote if it is not too difficult to vote (Blais & Daoust, 2020). This also means that people abstain from election because they feel that duty to vote doesn't form part of their moral conscience.

Our claim is that these two basic predispositions, one's level of interest in politics and one's feeling that voting is or is not a moral obligation, are the two most powerful individual-level determinants of the decision to vote or abstain. Because these predispositions are stable, there is strong stability in the propensity to vote. As a consequence, some people almost always vote while others almost always abstain. This stability is not the result of an acquired habit; it is simply the consequence of the fact that the act of voting reflects our priorities (how much we like politics relative to other "things") and values (our conception of our rights and duties in a democracy). As our priorities and values seldom change, our predisposition to vote remains stable.

Although these factors are important determinants of voter turnout, they are not sufficient to understand and explain the issue of lower voter turnout among particular groups. This exposes the vulnerability of theories on electoral participation which excessively focus on individual level factors. These theories on voter turnout arise from the misconception of that potential voter as individual divorced from social context (Franklin, 2004). But individual reasoning doesn't take place in a social vacuum (Rolfe, 2012). Rational choice theorists failed to give primacy to these contextual factors.

Downs considered only the cost-benefit analysis of single individual, without considering their interaction with others in the community. Sierra (2018) argued that a good theory on voter turnout should elucidate and explain structural factors behind it. Social environment not only determines the choice of voters at polling booth, but it also explains why people choose to vote or abstain from it. Structural determinants of electoral participation need to be taken into account to develop a good theory on voter turnout. However rational choice theory is not capable enough to address the structural factors. Contextual level variables are significant not only in understanding the voter turnout, but an ideal strategy to influence the voting turnout through an intervention. Overemphasis on individual factors will negatively affect the efforts to increase electoral participation.

The basic assumption of theorists on voter turnout is that voting is one of the easiest human activity. Proving this assumption wrong will help to disapprove the applicability of such theories on exceptional circumstances like that of electors in remote tribal hamlets of Attappadi. Downs's (1957) assumption that voting is inherently costly is not enough to explain the case of Attappadi. Electors in remotest tribal hamlets in Attappadi were also not just irrational. In sum, the idea of voter's paradox cannot explain their abstaining from elections. Structural factors and socio-economic background were important determinants of their voting pattern. Let us now discuss the real hurdles which prevented tribes in Attappadi from voting and how these challenges could be overcome.

Forced to Abstain

Why did electors from remote hamlets of Attappadi choose to abstain from election? Was it their choice at all? What are the factors that motivated people to distance themselves from elections? What were the costs associated with the voting of an elector in Attappadi? There were social, economic, psychological and physical costs. If an elector in the remotest tribal hamlet in Attappadi decide to vote, he or she had to travel around fourteen kilometers to reach the nearest polling station. First they had to walk six kilometers through forest and then eight kilometer by a jeep, if available, through a narrow forest path. They were compelled to begin their journey in the early morning and had to reach back forenoon. Elephant infestation in the afternoon is regular in this forest path. This threat to life from wild animals forced people to abstain from voting. Their mobility to polling booths were obstructed by lack of transportation and other infrastructure facilities. People from some tribal hamlets had to cross Bhavani River to reach polling booth. Physical barriers were the major reason for lower voter turnout in these areas.

Election campaigns hardly take place in these tribal hamlets. Most of them think that governmental authorities and political parties failed to address their livelihood and developmental issues effectively. They also believed that political leaders had failed to fulfill the promises made to them in hitherto elections. Some tribal hamlets like Thadikkundu and Murugala in Attapadi boycotted previous elections in protest against lack of infrastructure facilities. Most of them perceived that voting in elections is a futile exercise. Their sense of alienation and lack of motivation for political participation were psychological barriers for electoral participation. There were other psychological barriers which had roots in the recent past. Four Maoists were killed in Attappadi forest area in 2019, and some incidents of armed training of Maoists were also reported in the past. Inhabitants of tribal hamlets and tribal chiefs recognized the presence of Maoists near the tribal hamlets. There was an elusive climate of fear in forest areas of Attappadi after the Maoist encounter in 2019. The climate of fear and covert counter ideologies might have created a psychological barrier to political socialization of some inhabitants of tribal hamlets in Attappadi. Students at Government Higher Secondary School, Agali addressed these issues through their activities and initiatives which were part of ELC and SPC. Let us see how the students addressed the issue.

Interventions and Impacts

The students of ELC and SPC in Government Higher Secondary School, Agali in Attappadi jointly conducted electoral awareness programmes in the tribal hamlets of remote areas in Attappadi to address the problem of lower voter turnout. They had started their electoral socialization programmes before 2019 Lok Sabha election. These two student clubs associated with Election Commission, Police department, Departments of Forest, Education and Tribal Welfare, and Parents and Teachers Association (PTA) conducted electoral awareness classes in each tribal hamlet during holydays and late hours after school. They taught people not only about the way of voting, but also why they should vote.

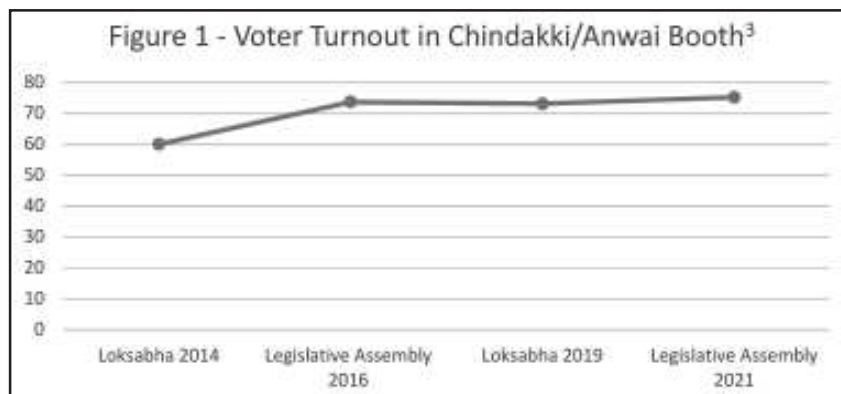
Activities of students was not limited to the structured electoral awareness campaigns. Regular messages on the importance of electoral participation were imparted through the school assembly where about 60% among the 2600 students belonged to the category of Scheduled Tribes. These students were urged to spread the same message to their parents. ELC also assisted people to register in the electoral roll. They sent messages in multiple tribal languages to young people in tribal hamlets. They also taught new voters to register. Students also produced a video containing the message of veteran singer Nanji Amma from the community to educate the tribes the importance of casting their votes. Nanji Amma later became an informal ambassador of senior voters in these areas and her message was widely circulated.

ELC effectively used social media platforms to spread voice messages on the importance of electoral participation during the pandemic era. Students also made short films and documentaries to elucidate the importance of voting. Students of ELC and SPC carried the posters and notices to the remotest tribal hamlets in Attappadi and explained the content to the tribals in the respective tribal languages. Students also innovated

new ways to communicate the messages to electors during the pandemic period. Pictorial messages on electoral participation was circulated even through printed masks. These initiatives helped students to bring the messages of Election Commission in the remote areas of Attappadi. The ELC and SPC members identified senior citizens and physically challenged people and helped them to utilize the new facility of postal ballot. They also ensured their assistance to those who wished to vote directly on the polling day. Through the Young India campaign, ELC and SPC members taught young electors in the tribal hamlets to use mobile applications of Election Commission like eVIGIL and *Booth App*. Young people were also taught to utilize online services in National Voters Service Portal. A help desk for the young people was also opened in the school. A football competition conducted by the district administration also attracted the attention of young people. Students used all means to educate people on the importance of participating in elections. They requested the priests to appeal to the people to cast their votes which yielded significant results. On the request of students, Fr. Stephen appealed to the people gathered on the occasion of Good Friday to cast their precious votes. This encouraged the inhabitants of MeleMulli and KeezheMulli which are remotest tribal hamlets to cast their votes in the election to the Legislative Assembly in 2021.

The students continued their efforts to increase political participation on the polling day as well. They assisted people from remote tribal hamlets to cast their votes democratically without fear or favour. They helped tribes, senior citizens, and physically challenged electors on the polling day to commute and vote. They arranged transportation facilities to all tribal hamlets inside the forest. For the needy they had arranged wheel chairs and ambulances and opened a help desk for them. They also assisted Election Commission in refreshment of voters from the remote areas in the polling booths. Students helped voters to follow COVID protocols on the polling day.

Continuous initiatives, activities and electoral education programs of ELC and SPC in Attappadi significantly increased voter turnout in elections to the Kerala Assembly (2021) and Lok Sabha (2019). A significant 14% increase happened resulting in the highest voter turnout (73.08%) in the 2019 Loksabha election, as compared to previous elections in Chindakki booth where tribal electors were in majority (see Figure 1). Their campaign for mandatory registration to electoral roll resulted in increase in the number voters among tribes.



Source: <http://www.ceo.kerala.gov.in/votersturnout.html>

Voter turnout crossed eighty per cent in all tribal hamlets in Attappadi where electoral socialization programmes were conducted by ELC and SPC. The success of the electoral education programmes in 2019 encouraged students to expand the scope of their activities into tribal hamlets of three panchayaths in the election to Kerala Legislative Assembly (2021). Tribal hamlets of Varkamabadi, Vellakulam, Vechypathy, Nallasinka, and Chavadiyur in Sholayurpanchayath in Kerala - Tamil Nadu border also responded positively to the activities of students. Students also visited a number of tribal hamlets in Agali and Pudur panchayats such as Kottamedu, Narassimukku, Pattimalam, chalyur, elachivazhi, cheerakadav, and padavayal. More than eighty percent electors turned out to vote in all tribal hamlets where the electoral socialization programmes of ELC and SPC were effective (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Voter turnout in tribal hamlets in Attappadi

Tribal Hamlet	Lok Sabha election (2019)		Local Self Government Election (2020)		Legislative Assembly Election (2021)	
	Total number electors	Number of votes polled	Total number electors	Number of votes polled	Total number electors	Number of votes polled
Murugala	20	18	20	17	20	17
Thadikkundu	60	60	72	68	82	61
Nakkupathy	900	700	1100	604	1130	950
Edavani	64	64	79	79	74	70

The Attappadi model of political socialization programme was commendable. For instance, during 2019 Lok Sabha election, electors in Murugala didn't turn out to vote till afternoon. The team led by ELC nodal officer Sathyan went to their hamlet and brought them to booth by crossing Bhavani River by foot. Another significant impact of the intervention for electoral participation was from Thadikkundu hamlet. Electors in this hamlet decided to boycott Lok Sabha election in 2019. Members of ELC and SPC persuaded and convinced them. As a result 98% electors from Thadikkundu turned out to vote in that election. The electoral education classes and other political socialization activities yielded considerable results in the tribal hamlets in Attappadi. How did Attappadi model of electoral education increase the voter turnout in a short span of time? Let us examine the factors contributing to the success of the model.

Language and Uniform

Irular, Mudhukar, and Kurumbarare are the three major tribal groups living in Attappadi. The ELC and SPC at Government Higher Secondary School also have good number of students from the tribal hamlets they engaged with. One of the attractions of SPC is its khaki coloured uniform similar to a police officer. The activities of ELC in tribal hamlets were carried out in SPC uniforms. Even their Political Science teacher Sathyan who was in charge of both SPC and ELC at the school accompanied students in uniform. The Voter education programmes carried out by their own children in uniforms with police officers and district authorities created a sense of pride among locals. The higher voter turnout was the result of positive response of voters to the request of their children.

Another social factor that led to the success of the model was the support of tribal chiefs. Students also ensured the cooperation of tribal chiefs of each tribal hamlet in the electoral education programmes. Commands of tribal chiefs in favour of electoral participation also moved people. Another important factor for the success of the Attappadi model was language. Electoral education classes in each hamlet was led by the ELC member from the same hamlet in their respective tribal language. Teachers who know the native languages also helped students to lead the classes. The classes in tribal languages helped inhabitants to become active participants who were hitherto passive recipients to similar initiatives of the government. People started to clarify doubts and asked students to repeat instructions they could not understand in these classes. Voice messages through social media to young electors were also in their tribal languages. Language was an important motivating factor in the Attappadi model. In short the participatory nature of the model was the reason for its success.

Expanding Functions

Electoral Literacy Clubs are constituted in educational institutions in India in 2018 to promote electoral literacy among new and future voters in educational institutions through class room activities and hands on experiences. ELCs in schools targeted future voters, ie. students in the age group of 14 to 17 years. Similarly in colleges the target group is new voters in the age group of 18 to 21 years. The objectives of ELC are to

educate the target groups about voter registration and other electoral process, familiarize EVMs and VVPAT, teach them the value of their votes, harness potential for carrying electoral literacy to communities, facilitate voter registration, and develop a culture of electoral participation. Elected representatives from students are encouraged to run the ELC under the guidance of the nodal officers who are teachers from the humanities department of the school. Classrooms became the major venue for the activities of ELC. Election Commission proposed activities such as preparation of wall magazines, film screening, card game on voting, visit to panchayats, school play, contests, hands on experience on EVM and VVPAT, social media campaigns and election simulation.

Classroom activities of ELC in Government Higher Secondary School, Agali also helped students to learn key lessons of political socialization. . The club conducted elocution, essay writing and drawing competitions on the themes of democracy and election. ELC also conducted colourful rallies of students in Attappadi by carrying the messages on the importance of election and democracy. But the members of ELC in Agali did not limit their activities within their school. They went out of their school boundaries to visit tribes in remote forests in Attappadi and educated the electors on the importance of voting and how to vote. The Attappadi model redefined the functional scope of the ELCs. Successful engagement of Student Police Cadets in electoral education campaigns in Attappadi also resulted in broadening functional scope. Activities of ELC and SPC in the Attappadi model shows the importance of the critical role students can play in community intervention programmes. Although voting is only a preliminary political activity, voters in tribal hamlets of Attappadi used the electoral socialization programmes to channelize their concerns and issues to government via student community. Students started to engage in the developmental and livelihood issues of inhabitants of tribal hamlets and their community level interventions became a continuous activity. This is how the Attappadi model of electoral education became an important step towards deepening democracy among tribes in Kerala.

Conclusion

The voters in remote areas of Attappadi were forced to abstain from elections due to various factors. Their cost of voting was too high compared to the elusive utility or benefits. The paradox of voting cannot explain the pattern of their electoral participation. The behavioral models of electoral participation also hardly explain the lower voter turnout in the region. This suggests that macro theories focusing on individual level factors cannot reflect the decision making pattern of voters in tribal hamlets of Attappadi. It points to the necessity to focus on structural and contextual factors. An ideal theory on voter turnout which emphasises structural variables like socio-economic factors can help in framing micro initiatives addressing the issue of electoral participation. This sensitivity to the cultural, political, social and economic needs of target groups led to the success of Attappadi model of electoral education. It highlights the fact that the means to participatory democracy needs to be participatory and sensitive.

References

1. Barber, Benjamin R. (2003) : *Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age*, California University Press, California.
2. Bendor Jonathan, Daniel Diermeier, & Michael Ting A. (2003) : 'Behavioral Model of Turnout'. *The American Political Science Review*, 97(2), 261-280.
3. Blais, Andre & Jean Francois Daoust (2020) : *The Motivation to Vote: Explaining Electoral Participation*, UBC Press, Toronto.
4. Downs, Anthony (1957) : *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, Harper & Row, New York.
5. Election Commission of India (2018) : "Electoral Literacy Club: Resource Guide", Election Commission of India, New Delhi.

6. Franklin, Mark N (2004) : *Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies since 1945*, Cambridge University Press, New York.
7. Green, Donald P, & Alan S Gerber. (2008) : *Get Out the Vote: How to Increase Voter Turnout*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington D C.
8. Rolfe, Meredith (2012) : *Voter Turnout: A Social Theory of Political Participation*, Cambridge University Press, New York.
9. Sierra, Luis Fernando Median. (2018) : *Beyond the Turnout Paradox: The Political Economy of Electoral Participation*. Springer, Madrid.

West Bengal Assembly Election 2021: A Paradigm Shift from Ideology-Issue based Politics to Identity Politics*

Biswanath Chakraborty

The West Bengal Assembly Election 2021 may be considered as a watershed between ideology-issue based politics and identity politics in West Bengal. The election marked the emergence of identity politics in the State. This paper seeks to intersect the political dynamics of West Bengal Assembly Election results, 2021. It also examines the causes of post-election violence and its ramifications in State Politics. The article is divided into four sections. Section -I deals with the emergence of identity politics in West Bengal since 2011. Election strategies of the political parties have been discussed in section II. Section - III discusses the constituency profile and the verdict, and finally Section-IV deals with the nature and extent of post-election violence.

The West Bengal Assembly election received worldwide attention. The Assembly election 2021 may be considered as a watershed between ideology-issue based politics and identity politics in West Bengal. The election marked the emergence of identity politics in the state. After the 2016 Assembly election in West Bengal with the decline of LF-INC, BJP steadily emerged as main opposition political force against ruling party TMC in Bengal politics. BJP central leadership took all possible initiatives to build a party state unit for the replacement of TMC. However, defeating the Modi-Amit Shaw duo, TMC under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee returned to power for the consecutive third time with 213 seats and 47.94% popular votes. On the other hand, BJP secured only 77 seats and 38.10% votes. The Left-Cong-ISF coalition got only 1 seat and 9.86% vote¹. Keeping in view the above backdrop, the present article seeks to intersect the political dynamics of West Bengal Assembly election results, 2021. Further, the present article also examines the causes of post-election violence and its ramifications in state politics.

Keeping in view the above-said objectives, the article is divided into four sections. Section -I deals with the emergence of identity politics in West Bengal since 2011. Election strategies of the political parties have been discussed in section II of the article. Section-III discusses the constituency profile and the verdict, and finally Section-IV deals with the nature and extent of post-election violence.

Section - I

The Emergence of Identity Politics and Structural Advantages-Disadvantages of TMC and BJP

‘Religious Polarisation’ and the demand for ‘Democratic Space’ were two key factors in the outcome of the Lok Sabha election in West Bengal in 2019. The election outcome has not only stunned the ruling party leadership but also the opposition parties in West Bengal including BJP. In 2011, the TMC under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee came to power in West Bengal after defeating 34 years of the Left Front regime led by CPIM. Thereafter from 2011 to 2018, the TMC has penetrated its organization in to every walk of life in such a way that it was unexpected for many experts that the party could face this type of serious crisis in the 2019 Lok Sabha election in West Bengal².

On the other hand, with the end of a formal electoral alliance between the Congress and the Left Front after the 2016 West Bengal Assembly election a large number of supporters who had strong aspirations

* This Article is written based on the outcome of ICSSR-IMPRESS project, “Opposition Space in West Bengal Politics: A Diagnostic Study”.

with election started to quit their party due to political frustration and due to pressure tactics exerted by the ruling party. Many of them (mostly Muslim minorities) in order to ensure their security preferred to join the ruling party TMC. On the other hand, a vast number of the Left and Congress supporters belonging to the majority Hindu community had preferred to join BJP. As a result, the BJP had gradually come to occupy the space of opposition in the State before the Lok Sabha election. Moreover, with the support of the national leadership, the State unit of the BJP leadership had initiated a number of political programmes based on the Hindutva nationalist agenda, like organizing *Ram Navami Yatra*, *Hanuman Jayanti Yatra*, etc. The BJP leadership for the first time in West Bengal politics seriously tried to build its organization based on hardcore RSS principles. The BJP State unit tried to implement the Hindutva agenda operationally based on the Hindi belt formula in which polarisation of the majority was the hallmark³. In addition to that, the BJP national president Amit Shah and the Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave special focus to West Bengal after the 2016 West Bengal Assembly election.

It should be pointed out that between June 2016 and March 2018 by-elections were held in West Bengal. BJP secured the second position in the Assembly and Lok Sabha by-elections. On the other hand, the Left Front and Congress came down to third and fourth positions respectively. However, with the rise of the BJP as the main opposition force in State politics, a sizeable number of minority voters who had long association with the Left Front and Congress politics started to shift their allegiance and joined TMC in order to prevent the rise of BJP in the State politics. In all the by-elections held during the period, the TMC increased its vote shares by 10% on an average. The results of the by-elections clearly indicated that the ruling party had a favorable political position in the State politics before the Assembly election, 2021.

The TMC leadership aimed at opposition-free politics in every walk of life, ranging from students' - teachers' unions to the workers' organizations. However, the Panchayat election 2018 should be considered as the turning point in State politics. The last Panchayat election was an extreme case where 34% of rural electorate could not cast their votes. The opposition parties were denied the right to contest in the local poll and the 'Right to franchise' was snatched by the ruling party cadres. Hundreds of people lost their lives during different stages of the Panchayat election. There was no opposition in the 12 districts of Bengal. The election experience has virtually driven rural masses to take revenge against the ruling party in the Lok Sabha election 2019. Exercising their voting right with the help of tight central security, the rural masses wanted to teach a lesson to the leaders and cadres of the ruling party⁴.

Considering the BJP as the main contender against TMC (election campaign between Modi v/s Mamata also helps to accelerate the intense fight between the BJP and TMC) a vast number of rural voters had chosen BJP instead of Left Front and the Congress. The Left Front failed to take a clear-cut position in the election. The religious polarisation also ruined the electoral prospects of the LF and the INC to a large extent.

With the end of the 34 years regime of the Left Front government in 2011, the people of West Bengal for the first time witnessed caste and language based identity politics initiated by TMC as a ruling party and its government in West Bengal. Pursuing caste-based politics in West Bengal, TMC got remarkable electoral success in West Bengal since 2011. After the 2014 Lok Sabha election, the TMC government introduced one after another government policies and programmes separately in support of minority communities in West Bengal. The TMC government announced a monthly stipend to Imams of Masjids (*Imam Bhata*). The State government further announced the constitution of different development boards addressing different ethnic, religious and caste groups. It may be pointed out here that Muslims constitute more than 30% of the state population. At the political, social, religious and security levels, the ruling party tried to mobilize the minority community.

On Citizens Amendment Act (CAA) and National Registration Certificate proposals the TMC took a strong stand against the proposals. The party under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee brought all sections of Muslims in West Bengal against CAA and NRC. Traditionally, the Congress party had a strong

organizational presence in the three Muslim majority districts of West Bengal (North Dinajpur, Malda, Murshidabad). However, during CAA and NRC movements, Muslim people in these districts had changed their political allegiance from Congress to TMC. It should be pointed out here that identity politics got new momentum in West Bengal with the rise of BJP as the main opposition political party. After the 2016 Assembly election, the people of West Bengal witnessed a competitive identity politics between TMC and BJP. Largely this was the reason behind the decline of Left and Congress in West Bengal politics.

After getting success in the 2019 Lok Sabha election, the BJP central leadership left no stone unturned to expand the party's organizational base. However, BJP as a political party always faces the following structural constraints in West Bengal:

- a) The 30% of Muslim voters are generally hostile to BJP politics. It was observed that after the enactment of CAA there was a strong anti-BJP sentiment among the Muslim population. The BJP could not constitute Booth Level Committee (BLC) in more than 35,000 Muslim-dominated booths of West Bengal.
- b) The state BJP leadership did not have the necessary political experience. The West Bengal BJP leadership was not experienced enough to fight against TMC under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee. BJP central leadership tried to overcome this organizational deficiency with the help of political defection from other parties. They brought a huge number of state-level TMC leaders and also countless local leaders from different political parties in their organization. It should be pointed out that most of the TMC leaders who joined BJP politics before the election were charged either by CBI/ED for corruption. Another failure was nominating such persons as the BJP candidates.
- c) Though in the Panchayat and Lok Sabha elections, BJP emerged as a main political force in West Bengal, the party failed to penetrate the social and cultural space of West Bengal. Very few clubs and social organizations were politically affiliated to BJP politics.

On the other hand, TMC had some structural advantages before this election -

- a) The TMC government had successfully implemented a number of welfare schemes like Kanyashree (Women's Welfare Scheme), Health Insurance Scheme (Satha Sathi), and promised the implementation of a Woman's Stipend Scheme named "Lakir Bhandar". These social schemes actually helped to develop a kind of patron-client relationship between the ruling party TMC and the voters.
- b) TMC enjoys strong leadership both at the state level and local level. On the other hand, the opposition had no substitute face against TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee in this election. Her popularity among the leaders across political parties was unmatched in West Bengal. She was supported by all sections of society in West Bengal in general and Muslim voters in particular.
- c) TMC as the ruling party was in an advantageous position in respect of the 30% Muslim vote bank for their strong anti-Modi and anti-BJP image.
- d) TMC as a party had a strong organizational base at the local level. Moreover, TMC has a strong social and cultural base among clubs, churches, mosques, and other social organizations and institutions.
- e) In spite of the prevailing favourable political equation for TMC before the election, in-fighting among the workers and leaders within the party, rampant corruption in the functioning of the government, extortion of money by workers and leaders of the ruling party in different walks of life, lawlessness in the society and opposition free politics initiated by the TMC, were the areas of major concern for the ruling party before the Vidhan Sabha election 2021.

However, ultimately, it is the identity-based politics that was the driving force behind the success of TMC in their consecutive third-term victory in West Bengal.

Section -II: Election Strategies

Facing the electoral setback of the 2019 Lok Sabha election, the ruling party TMC appointed Prashant Kishore and his team I-pack to set their election strategies and to conduct a party election campaign on behalf of the party. The objectives of the campaign were:

- a) To reconstruct the image of TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee.
- b) To reconstruct the good image of TMC as a pro-people party before electorate.
- c) To create a feel-good factor about the TMC government among the people.

‘DIDIKE BOLO’ (tell your elder sister, Mamata Banerjee) was the first election campaign launched by Prashant Kishore and his team in the middle of 2019 to reconstruct the image of Mamata Banerjee. In this campaign, a phone number was given to the public to address their grievances against the government. The duration of the campaign was six months and it got huge responses from the masses. After the successful implementation of the ‘DIDIKE BOLO’ campaign, Prashant Kishore and his team launched one after another programmes for TMC to reconstruct and rebuild the image of Mamata Banerjee and her party before electorate. Among these election campaigns ‘MAIN HUN NA’ (I am with you) was the most successful election campaign of this kind during the 1st phase of Covid 19. However ‘DUYARE SARKAR’ (Government at door) was a very thought-provoking and influential election campaign adopted by Prashant Kishore and his team to provide government services at the local level. They organized camps at the local level to provide 12 services to the people quickly including - caste certificates, health insurance cards and ration cards. These programmes attracted the voters. The ‘DUYARE SARKAR’ campaign influenced the voters in general and women voters, in particular.

At the party organizational level, Prashant Kishore and his team took several important steps in streamlining the ruling party organization. Some of the initiatives were:

- a) To reconstruct local party organization with strong young leadership.
- b) The local TMC leaders were trained for better utilization of social media .
- c) The old party structure was replaced by introducing a new organizational structure. For instance, they dropped the district observer post. This reorganization of the party has helped Abhishek Banerjee (nephew of Mamata Banerjee) to bring the entire party leadership under his control. So before the 2021 Assembly election, TMC became more organized than ever before in state politics.

However, mobilization of the Muslim community was the most important strategy adopted by TMC in the 2021 election. Policies and strategies addressing the SC/ST and minority voters rolled in. The party launched ‘Para meeting’ (local area meeting against CAA) in all the Muslim Mahallah (Muslim areas) throughout the State. The verdict clearly indicates the success of their campaign. TMC further regained the support of SC/ST voters’ which they lost during the Lok Sabha election, 2019. Further, the Party got full support from the Muslim community.

To meet the aggressive poll campaign of TMC, the BJP leadership adopted following election strategies:

- a) The party organized one after another mass rallies by their national leaders like Narendra Modi, Amit Shah, J.P Nadda and others. They tried to create a perception before the voters that BJP would come to power in the election.
- b) They brought RSS cadres from outside Bengal to fill organizational deficiency at the local level.

- c) They wanted to break TMC's organization and leadership. They were quite successful in bringing some of the important leaders like Suwendu Adhikari from the TMC camp to BJP. They also brought the leaders from other political parties, especially from Left political parties.
- d) They also widely utilized social media in mobilizing Hindu voters by raising issues like necessities of CAA and NRC, immersion of Durga idol, and '*Imam Bhata*'.

On the other hand, Left parties under the leadership of CPIM entered into a coalition alliance with Congress and ISF. There was strong criticism against Left parties for entering into an alliance with a Muslim-dominated party like ISF. The Left-Cong-ISF alliance tried to raise economic issues during the election campaign like unemployment and poverty.

Left parties brought a change in their election campaign method in this Assembly election. They used popular songs (Tumpa Sona, a popular Bengali song) in their election campaign against TMC and BJP. Moreover, Left political parties along with Cong-ISF nominated young candidates in the fray. They also conducted door to door election campaign with their election manifesto. However, none of their strategies got worked out as planned. The wave of identity politics was so strong that the voters were not ready to listen to them. The entire election process moved around the TMC-BJP politics. Thus Left-Cong-ISF coalition remained a distance spectator in the fray.

The TMC supremo Mamata Banerjee in the last two and half years had only focused BJP as the main opposition party among the opposition parties in West Bengal. This had actually helped BJP to remain within the centre of everyday politics in West Bengal. She made lots of derogative words against Modi and Amit Shah that further helped the BJP to remain at the focal point of West Bengal politics. In the Modi Vs Mamta frame, it is very difficult for the Left and Congress to draw the attention of the electorate to issues like unemployment and corruption.

Section-III : Constituency Profile and the Verdict

Out of a total of 294 Assembly constituencies in West Bengal, 68 constituencies are reserved for SC, 16 constituencies belong to ST⁵ and 146 constituencies are minority Muslim dominated having 25%-96% of Muslim voters. Out of 294 constituencies, 163 are rural, 39 urban and the remaining 92 are rural-urban mixed constituencies. There are 21 Mothua dominated Assembly constituencies and Rajbangshi domination is seen in 30 constituencies in North Bengal. 90% and above Hindu dominated Assembly. There are 49 constituencies where 90% of voters are Hindus. There are 45 constituencies where non Bengali speaking population is in majority.

The above data clearly indicates that West Bengal is a multi-ethnic-linguistic-caste and religion-based state. However, it should be noted here that half of the constituencies in West Bengal are minority-dominated constituencies. That is why the minority vote bank is always a dominant factor in the outcome of the election results in West Bengal.

The Verdict

In this election, TMC returned to power for the third time with 213 seats and 47.94% popular votes. TMC and their hill partner G.J.M (Bimal Gurung faction) got 2,87,34,420 votes. On the other hand, BJP secured 77 seats and 38.10% votes. BJP and its allies altogether secured 2,28,50,710 votes. On the other hand, the Left-Cong-ISF coalition got only 1 seat and 9.86% vote. The Left-Cong-ISF coalition got only 60,11,800 votes. Table-1 shows party-wise contesting candidates, vote secured, and percentage of vote and seats secured by the different political parties in the 2021 Assembly Election in West Bengal. Table-2 shows the comparative position of the different political parties based on the 2021 and 2016 Assembly election results.

Table-1: Party wise Contesting Candidates, Vote Secured, and Percentage of Vote and Seats secured by the Different Political Parties in 2021 Assembly Election in West Bengal:

Party	Contesting candidates	Secured votes	Percentage of votes secured	Elected seats
TMC	288	2,87,35,420	47.94	213
BJP	291	2,28,50,710	38.10	77
CPIM	137	28,37,276	4.70	00
CONGRESS	91	17,57,131	2.90	00
ISF	29	7,80,188	1.30	01
Forward Block	18	3,18,932	0.50	00
CPI	10	1,18,665	0.20	00
RSP	11	1,24,780	0.21	00
OTHERS	257	17,96,140	2.99	01
NOTA		6,47,783	1.08	

Source: Data Compiled from Election Commission of India

The Table-2: Comparative Position of the Different Political Parties based on 2021 and 2016 Assembly Election Results:

	Assembly Election 2021				Assembly Election 2016			
	TMC	BJP	United Front	Others	TMC	BJP	United Front	Others
Out of 294 Constituencies	213	77	1	1	211	3	77	3
Vote Percentage of Parties	47.94	38.10	9.86	2.65	45.71	10.31	40.03	3.95
Elected by less than 1,000 Votes	3	4	0	0	4	0	4	0
Elected by 1,000-5,000 Votes	13	22	0	9	11	1	17	0
Elected by more than 50,000 Votes	43	1	0	0	10	0	4	0
Defeated even after Securing 45% or above Votes	10	10	0	0	4	0	3	0
Winning by less than NOTA Votes	5	8	0	0	9	0	15	0
Out of 42 Lok Sabha Seats	32	10	0	0	36	0	6	0

Source: Data Compiled from Election Commission of India

Both the state ruling party TMC and central ruling party BJP took all possible efforts to mobilize the different castes, linguistic and religious groups. In this regard, the difference between TMC and BJP was marked only on the question of minority vote bank. TMC had a strong support base of Muslim voters. On the other hand, BJP enjoyed strong support base among the SCs, STs, and OBC voters before the election.

However, TMC applying identity base mobilization policy for different caste, linguistic, religious communities and also providing social services through the 'DUYARE SARKAR' project was quite successful to get back their support in this Assembly election. Further TMC tried to sensitize each of the community based on their own needs and requirements and also giving the promise to protect their identity in the state. On the other hand, BJP tried their best to mobilize different ethnic and caste groups bringing them within their broad 'Hindutva' politics. However, they could not reach out to minority voters who cast their votes in a block against BJP and in favour of TMC. So we can conclude here that TMC was much more in an advanced position than BJP in respect of support base of different caste-ethnic-religious groups. Table-3 shows the Social Base of Different Political Parties.

The Table-3: Assembly Election 2021 - Social Base of Different Political Parties

Serial No.	Type	Assembly constituency	TMC	BJP	United Front	Others
1.	Political Support of ST's	16	09	07	00	00
2.	Political Support of SC's	68	36	32	00	00
3.	Political Support of Mothua Voters	21	12	09	00	00
4.	The support base of Bagdi Voters	16	09	07	00	00
5.	Political Support of Raj bangshi Voters	30	09	21	00	00
6.	Constituencies where more than 25% Muslim	146	131	14	01	00
7.	The constituency where Muslim Voters Ranged between 40%-90%	74	71	02	01	00
8.	Elected Women Candidates	40	33	7	00	00
9.	Party wise Performance of the Star Candidates	16	13	03	00	00
10.	100% Urban Constituencies	39	34	05	00	00
11.	Industry base Constituencies	70	52	18	00	00
12.	Rural Constituencies	163	126	36	1	00
13.	Rural-Urban Mixed Constituencies	92	55	36	0	1
14.	90% Hindu Voters Constituencies	49	27	22	0	0
15.	Non-Bengali Speaking Constituencies	45	29	15	00	01

Source: Data Compiled from Election Commission of India

The election result clearly reveals the rise of identity politics in the State. The identity politics that started with the end of the Left Front regime in 2011 got momentum in subsequent elections in West Bengal. However, identity politics has become mature enough through the 2021 Assembly election. Identity politics helped both TMC and BJP to retain their position as the ruling party and the principal opposition party in the Assembly. In contrast, the rise of identity politics has virtually ended the presence of Left and Congress in West Bengal legislature. Next to identity politics, social and economic schemes of TMC govt. particularly schemes targeted for women have influenced the voters in general and women, in particular, to cast their vote in favour of TMC. A total of 30% Muslim votes along with 18% Hindu beneficiaries' vote bank constituted a deadly electoral combination against BJP. It has been clearly observed that Prashant Kishore and his team I-pack was quite capable to polarize minority votes in absolute terms by projecting the CAA

and NRC issue before the electorates. The election result further reveals that TMC was capable enough to regain party support base among SCs and STs.

On the other hand, the BJP was capable to polarize 54% Hindu votes in their favour. However, this polarization of the Hindu vote bank was not enough to come to power in West Bengal. Muslim voters leaving their age-long political allegiance with Congress Party in three districts namely, North Dinajpur, Malda, and Murshidabad supported TMC primarily to prevent BJP. Thus the competitive communal politics of BJP and TMC has ruined the prospect of the Congress party in their traditional strong holds mainly consisting of three districts in West Bengal.

The 2021 Assembly election verdict clearly indicates that developmental issues, large scale defection of political leaders, Bangla Bangali (Bengali sub-national) issue, the outside intervention of BJP central leadership in State politics, the issue like CAA and NRC, widespread corruption charges against TMC party leadership etc received wide attention, but all these vaporized when confronted with identity issues.

Section-IV: Post-election Violence

After coming into power in 2011, the TMC led Government successfully implemented a large number of social projects in both rural and urban areas. The performance of the State Government has been recognized in the area of women empowerment by UNESCO also. The Kanyashree Project of the State Government received wide recognition from different corners including the UNO. Under the Food Security Act, the Government is providing 2Rs./Kilo rice for all the families living below the poverty line. Even the people above the poverty line have been included in this scheme. The Government has earned credit in the construction of rural roads, in the implementation of MGNREGS, beautification of the urban areas and distribution of other benefits like scholarships and stipends to different categories of the people. As a result, the TMC led Government has earned a pro-developmental image among the masses in comparison with the erstwhile Left Front government in West Bengal.

Side by side during the last ten years of TMC rule in the State corruption has spread beyond anybody's imagination. Crime syndicates' extraction of money from different sections of the people including businessmen; cut-money against every developmental scheme etc. have become common practice. On the political front, it is virtually one-woman show in every walk of life. The democratic space of the State has been shrinking down in different walks of life. For example, the school- college-university, co-operative elections, and elections to the other elected bodies were stopped by the TMC Government. Too much intervention in quasi-judicial organizations and also quasi-Constitutional organizations has been frequently noticed. After coming into power in the State one after another elections have been manipulated by the TMC leaders and cadres to such an extent that people have started ignoring the elections, especially the local polls. The last Panchayat election was beyond the permissible limit of tolerance. The way the entire Panchayat election was rigged and manipulated by the TMC leaders and workers was unthinkable in a democratic country like India. The best example of this kind is the West Bengal Panchayat election 2018. Violence was used by the ruling TMC from the nomination stage to the formation of Panchayat boards. In fact, the ruling party leaders and cadres have crossed all permissible limits during the Panchayat election⁶.

Like earlier elections, post-election violence has been a burning topic in West Bengal after the declaration of election results on May 2nd. According to the BJP, 38 of its activists were killed and around 20,000 were rendered homeless. On June 18, the Calcutta High Court directed the NHRC to "examine all the cases... and submit a comprehensive report". The court asked the NHRC to suggest "steps to be taken to ensure the confidence of the people that they can peacefully live in their houses and also carry on their occupation or business to earn their livelihood" and point out "the persons *prima facie* responsible for crime and the officers who maintained calculated silence on the issue". Mamata Banerjee maintained that the violence was a "pre-poll" phenomenon and took place at a time when the Election Commission was in charge of law and order."

The report submitted by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) on the post-election violence in West Bengal has caused major excitement in political and social circles. The Calcutta High Court had directed the NHRC to look into complaints of violence following the Assembly election; on July 13, the Commission submitted its final report to the court. NHRC in its report has brought to the fore the alarming rise of political violence in the State. However, ruling party TMC has raised questions regarding the Commission's absolute impartiality. "The situation in the State of West Bengal is a manifestation of 'Law of Ruler', instead of 'Rule of Law'," the report stated at the very outset⁷.

"Most of the violent incidents included murder, rape, molestation, assault, vandalism, looting, dispossession, arson, extortion, threat, and intimidation. Pertinently, they were neither sporadic nor random; instead, they targeted specific persons (those associated with the main opposition party)," the report stated⁸.

"Violence was retributive. It was in retaliation to those who 'dared' to vote or support the major opposition party," the report stated. It also suggested that a "court-monitored" Special Investigation Team be formed "consisting of senior supervisory IPS [Indian Police Service] officers and others" which would also start investigating cases of violence¹⁰.

The report will be assessed by different political parties in their own manner, but the extent of the violence, as indicated by data provided by the State police, does not allow the government to remain in a state of denial. The recent violence was different from the violence witnessed in the past mainly because of the intensely polarized nature of the election. In the past also there was violence, but it was more sporadic and on issues that were local. But this election, right from day one, was a hard, long-drawn polarizing battle between TMC and BJP.

Conclusion

The election is the permanent source of political violence in Bengal politics. We cannot mention a single election that was held in the recent past peacefully in West Bengal. Violence does not confine only to the Parliament and Assembly elections, its extents up to school management and cooperative elections also. We have observed the extent and nature of poll-related violence that had occurred in the 2003, 2008, 2013, and 2018 Panchayat elections in West Bengal and also violence during the 2015 Municipal election in West Bengal. One of the permanent features of political culture in West Bengal is that the political party in power does not provide a level playing ground for opposition parties in the election process. It is a well-established fact that the party in power in West Bengal does not feel shame to misuse government machinery in getting undue privilege in the election. It should also be pointed out here that in areas where the opposition party is strong it also utilizes money and muscle power in influencing the voters' in their favour. Further, it should be mentioned here that there is a broad base unwritten consensus among the political parties about the use of physical power in elections. The leaders across the political parties in their interview with us never consider that 100% free and fair election is possible in West Bengal. Leaders of the opposition party also believe unless they acquire the organizational strength on their own, they cannot expect to win an election. Most of the opposition leaders express the view that physical power used by the ruling party in elections can only be stopped with the help of the counter-organizational power of the opposition parties. The 2013 and 2018 Panchayat elections in West Bengal were the most violent and bloody in the history of local elections in the State. In 2018 around 100 people died. Opposition parties were not allowed to file nominations in most of the districts in West Bengal by ruling party leaders and cadres. The opposition political parties had criticized the role of the State Election Commission for its failure to ensure a free and fair election.

From the ongoing discussion we may conclude with the following statements:

- i) All the stakeholders in West Bengal politics consider that violence in elections has acquired a permanent feature.

- ii) None of the stakeholders believes that a complete violence-free election is possible in West Bengal.
- iii) Violence in electoral politics in West Bengal is an inseparable part of the political culture of Bengal.
- iv) People in general and leaders of the political parties in particular also believe that the organizational power of the political party should be utilized in a strategic way to counter violence for achieving political objectives.

When violence in elections has been curbed by the Election Commission of India in other parts of India including Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Haryana, the use of violence in elections in West Bengal has gradually increased over the years. Apart from the 2009 Lok Sabha election and the 2011 Assembly election, the Election Commission has virtually failed to stop violence in the West Bengal election. Thus, experiences show that elections always remain the source of conflicts among the political parties in West Bengal politics. Elections in West Bengal are rarely held on a level playing ground.

A state like West Bengal has entered into a vicious circle in respect of the use of political violence. The political violence has changed its character in West Bengal politics from the strategic form into a structural character. It has become a common weapon in the hands of powerful political groups against the opponent group.

References

1. Chakraborty, Biswanath, (2021) : *Bidhan Sabha Nirbachan-2021-Parthabartan (in Bengali)*, Deep Prakasan, Kolkata
2. Chakraborty, Biswanath, (2019): 'Lok Sabha Election 2019 in West Bengal: Signal for Regime Change?' in *Socialist Perspective*, Vol-45, No-3-4, Kolkata
3. Chakraborty, Biswanath, (2019): *Janadeh*, Deep Prakasan, Kolkata
4. Chakraborty, Biswanath, (2018): *Panchayat Election, 2018- Gram Dakhaler Lorai (in Bengali)*, Deep Prakasan, Kolkata
5. Sen and Chakraborty (2008): *Delimitation Commission: Working and Impact*, Progressive Publishers, Kolkata
6. Chakraborty, Biswanath, (2021): 'Exploring Some Key Issues in Parliamentary Democracy in South Asia', chapter in "Challenges to Democracy in South Asia by Karmakar,A, Navyug Books International, Delhi
7. *Report of the Enquiry Committee, 2021*, National Human Rights Commission, New Delhi, Page-4
8. *Report of the Enquiry Committee, 2021*, *ibid.*, P-4
9. *Report of the Enquiry Committee, 2021*, *ibid.*, P-4
10. *Report of the Enquiry Committee, 2021*, *ibid.*, P-4

**SOCIAL SCIENCE
IN
PERSPECTIVE**

**Vol. 13
July - September 2021
&
October - December 2021
No. 3 & 4**

SOCIAL SCIENCE IN PERSPECTIVE

Vol. 13

July - September 2021
&
October - December 2021

No. 3 & 4

CONTENTS

Articles

**Incumbency Wave on the Way-Clues from
Election Outcomes in Five States in India**
Gopal K. Kadekodi & S.V. Hanagodimath

Combative Federalism: New Model from West Bengal
A.K. Verma

Election Commission of India & 2021-Assembly Elections
Patibandla Srikant

Assam Assembly Elections 2021: Themes, Issues and Debates
Jayanta Krishna Sarmah & Parimita Bhuyan

Scanning the Assembly Poll Results (2021) in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry
G. Ulaganathan

Verdict for Continuity: Kerala Assembly Elections 2021
M.R. Biju & MR.B. Anantha Padmanabha

**West Bengal Assembly Election 2021: A Paradigm
Shift from Ideology-Issue based Politics to Identity Politics**
Biswanath Chakraborty

**Voters' Perception on Governance and
State-Centre Political Congruence: An Analysis
of the Puducherry Legislative Assembly Election of 2021**
Avinandan Choudhury & Periyakrishna Moorthy

**Assam Assembly Election 2021 : The Incessant Ride
of BJP and Temporal Crisis of the Congress and AGP**
V. Bijukumar

**Issues, Voting Pattern and Peoples Verdict in
Tamil Nadu Assembly Elections 2021**
P. Sakthivel

Voting Trends in the Kerala Assembly Election 2021
K.M. Sajad Ibrahim

Trinamool Triumph 2021: A Paradigm Shift Within West Bengal or Beyond?
Nirjhar Mukherjee

Assam Assembly Elections 2021: Bipolar Outcome in Tri-cornered Contest
Dhruba Pratim Sharma

Understanding West Bengal Assembly Polls 2021
Oindrilla Dattagupta & Manish

A Mandate for Good Governance & Smart Politics Amidst Odds
Josukutty C.A. & Thomas Mathew

Use of ICT in the Election Process : A Case Study from Tenkasi District (TN)
Raju Narayana Swamy

**Elected Governments and Inclusiveness : A
Critique of NDA Government's Policies and Programmes**
Mary George

**Pandemic Management and Elections: Impact of
COVID-19 on State Assembly Polls in Kerala**
Ashika S Prasad, Jeffin Thomas Mammen & Girish Kumar R

**Beyond the Paradox of Voting: The Attappadi
Model of Deepening Democracy**
Biju Lekshmanan, Dileep P. Chandran & Sathyan T.

LDF 2.0: Grounds for the Left Front Victory in Kerala
K.M. Seethi

Introducing New Books

Challenging the Meta Narrative of European Naval Supremacy
Saurav Kumar Rai

Assam Assembly Elections 2021: Bipolar Outcome in Tri-cornered Contest

Dhruba Pratim Sharma

A dominant ruling coalition and a fragmented opposition marked the political scene in Assam with contentious issues of citizenship and safeguards for native populations as key issues in the keenly contested state Assembly elections of April 2021 that returned the BJP-led coalition to power with absolute majority, while also bringing some significant gains for the Congress-led 'Mahajot'.

“Assamese Society is not just plural like the rest of Indian society, it is also diverse and laden with complications that are of a historical nature. The fact that the BJP had won there was a clear indication that it would be making deep inroads into not just the Northeast, but the eastern region in general” (Palshikar, 2019).

Characterised for long as a Congress bastion, Assam in recent years has emerged as a major base for the BJP, with Modi's advent on the national scene way back in 2013 decisively transforming its political contours. While the saffron party had a nearly marginal presence in the 2011 State Assembly polls, its outstanding performance in the 2014 Lok Sabha polls as well as in the State Assembly elections two years later was attributed mainly to the Modi wave as well as to strong anti-incumbency sentiments. The BJP's showing in the 2019 Lok Sabha polls in which it bagged nine out of the state's fourteen seats, two more than its tally of 2014, signified that there was no anti-incumbency this time round, and that the party was here to stay on as the dominant player. The rise of BJP in 2014 and concomitant religious polarization disadvantaged Congress because of the split of Muslim votes owing to the presence of AIUDF and Hindu consolidation in favour of NDA during subsequent elections. BJP's ability to forge and retain coalition with prominent regional parties having distinct social bases during Assembly and Lok Sabha elections veiled social polarisation and enabled it to win votes from wide segments of society with the exception of religious minorities.

Assam proved to be the gateway for BJP's expansion in rest of the states in North East India where the party became instrumental in replacing Congress-led governments. Subsequent to the formation of North East Democratic Alliance (NEDA) with Himanta Biswa Sarmah as Convener in 2017, either the BJP or an ally from the NEDA formed governments in the rest of states in North East India. BJP's dominance in the state is marked by the position of the party and its allies in elected bodies from panchayat to parliament. Within a period of just seven years, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) could secure majority presence in the Vidhan Sabha, Lok Sabha, urban local bodies, panchayati raj bodies and tribal autonomous councils.

Stable alliances of BJP in Assam with leading regional parties, and bickering within Congress, the main opposition party, along with inability of the opposition parties to present a united front contributed to BJP's wins in the LS polls of 2019, despite strong anti-BJP feelings among Assamese as well as Muslim groups centred around opposition to the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, 2016. The month of December 2019 saw the rise of an intense movement against the passage of the controversial bill in Parliament and its conversion into a statute, plunging parts of the state into chaos and briefly rendering the ruling alliance to the back-foot, but within a couple of months the movement had all but fizzled out. However, opposition to the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019 (CAA) along with apparent inertia of the State in responding to the recommendations of a State-appointed committee on Clause VI of the Assam Accord of 1985 seeking to grant constitutional protection to the Assamese-speaking population of the state, and failure of the Central

government to accord Scheduled Tribe status to six populous backward communities of the state as promised by the BJP on the eve of the 2014 Lok Sabha elections emerged as ready issues for the opposition to cash on in the State Assembly elections. For the opposition and mainly for the Congress, the demise of its three-time CM and strategist Tarun Gogoi, whose ability to forge social coalition with diverse ethnic groups and to secure an even presence of the party across regions and social segments in the state had contributed to party's earlier successes, came as a body blow almost on the eve of the polls.

On the other hand, welfare schemes of both the State and Central governments including targeted direct-beneficiary schemes, and granting of autonomous and development councils for backward communities may have contributed to victories of BJP and its allies in elections to tribal Autonomous councils including the Bodoland Territorial Council under the 6th schedule of the constitution, signifying its success in bringing tribal communities within its fold. At the same time, implementation of welfare schemes as well as negotiation of pay hikes for the tea workers, aimed to securing support of this populous community towards the ruling party, development of infrastructure, especially in transport and communication as well as in health and education sectors, and rise in employment opportunities including self-employment emerged as main issues on which the ruling alliance placed high stakes.

Alliances and Contestations

Emergence and reorientation of alliances on the eve of the polls signified the changing political landscape in State. While the ruling alliance gave up its partnership with the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) in the Bodoland region and chose to ally with the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) from this region, the opposition was dominated by two major alliances. The Congress in alliance with the AIUDF, based mainly among Muslim migrants of Bengali origin, along with the BPF in the Bodoland region and the Left parties was expected to have a major impact in Muslim-dominated seats in Lower and Central Assam as well as in the southernmost region of the state, the Bengali-speaking Barak valley. On the other hand, a regional alliance of two fledgling but prominent regional groups, namely the Asom Jatiya Parishad (AJP), supported by the influential All Assam Students Union (AASU), and the Rajior Dal backed by the left-oriented activist group Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS) was expected to impact outcomes in the Assamese-dominated areas mostly in Upper Assam. However, the two main opposition formations despite being on the same page as far as opposition to the CAA was concerned could not unite against the BJP-led alliance, which proved detrimental for the opposition's aim of changing the existing balance of power.

The polls for the 126 member state assembly held in three phases in late March and early April witnessed high voter turnout ranging between nearly 80% in the first phase to more than 85% in the third. The NDA and the 'Mahajot' contested in all seats while the third 'regional front' put up a total of 99 candidates, with some overlapping between partners in all the three alliance formations in the form of 'friendly contest'.

The Results

The BJP-led NDA retained power with 75 seats, well above the half-way mark of 63 but down from its 2016 tally of 86. As a party BJP's tally remained constant at 60. The Congress-led Mahajot won 50 seats, with the Congress itself bettering its score from the 2016 elections by three seats from 26 to 29. One seat was won by the newly-formed Rajior Dal in which its party president contested as an Independent candidate. Thus in a House of 126 seats, roughly three-fifths of the seats went to the ruling alliance and two-fifths to the opposition. Moreover though the contestation was between three alliances, the outcome was bipolar with the third alliance of new regional parties bagging just a single seat:

“Though the Congress forged *Mahajot*, a grand pre-election alliance with the All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), the Bodoland People's Front (BPF) and Left parties, the ruling alliance managed to defeat it. In fact, the Congress's tie-up with the 'Muslim party' AIUDF seems to have helped the National Democratic Alliance's (NDA) cause, helping them keep Hindu voters firmly on their side and wean away a small but sizeable chunk of Assamese Muslim voters. The two local parties, the Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP)

and the Rajgor Dal (RD), had a limited impact, and the latter could win just one seat in Upper Assam. Their influence remained confined to Upper Assam” (Palshikar, et al, 2021).

Issues and Sentiments

One of the chief reasons for the NDA’s return to power in Assam seems to have been the absence of any negative sentiment regarding the performance of the Sarbananda Sonowal government in the State and the Narendra Modi government at the Centre. The Lokniti-CSDS’ post-poll survey found a fair amount of satisfaction among voters with both-the governments (Palshikar, et al, 2021). The absence of any major dissatisfaction with the state government translated into a pro-incumbency sentiment. There was no overwhelming desire to get rid of the government among the electorate like there had been in 2016. This time, on being asked if the incumbent government in the state should get another chance, more than two in five favored the *status quo*, while 37 percent voters did not want the government back. Not surprisingly, the NDA swept the pro-incumbency vote, securing about four-fifths of their vote. However, the Congress-led Mahajot was simply unable to consolidate the anti-incumbency sentiment to the same extent and this seems to have been a critical factor in its worse than expected performance. While three-fourths of those wanting a change backed the Mahajot, a considerable chunk shifted towards the third front. Comparing across the regions, this division of the anti-incumbency votes was the highest in Upper Assam, where over a quarter of the voters wanted the government outvoted for other parties including the AJP-RD alliance, at the cost of the Mahajot (ibid).

The power of having a ‘*double-engine ki sarkar*’ (having the same party’s government at Centre as well as the state) was emphasized by the prime minister and other leaders time and again during the Assam election campaign, and the voters seem to have reverberated with this idea. Over three-fifths of the voters surveyed agreed that for Assam’s development it was rather necessary to have the same party ruling at the Centre as well as in the state (ibid). Moreover, the desire to have a double engine government seems to have also been a factor in how most voters voted. On being asked whose performance they had kept in mind while voting - the State government or the Central government - more than one-thirds said they looked at the work done by both the governments. Prime Minister Modi’s popularity seems to have been a quite a factor on its own along with satisfaction with Sonowal government’s work, indicating that the Modi factor may have worked as much for the NDA if not more than the Sonowal factor. The schemes of the state government such as ‘*Orunodoi*’ (a fixed monthly sum was promised to one woman in the household) and the ‘*Chah bagichar dhan puraskar mela*’ (financial aid to the tea garden workers) as well as Central government’s schemes like Ujjwala Yojana, MNREGA and PDS having large numbers of beneficiaries seem to have impacted voters (ibid).

Role of Religious Polarisation

Religious polarisation appears to be the one factor that helps in making sense of the election verdict of Assam, particularly Hindu consolidation (Palshikar, et al, 2021). The electoral outcome in the state simply cannot be understood without looking into this aspect. For the second straight assembly election, the Hindu coalescing around the BJP was remarkable. Overall, about two-thirds of Hindus rallied behind the NDA, with the Congress alliance securing less than one-fifth of Hindu support. Given the religious profile of Assam where the Hindu share in the state’s population is about 15 percentage points more than that of Muslims, this consolidation proved to be decisive. Support for the BJP among Hindus cut beyond linguistic-ethnic differences and came both from the Assamese and Bengali speaking communities. While some Assamese Hindus did shift to the AJP-RD alliance, particularly in the upper Assam region, the shift was not large enough to significantly affect the BJP’s prospects. One reason of Hindus continuing to stay away from the Mahajot and not showing much inclination towards it seems to have been the Congress’s alliance with the AIUDF, as most Hindus considered the latter to be communal and opposed the Congress-AIUDF alliance. Many of the Congress’s traditional Hindu supporters were found to oppose to the Congress-AIUDF alliance and around three-fourths of them ended up voting for the NDA (ibid).

What the Congress-AIUDF alliance did successfully manage to do was to consolidate the votes of Muslims around itself. Overall, about four-fifths of Muslims rallied behind the Mahajot. In the earlier elections, in the absence of an alliance between the two parties, votes of Muslims were badly divided between the Congress and the AIUDF. This time on account of the alliance, their votes came together giving the alliance victories in many Muslim-concentrated seats. However, even this consolidation was perhaps not as per the expectations of the alliance, being far stronger among Bengali Muslims, as against the Assamese Muslims. A quarter of Assamese Muslims backed the NDA alliance and about a tenth also voted the AJP-RD. The AIUDF being a party primarily of Bengali Muslims and the growing distance between indigenous Muslims and the so-called 'Miya Muslims' may have had a role to play in this. One-fifth of Assamese Muslims voted for the NDA in the Congress-contested seats, as against seven percent Bengali Muslims (ibid).

Another community among whom the Mahajot was hoping to make a dent this time but failed to do so was the Bodo community. Despite tying up with the Bodo party, the BPF, which shifted its allegiance from the NDA to the Mahajot before the elections, the Mahajot seems to have secured just a small fraction of the Bodo votes. Instead it was the BJP's UPPL alliance that bagged a large share of the Bodo votes. In fact, there seems to have been religious polarisation even in the Bodo areas as the only community that seems to have voted for the Mahajot in large numbers in these areas are the Muslims. Along with the Bodos, other non-Bodo communities also rallied behind the NDA thus giving it a huge win. Not just the Bodos, the Congress's performance among other tribal voters such as Tiwas, Rabhas and Mishings elsewhere was also particularly underwhelming with the opposition alliance managing to secure only about one-tenth of their vote and the NDA about three-fourths (ibid).

Conclusion

After a record three consecutive victories of the Indian National Congress, led by Tarun Gogoi, the Assamese brought a change of power in 2016 by voting for the BJP. The BJP successfully consolidated Hindu votes in a state where elections were largely governed by the multiple ethnicities it hosts. The story after five years has been more or less the same, with religious identity yet again emerging as one of the key determinants for the electors, albeit on a slightly muted level. This apart, a relatively high satisfaction with both the central and the state governments among voters and the absence of a strong anti-incumbency sentiment gave the BJP-led NDA a head start. Despite the Congress forging a grand pre-election alliance with the AIUDF, the BPF and the left parties, the ruling alliance managed to defeat the muddled poll-arithmetic. In fact the Congress's tie up with the Muslim party AIUDF seems to have helped the NDA's cause, helping them keep Hindu voters firmly on their side and wean away a small but sizeable chunk of Assamese Muslim voters. In the aftermath of the polls the BJP-led NDA formed the government with Dr. H. B. Sarma replacing Sarbananda Sonowal as the new Chief Minister. Defections of three newly elected MLAs, two from the Congress and one from the AIUDF, along with passing away of two MLAs from the Bodoland region have necessitated holding of bye-elections to the State Assembly in five constituencies, due to be held at the end of October.

Data from the Election Commission of India reveal that the votes polled by AJP-RD exceeded the victory margin of the BJP and its allies in 14 constituencies, of which the BJP won 11 and ally Asom Gana Parishad (AGP) three. This could have been a factor in the failure of the Congress-led 'Mahajot' or grand alliance in dislodging the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and its allies in Assam. Following the elections, the opposition Mahajot all but broke up with the AIUDF and the BPF parting ways with the Congress, and the latter patching up a pact with the regionalist AJP for the ensuing by-polls. The future prospects of Congress' efforts to re-establish dominance in the state depends on its success in forging alliances with regional forces and in regaining support of the tea workers and ethnic groups, while also working out tacit agreements with the AIUDF in selected constituencies in order to prevent a split of anti-BJP votes. Congress as the leading opposition party thus faces the twin challenges of bringing together a social coalition and ensuring a consensus

over a new ideological middle ground among diverse political parties to challenge the dominance of BJP, primarily to offset the impact of religion overpowering the ethnic and linguistic barriers of political mobilisation in the state.

References

1. Palshikar, Suhas (2019): “The BJP’s ‘Act East’ Moment”, *The Hindu*, 28 May, p. 9.
2. Palshikar, Suhas, Rana, Manjesh, Sharma, Dhruva Pratim and Tripathi, Vikas (2021): Hindu consolidation pays off for BJP, *The Hindu*, 8 May, <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/assam-assembly/hindu-consolidation-pays-off-for-bjp/article34509288.ece>.

Scanning the Assembly Poll Results (2021) in Tamil Nadu and Puducherry

G. Ulaganathan

The 2021 elections is significant because the voters have selected politicians over actors and actresses like Khushbu who joined BJP with the hope of making it big in politics. AIADMK, which fought the election under the leadership of chief minister Edappadi Palanisamy did fairly well in the absence of its supreme leader 'Amma' Jayalalithaa. It performed well in the western districts but not in the north-central region. The fact is that the DMK's alliance was more coherent than in 2016. The DMK did well across the State while its ally, the Congress, also managed to improve its vote share. The DMK-led coalition managed to trounce its opponents across the rural/urban divide and also did well in the Cauvery Delta region where farming is intensive. The 2021 election brought some cheer to the BJP as it could extend its rule in South India to Puduhcerry also besides Karnataka.

Tamil Nadu is one of the very few states in India which presents an interesting scenario in the world of electoral politics. For more than half a century now, none of the so-called 'national parties' have been able to come to power in the state. Whether it is the Congress, the Communist parties or the BJP, they have had to content with riding piggyback on the shoulders of one of the Dravidian parties.

Election to the legislative assembly of Tamil Nadu was held in a single phase on 6th April, 2021 with a voter turnout of 72.78%. The Lok Sabha election in the state has also proved that the national parties do not make any impact and have to contend with some seats they manage to win courtesy either the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) or the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK). DMK won 38 out of the 39 Lok Sabha seats in 2019 and 159 seats along with its allies in the Assembly elections in May, 2021.

DMK on its own got 125 seats and Congress, its ally, won 18 seats in the 234-member State Assembly. The then ruling AIADMK came second winning 65 seats and helped BJP bag 4 seats.

Among parties outside the two coalitions, Seeman's Naam Tamilar Katchi got a 6.5% vote share, trumping T.T.V. Dhinakaran's AMMK (3.4%) and Kamal Haasan's MNM (2.9%). These parties, however, didn't win a seat.

Ascend of the Dravidian Parties

To go back in history, the Dravidian parties rose to prominence in the political stage of Tamil Nadu in the 1960s. DMK formed the government in the state in 1967 in the aftermath of the anti-Hindi agitation led by C N Annadurai who later became the chief minister of the first non-Congress government in 1967. Although the Dravidian parties have split many times and have fought each other, the seat of power in Tamil Nadu has been with one or another Dravidian party since the seventies.

The popularity of the Dravidian parties is attributed to several factors, starting with the anti-Hindi agitation, the self-rights movements of Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, the domination of North Indian parties, Hindi imposition in the sixties, etc.

The differences between North and South India arose with the strong feeling that the nation was dominated by the North (Aryans, as the DMK effectively put it across) and that the South had been both neglected and exploited. The hostility towards Hindi as well as Brahminism helped the Dravidian parties to get a powerful grip over the people of Tamil Nadu .

During the peak of anti-Hindi agitation, though Annadurai asked students to return to classes and leave the agitation, some high-profile leaders in DMK were still active and one of them was Muthuvel Karunanidhi whose fiery oratory and in-depth knowledge of the Tamil literature was very popular among the students. Karunanidhi was later arrested and attained a status of “martyred hero”.

There was no looking back for this man and, after the untimely death of Annadurai, who succumbed to cancer, Karunanidhi brought the party under his control and became the chief minister after strong manipulation which saw senior leaders like Nedunchezhiyan and A V P Asaithambi sidelined.

Karunanidhi became chief minister six times, an MLA thirteen times and firmly established the Dravidian rule in Tamil Nadu. A clever and shrewd politician, he was on the right side of the fence all the time. He supported Indira Gandhi when she was Prime Minister, Atal Behari Vajpayee during his rule, then Rajiv Gandhi and later Manmohan Singh as PMs.

He also ensured that the DMK, was an alliance partner and even a participant in several governments at the centre bagging prime portfolios. Under him, the DMK became one of the strongest regional parties which could not be ignored by the parties in power at the Centre.

His brief eclipse came with the rise and rebellion posed by actor turned politician and heartthrob of millions M. G. Ramachandran or simply MGR who broke away and formed his own party, All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK).

For thirteen years Karunanidhi was out of power but proved his leadership skills by keeping the morale of the party cadre high always-not an easy job for a party leader out of power.

After MGR, the AIADMK found a strong leader in Jayalalithaa, an actress and heroine in more than 25 MGR films, most of them blockbusters. She fought her way up, took control of the party against all odds and led AIADMK to victory in three polls and became chief minister and had a firm grip over the party.

Until her untimely-and also as many believe mysterious-death a couple of years ago, politics in Tamil Nadu was totally in the hands of these two leaders, M. Karunanidhi and J Jayalalithaa.

The 2021 elections thus marked a milestone in the politics of Tamil Nadu. The absence of these two stalwarts, both massive crowd-pullers, was felt badly and it was expected that Bharatiya Janata Party will make significant inroads and emerge as a strong force.

But that was not to be. Riding piggyback on the ruling AIADMK’s shoulders, it managed just 4 seats. Nevertheless it is also a creditable feat. BJP made its entry into TN Assembly after a gap of nearly 15 years.

Descending Cine Glamour

There was a great expectation that the popular hero Rajnikanth will enter politics, form his own party and contest elections. In fact BJP managers were working overtime to get him to their party and even offered to make him the CM. Initially he was dilly dallying on this. However this time he called a press conference and announced that he was forming a political party, and even announced the office-bearers. This resulted in high voltage frenzy among his fans and spread panic among other parties. Then, after a month, Rajnikanth announced that he will not be forming a party and that his fans can vote for any party that they choose. Though this came as a shock to his fans and followers, for those who have been following him closely over the years it was no surprise. Though health and his age (70) was said to be the main reason for his backing out, it is clearly visible that he lacked confidence. The prospect of defeat at the hustings was something that he would not be able to take. Moreover, he was also advised against launching the party by his well-wishers who included the Telugu star Chiranjeevi who could not continue with his Praja Rajyam party which was launched with much fanfare in Tirupati and had to finally merge with the Congress. Another popular film star Vijaykanth had done fairly well in his political career. He had launched his DMDK (Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam) in 2005, contested in all seats in 2006 Assembly elections but won only one seat contested

by him. However, the DMMDK proved to be an important player then garnering 10% of the votes and securing 10.1% in the last Lok Sabha election. Vijayakanth had declared that he would not ask donations for his party, and most of the funding for the party came from his own pocket. In the 2011 election, he formed an alliance with AIADMK and contested in 41 constituencies. His party saw success, winning 29 of the 41 seats it contested. DMMDK won more seats than the DMK and he became the Leader of the opposition. He lost in both the seats contested by him in the 2016 election. A two-time MLA (2006 and 2011), he could manage only 34,447 votes, which saw him finish third. Since then, due to his failing health he has almost quit politics though his party is still alive.

Another new political outfit, Makkal Needhi Mayyam (MNM), launched with much fanfare by the well-known cine actor Kamal Haasan was also hoping to fill in the gap and Kamal himself was dreaming of replacing both Jayalalithaa and Karunanidhi. But, as the results emerged, his dreams lay shattered and he himself lost badly to a BJP candidate in Coimbatore. He was 'inspired' by successful film star-turned politicians MGR, N T Rama Rao and Chiranjeevi who formed their own political parties and tasted success in the very first electoral test they faced. MNM's vote share in the 2019 Lok Sabha election was 3.72% (in the seats it contested). The party performed well in urban areas such as Chennai, Coimbatore and Madurai, where it regularly polled upwards of 8.5% to 12.5 % of the vote share and often secured more than one lakh votes, which may have prompted Kamal Haasan to contest from Coimbatore. However, the party performed poorly in rural areas and came third in many urban constituencies. Kamal, probably underestimated the strength of Dravidian parties or overestimated his own popularity.

The 2021 elections is significant because the voters have selected politicians over actors and actresses like Khushbu who joined BJP with the hope of making it big in politics. AIADMK, which fought the election under the leadership of chief minister Edappadi Palanisamy did fairly well in the absence of its supreme leader 'Ammu' Jayalalithaa. It performed well in the western districts but not in the north-central region. The fact is that the DMK's alliance was more coherent than in 2016. The DMK did well across the State while its ally, the Congress, also managed to improve its vote share. The DMK-led coalition managed to trounce its opponents across the rural/urban divide and also did well in the Cauvery Delta region where farming is intensive.

Caste Plays Crucial Role

Despite having the image of a state far ahead in social reforms, Tamil Nadu is still caught in the grip of caste politics. Caste groups, organisations and parties have a huge say during the polls. The clout of such groups, particularly intermediate or dominant castes, across the state have kept the major parties, including the Dravidian parties, on their toes. Both the AIADMK and the DMK have played their roles in ensuring the confidence and support of the caste-based organisations for political gains. The deafening silence of the Dravidian parties during incidents of caste violence, atrocities or honour killings are pointer to the fact how caste plays an important role in Tamil Nadu. The emergence of two leaders - Edappadi K. Palanisami (EPS) and his deputy O. Panneer Selvam (OPS) - within the ruling AIADMK, can be attributed to the importance given to the caste groups they belong to, who form a solid vote base of the party. EPS hails from the western part of Tamil Nadu and belongs to the dominant Gounder community, while OPS hails from the south and belongs to another dominant caste group called the Mukkulathor, which includes the Kallar, Thevar and Agamudayar sub-castes. The two communities form a strong vote base for the AIADMK. While both began their political journey from the grassroots, the caste they belonged to pushed them up the ladder ahead of many other senior leaders. The two communities form a strong vote base for the AIADMK.

Though many organisations representing caste groups exist, recent years have seen a mushrooming of political outfits. In the Kongu region - the western part of the state - fringe political outfits carry the term 'kongu' with them by default. This includes the KonguNadu Makkal Desiya Kutchi, Kongu Ilaingar Peravai, KonguNadu Munnetra Kazhagam and KonguNadu Jananayaka Kutchi, to mention a few. These organisations,

much to the dismay of the major parties, claim to be the representatives of the Gounder community which forms between 12% to 15% of the total population of the state.

The Mukkulathor community, constituting around 10% of the population, wields considerable influence in the southern and central districts of the state. Former chief ministers M.G. Ramachandran and J. Jayalalithaa have contested from the southern district banking solely on the votes from the community.

Though the number of parties representing caste is relatively low, the community has a larger say within the AIADMK and the splinter group Amma Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam (AMMK). Smaller parties like Anaithu Tamil Agam Katchi, All India Moovendar Munnani Kazhagam and Mukkulathor Puli Padai claim the support of the community.

The consolidation of votes by such parties has forced the major Dravidian parties to accommodate them within their fold for electoral gains. The DMK has also been banking on the minority, Dalit and OBC vote in the elections.

Another dominant caste in the northern part of the state is the Vanniyars, who constitute around 12% of the population. The Vanniyar Sangam came into existence in the late 1980s also as a show of strength of the community. This organisation later transformed into the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK) in 1989.

The term 'pattali' translates to 'toiler', but has nothing to do with working class politics. The community tends to lean towards the PMK, which garnered around five per cent of the votes in the 2019 General Elections. The party has used its voter base to bargain with both, the DMK and AIADMK, on multiple occasions.

The party is known for its association with violence, the stone pelting at trains in the outskirts of Chennai during a march for internal reservation, being a recent example. The AIADMK government passed a resolution in the Assembly for 10.5% internal reservation for the Vanniyars just ahead of the elections. The two Dravidian parties have toed similar lines by fielding candidates of the community in their regions of influence. The office-bearers of these parties in such regions hail predominantly from the Vanniyar community.

Other communities are spread far and across, unable to consolidate their presence in a particular region. The Mudaliyar, Yadavas, Reddiars, and Kammalars have a significant presence and are spread over the state, with the exception of the Nadars. C.N. Annadurai, the founder of the DMK and the first chief minister from the party, is from the Mudaliyar community from Kancheepuram district.

Districts like Kanyakumari, Tirunelveli, Virudhunagar and Thoothukudi have a considerable Nadar population. Late chief minister K. Kamaraj, Telangana Governor Tamilisai Soundararajan and former Union minister P. Radhakrishnan hail from the community and the same region. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has considerable support in Kanyakumari due to the community, but it remains divided while voting. The 'Nadar Mahajana Sangam' of the Nadar community is a powerful organisation in the region and quite influential. A vast majority of the people's representatives in the region hail from the community.

Atrocities Against Dalits

Irrespective of the dominant community in any particular region, Dalits have been at the receiving end. The existence of untouchability in hundreds of villages, presence of caste walls, fences and the cruelty of honour killings, exposes the vulnerability of the Dalit population. They constitute 20% of the state population, the highest for any caste group. The Dalit population is spread across the state, highly concentrated in the Kongu region, Chennai, Villuppuram, Vellore, Tiruvannamalai and the delta districts. Not surprisingly the Kongu region leads in atrocities against Dalits.

The collapse of an untouchability wall claimed the lives of 17 people in Coimbatore district, which was reported as a major incident in December 2019. The delta region is no stranger to such violence, with the wounds of the Venmani massacre yet to heal even after 50 years.

The Dalits in Vanniyar-dominated areas are always vulnerable to attacks. PMK cadres were alleged to have incited violence during the 2019 polls which left many houses and properties damaged.

Even the COVID-19 induced lockdown could not prevent atrocities against Dalits, said a report by the Tamil Nadu Untouchability Eradication Front (TNUEF). The state also has the dubious distinction of accounting for higher crimes against Dalits.

More intriguing is the silence of the Dravidian parties and other mainstream parties, with the exception of the Left parties. On most occasions, the Dravidian parties paint such incidents as law and order issues and not as caste-based violence. The major parties remain silent on caste issues, fearing backlash from the intermediate or dominant caste groups during elections.

The Dalit vote for the DMK-led coalition helped them consolidate in the north and offset the loss of the Vanniyar and Mudaliar support. In the west, the Gounder vote was firmly with the AIADMK front (59%). Here, the support of Arunthathiyar Dalits (68%), for the DMK alliance helped it garner votes and slash the winning margins for the AIADMK front. The support of the Nadars, the Devendrakula Velalars, and Christians helped the DMK-led coalition in the South.

Concluding Observations

The Congress party improved the “Strike-rate” hurdle it faced in the past Assembly elections (both in 2011 and 2016) by winning in about 18 of the 25 seats allotted by the DMK. This is only the second time that it registered success rate of 64 per cent

Tamil Nadu is the only state in India which has been ruled by state-level parties either single-handedly or in alliance with the national parties since 1967.

The Dravidian parties also succeeded in developing a perfect system of patronage together with welfare-oriented governance that included entrenched corruption. This helped them to consolidate and remain dominant.

Both the DMK and the AIADMK owe their electoral success to their ability to stitch together a political force the plank of dignity and social justice. Importantly, the two parties have thus far managed to hold the subaltern communities across castes and religions as a bloc despite emergence of frictions between specific communities.

Kamal Haasan’s MNM sought to bring about two changes in the politics of TN. First, the party was focusing on corruption as the cardinal problem of TN, much like the Aam Aadmi Party (AAP) in New Delhi. Second, despite assuming a political stance against the BJP, the MNM also tried to reduce the Dravidian identity to an ethnic one.

Actor-Director Seeman was the surprise pack and his Naam Tamizhar Kutchi (NTK) came third pushing the hugely popular Kamal’s MNM to the fourth position.

NTK seeks to isolate the “Tamil” from the “Dravidian” and construct an identity rooted in Tamil and a politics of purity that marginalises other linguistic groups. Accusing the DMK of abandoning the Tamil cause during the 2009 genocide in Sri Lanka and all things wrong with the state, NTK has managed to gain support among sections of youth.

The Pattali Makkal Kutchi (Toiling People’s Party), whose main strength is the Vanniyars demanded most backward caste status for the group as well as benefits in proportion to their numerical strength. The AIADMK govt in one of the last decisions allowed 10.5 per cent reservation for the vanniayars in government jobs. But that did not give the AIADMK the necessary boost and PMK which contested in 25 seats, ended up getting only five.

The 2021 election saw the DMK-led alliance consolidate its presence among the upper castes, Other

Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and the minorities across the state. The AIADMK-led alliance seemed to have an advantage among the Thevars and Udayars. The Vanniyar vote was split between the alliances and the Nadar vote was split among the two factions of the AIADMK.

Persuing the Verdict in Puducherry

The key battle in the Union Territory was between the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) which included Congress, DMK, CPI, VCK and an independent - and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) consisting of All India NR Congress, BJP and AIADMK.

The man who became the chief minister after the elections, All India N.R. Congress (AINRC) leader N Rangaswamy is known as “people’s CM” due to his popular welfare schemes including free and quality education in government schools, old age pension programme and fee reimbursements for professional and non-professional college students during his earlier tenure.

Rangaswamy’s popularity is such that he holds the record for taking charge as the chief minister of Puducherry within three months of forming his own party. Besides, he is known for his simplicity and is easily accessible as he is often spotted as a commoner at a tea stall in his constituency Thattanchavady.

In his earlier stint, though his track record was largely good, it is said that towards the end of his tenure Rangaswamy suddenly became “unapproachable” for bureaucrats as well as the people of Puducherry, causing indefinite delays in approving and implementing various government schemes.

After the collapse of the UPA government under Mr V Narayanasamy due to defections engineered by the BJP, the road ahead was smooth for the NR Congress.

Compared to the AINRC-led alliance, UPA had a better organisational capability with committees in place at the booth and block levels. But the loss of several MLAs, reportedly with much money flowing in from Delhi coupled with a long face-off with former Lt Governor Kiran Bedi, and anti-incumbency factor led to its rout, ironically in sharp contrast to the scenario in the neighbouring state, Tamil Nadu.

The peculiar nature of Puducherry politics and the size of each assembly seat explains why it is easier for legislators here to shift their loyalties.

On an average, a Puducherry MLA represents about 20,000 to 25,000 voters, which is only as big as an average city corporation ward in India. And, the political transactions here are largely ‘personal’ than ‘political,’ with politicians having a significant personal rapport with people in their smaller localities, mostly based on community and caste factors.

The tiny Union territory has only 30 Assembly constituencies which are scattered across Puducherry (23), Karaikal in Tamil Nadu, Mahe in Kerala and Yanam in Andhra Pradesh. Puducherry has been traditionally a Congress stronghold.

As in Tamil Nadu, where BJP managed an alliance and a control over the ruling AIADMK alliance, it was also the beneficiary in the Puducherry crisis. Two of the four MLAs who resigned from Puducherry Congress joined BJP, including a minister. And, three nominated MLAs in the assembly represented BJP, thanks to the former Lt. Governor Kiran Bedi who nominated them.

What had shaken the status quo in Puducherry politics was undoubtedly the entry of Kiran Bedi as Lt. Governor. Her role was more like a self-styled cop than a Governor. She was often accused of disrupting the governance process by the elected government. While Bedi did not play a direct role in Congress’s crisis, she can be easily held responsible for making the ruling party leaders “tired” and “irritated” with her “policing.” Her actions were often derailing administrative hierarchies, leading to chaos at the top administrative layer.

So, even on a day his government had lost the majority, the news of removal of Bedi as Lt Governor

was a reprieve for Narayansamy. He even called a press conference and announced, “It is a victory for the people of the Union Territory.”

Narayanasamy as the incumbent Chief Minister had waged many battle with the Lt. Governor. To him she was a stumbling block to implement welfare schemes. The tussle between then made his party weak. He knew about his colleagues being approached by agents with huge offers. Some of his close aides in the cabinet were also holding talks with rivals. But he was never aggressive, neither with Bedi nor in handling problems in the party. He was over confident too.

Amidst all these chaos, the central leadership of the congress party turned a blind eye and relied on the Chief Minister’s abilities to win the election battle. Rahul Gandhi made a visit to Puducherry, and tried to put the house in order, but it was too late.

The 2021 election brought some cheer to the BJP as it could extend its rule in South India to Puduhcerry also besides Karnataka.

Incumbency Wave on the Way-Clues from Election Outcomes in Five States in India

**Gopal K. Kadekodi
& S.V. Hanagodimath**

Elections, be they of central or states, are always open portals for citizens to express their faith, trust and expectations of development after elections. In the Indian situation that faith has never lost its steam, be it the Covid-19 period, drought or flood or war situations. The recent elections in five states have demonstrated that power of democracy. Governments come and go; but the outcomes can be viewed for incumbency versus anti-incumbency waves of political parties. This paper addresses this question, using the empirical evidence from these states; provides clues on these, from immediate, last two, three, and ten elections in the past. With some rigorous statistical analyses, it can be inferred that incumbency is re-emerging in three major states-Assam, Kerala and West Bengal on an increasing scale; while continuity of anti-incumbency wave is revealed in Puducherry and Tamil Nadu.

1. Introduction

In an earlier paper published in the Journal: *Social Science in Perspective* the same authors had said: ‘Beauty of democracy is in its voting power’ (Kadekodi and Hanagodimath, 2021). This statement is open now for ‘testing’ on its truth from the recent state elections held during March 27 to April 29, 2021 in five Indian states namely, Assam, Kerala, Puducherry, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. Testing of ‘power of voting’ is all the more relevant when the election period was also marred with continued Covid-19 pandemic all over the country, more intensively during April 2021.

People in a democracy, vote for various reasons. Among the many factors that influence and dominate the attitude and behaviour of the voters the primary one is voting for an incumbency (Ravishankar, 2009; Kumar, 2021; Vaishnav and Lillehaugen, 2018; Rostow, 2021). According to Rostow (2021, pp.1): ‘The last 25 years of Indian democracy have shown that anti-incumbency in state elections is on the decline. This is a positive trend because continuous terms will allow political parties to look beyond single-term policies and focus on long-term development’.

It may be noted that in a democracy several other factors also influence the voting behaviour of people. Grouped directly into four relevant theories, Kadekodi and Hanagodimath (2021, p.171) has identified “psychological cognitive theory of pleasure, pride or self-esteem, or conscious intellectual behavior (Lee, 2013; Christiano, 1995); economic theory of democratically voted majority political parties bringing about economic development and upliftment of social welfare (Jensen and Justesen, 2014; Lewis-Beck and Nadeau, 2011; Debnath and Chatterjee, 2021); political theories of ‘vote bank’, monetary rewards and incumbency (Luca, 2016; Manor, 2008; Persson et al, 2001; Ravishankar, 2009; Gelman and Huang, 2008; Chakrabarti et al., 2021); and Sociological theory of reign based on caste, religion, or sects (Rodrigues, 2018; Assadi, 2013, 2018; Vasavi 2008)’. All these different theories are equally important. But, among them, the political theory of incumbency is most relevant in India today¹.

This paper specifically takes up the question of incumbency in Indian elections, through study of five state election results.

2. Incumbency: Continuing or Declining?

Before taking up the question on incumbency, one can take a look at the trend in the voting percentage in these five states. As can be seen from Table 1 between 2016 and 2021 there have been consistent rates of voting around eighty percentage, with a marginal decline in 2021 in all the five states. It can be very well attributed to the Covid-19 situation in the months of March-April 2021; but not for any loss of trust in the democratic process of the voting power. Therefore, this strong motive power of voting can as well be used for testing the hypotheses on incumbency.

Table 1: Percentage of Actual Pollings during 2016 and 2021

States in Assembly Election	Percentage of Voters Actually Voted		
	2016	2021	Comments
Assam	84.49	81.8	By and large, the results in the five states over the five year time show (a) maintaining the trends in voting rates, (b) though Covid-19 might have dimmed the voting rates, it did not fall drastically.
Kerala	77.10	74.57	
Puducherry	84.03	81.66	
Tamil Nadu	74.24	73.63	
West Bengal	82.66	81.57	

Source: Computed from the data available from <https://eci.gov.in/>

How to measure incumbency? Barooah (2016; p.78) defines in terms of the party which won the constituency in the previous election returning back in the current election as ‘party incumbency’; she also defines ‘candidate incumbency’ as a case of the same candidate returning in the next elections. Since it is extremely difficult to track the candidate incumbency, she attempts to test of ‘party incumbency’ in the Indian parliamentary elections for over 50 years².

Restricting only to ‘party-wise incumbency’ as noticed by several writers, there are evidences of both continuing and declining incumbency attitudes in India, (Aiyer, 2021; Kumar, 2021; Vaishnav and Mathew, 2018; Rostow, 2021; Saikia, 2014; Barooah, 2016; Ravishankar, 2009). Barooah (2016), analyzing parliamentary election results in recent periods, shows the existence of incumbency in one of the two major political parties studied in India; but Saikia (2014) does not find any strong evidence on this in Indian national and state elections between different political parties. However, recent studies by Ravishankar (2009) and Vaishnav and Lillehaugan (2018) come up with a new theory of ‘honeymoon effect’ of state election results. Stated in simple terms, ‘state ruling parties enjoy a ‘honey moon’ period of two years after they are elected into office during which incumbents from their party are more likely to win than other candidates in national elections’ (Ravishankar, 2009, p.98). Put together from these studies, it appears that over the years, the kinds of obligations and loyalties that citizens expect from the elected parties would change, over years and between election periods.

Studies also prompt that as far as the state elections are concerned, it is bit difficult to make at this stage any sweeping statement on either incumbency or anti-incumbency in the Indian state elections, either in a short or in the long run (Aiyer, 2021; Rostow, 2021; Balu and Sarath, 2021; Kumar, 2021).

3. An Overview of 2021 Election Outcomes

In this section a brief statistical analysis of the 2021 election outcomes for the five states is presented, contrasting with the similar results from 2016 elections. Subsequently, a historical trend of past 10 elections in these states is also analysed.

3.1 Assam Results

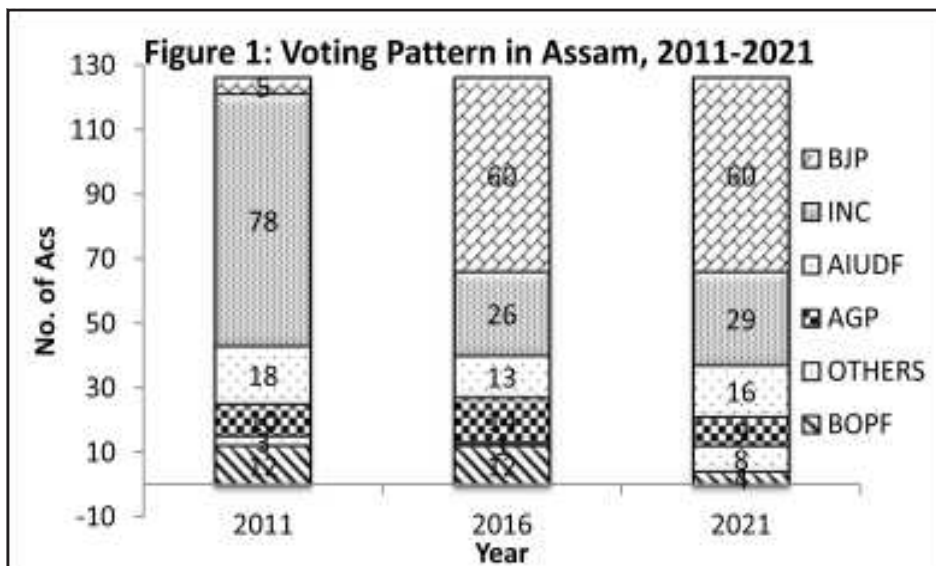
Assam has a long history of United Progressive Alliance (UPA) ruling in the state, since 1978. The same continued till the 2011 state election. Indian National Congress (INC) had alliance with All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), Communist Party of India (CPI) and Bodoland Peoples’ Front (BoPF). The alliance came to power in the 2011 elections by winning a total of 108 out of 126 seats. The trend changed drastically in 2016 when the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Assam Ganatantra Party (AGP) and United Peoples Party Liberal (UPPL) the major partners of National Democratic Alliance (NDA), came to power, winning 86 seats. The trend continued even in the 2021 elections with BJP (winning 60 seats) and its alliance partners together winning 74 seats. INC which was holding a lion’s share in UPA could marginally improve its seat from 26 to 29 seats in 2021 elections. It should be noted that for the UPA group, AGP lost 5 seats from its 2016 outcomes, while snatching 6 seats from BOPF. This continuity is also confirmed statistically³.

BJP’s entry into Assam in a big and stable way needs to be interpreted in the light of the recent political movements there (Kumar, 2021). Since 2019 BJP has been promising the people of Assam, that Citizen’s (Amendment) Act (CAA) of 1955 (as amended in December 2019), and implementing National Registration of Citizen (NRC) of 1955, (amended twice, once in 2003, and again in August 2019) will be implemented.

But strategically the NDA did not use either CAA or NRC as an election agenda. Rather, the incumbency of NDA (or BJP strongly) can at best be attributed to many parties opposing BJP and their allies, thereby splitting the voters; (b) BJP did not highlight playing with a low key on NRC or CAA during election propaganda; rather focused on regional development.

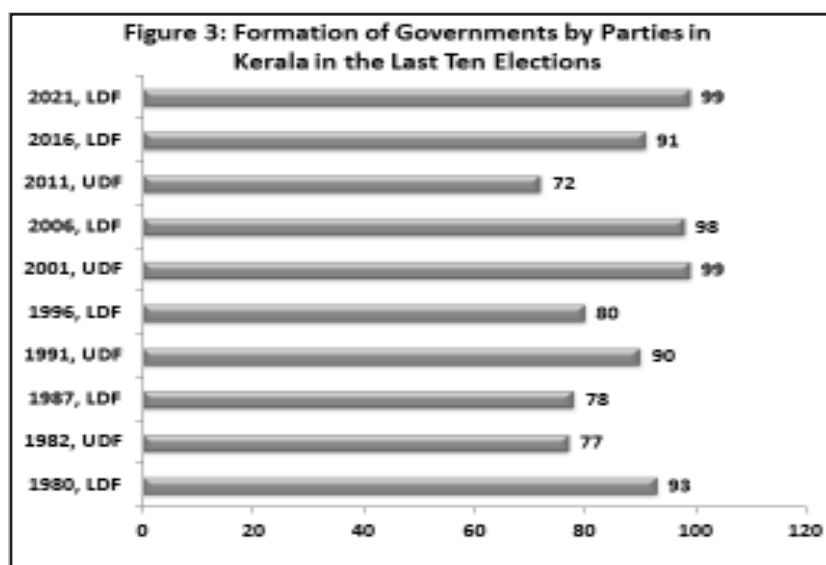
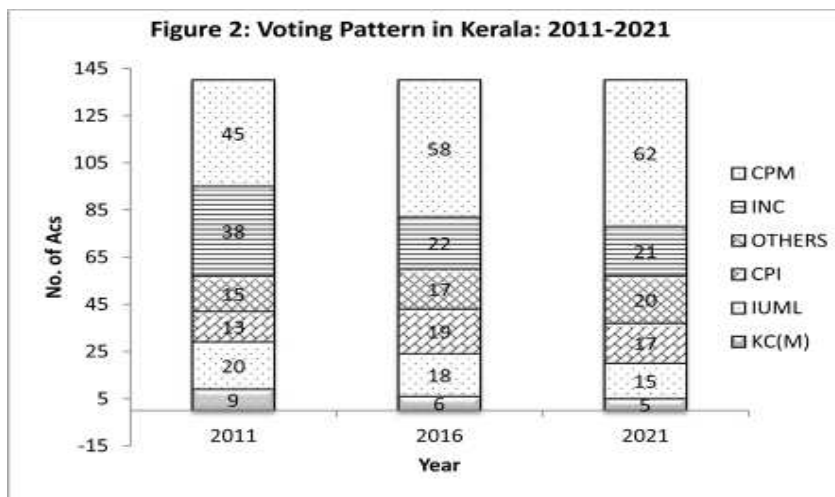
Only the INC and AIDUF took an anti-CAA stance, which did not go home well with majority of the voters. The opposing parties didn’t have a united stand on either NRC or CAA. Most of the smaller regional parties were against the INC as a national party, and the AIDUC as a communal party.

The historical trend in Assam is an exact replica of what was going on in Puducherry (or vice-versa) till 2006. From 1978 till 2011 it was the incumbency play of UPA in Assam; while breaking that trend, came NDA in 2016 elections. However, it is extremely difficult to reason or project these trends in Assam (and also Puducherry) based on the 2021 election outcomes.



Ac=Assembly constituency; Source: Computed from the data available from <https://eci.gov.in/>

3.2 Kerala



Ac=Assembly constituency; Source: Computed from the data available from <https://eci.gov.in/>

Having dealt with severe Covid-19 impacts during 2020, the LDF led Kerala government came back to power smoothly in 2021. The LDF Alliance with major partnership of CPI(M) and CPI won 99 seats as against 91 in 2016. Both the Communist parties together have been consistently securing increasing number of seats; 58 in 2006, 77 in 2016 and now 79 in 2021 elections. This shows a consistent trend, partly attributable to systematically delivering good human development (such as education and health care and gender balance) and handling Covid situation very transparently with decentralization.

The United Democratic Front (UDF) led by INC and Indian Union of Muslim League (IUML), lost several seats yielding to CPM in the 2021 election. The UDF seats reduced to 41 from its 2016 outcomes of 72. All these recent trends reverse the historical trend in Kerala of Anti-incumbency (as can be seen from Figure 2 and 3) in favour of incumbency⁴.

The long historical trend in Kerala has yet another story (See Figure 3). Since 1980's till the 2016 elections, Kerala has always tossed the electoral votes, switching between LDF and UDF (Balu and Sath, 2021; Kumar, 2021). However, such a strong anti-incumbency trend was broken with the LDF holding on to power in 2021. Unlike in the case of Puducherry, in Kerala it was a shift from anti-incumbency tendency to a firm incumbency trend. In the recent elections LDF returned and retained power, not with much resistance from any strong opposition parties. This is attributable to decentralized Covid management impacts,

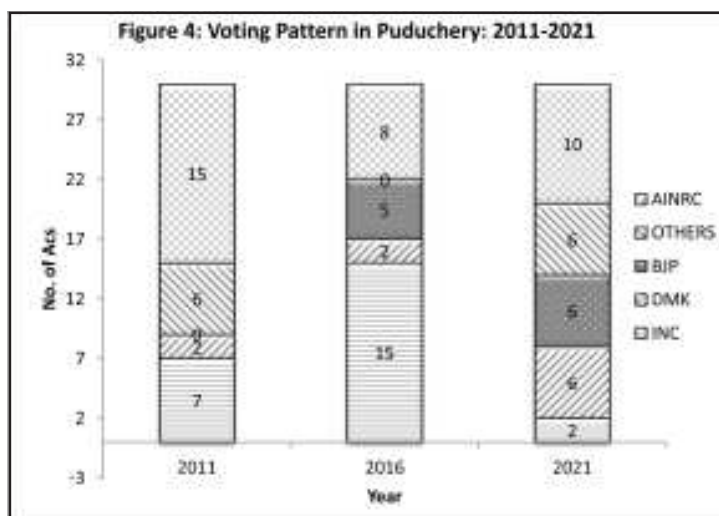
distribution of doses like laptops to students, and putting housing schemes to the poor and such other distributive justice measures (away from neo-liberal models) by the LDF government (Balu and Sarath, 2021). Finally, it is a cultural and regional identity factor of good harmonious life between three major religions- Hindus, Christians and Muslims that is prompting return of incumbency in the state, with possibly no reflections for the future.

3.3 Puducherry

Being a Union territory, and also under President’s Rule during the election time, many political *Pandits* predicted that the central ‘*abhay hasta*’ wave would sweep the floor in Puducherry. Though not swept, All India N R Congress (AINRC) returned to power with a marginal improvement from 8 seats in 2016 to 10 seats in 2021, and with the blessings of BJP with 6 winning seats. For BJP winning in 2021 as against no seats in 2016 is a major entry point, by taking away 6 seats from INC. In a way BJP replaced All India Dravid Munnetra Kazagam (AIDMK) in the state.

The INC, which was a ruling party after 2016 elections with 15 seats and in alliance with Dravid Munnetra Kazagam (DMK) and CPI, performed very badly by retaining only 2 seats in 2021 (not being able to hold even 15% of their original seats). On the other hand, DMK improved its status by securing 6 seats in 2021 as against 2 in 2016. The transition from 2016 to 2021 was the power shift from UPA to NDA⁵ and thereby highlighting the case of anti-incumbency.

The history of elections in Puducherry revealed the existence of strong incumbency from 1980 till 2006 for over 25 years with UPA retaining power. It switched over to NDA in 2011 and again went back to UPA in 2016. This time once more the Union Territory elected the NDA. The reasons for Puducherry giving up incumbency are bit difficult to analyse. A new trend of anti-incumbency seems to be surfacing in Puducherry. Interestingly, both Puducherry and Assam have had similar pattern of incumbency with UPA till 2006; but Puducherry switched over to anti-incumbency since then.

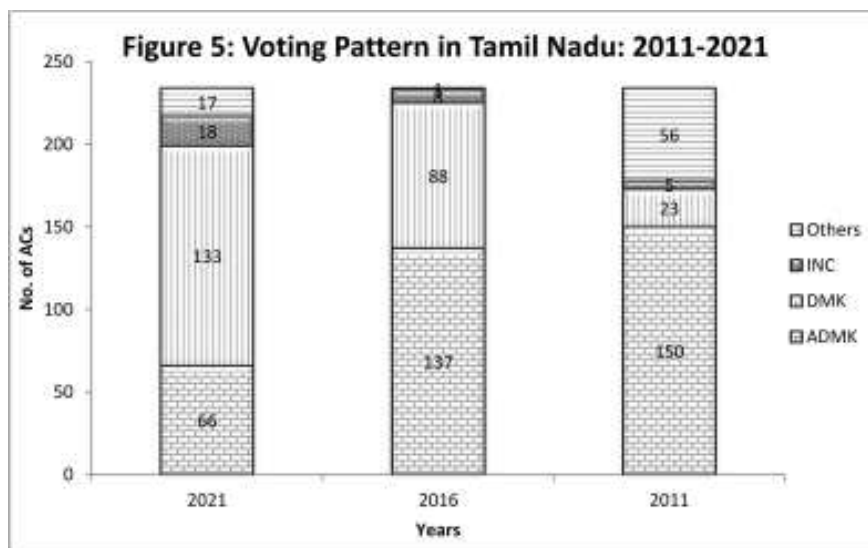


Ac=Assembly constituency; Source: Computed from the data available from <https://eci.gov.in/>

3.4 Tamil Nadu

Tamil Nadu has always been a perfect example of anti-incumbency in theory. During the last ten state elections, All India Anna Dravda Munnetra Kazagam (AIDMK) won and formed the government six times; likewise DMK won four times and formed the government (see Table 2 for some details). Also, often than elsewhere, it has been a reflective mirror of the political wave in the Centre. Whenever the central government was ruled by the UPA alliance (as was the case during 1980, 1984, 1991 and 2001), it was AIDMK that came to power with support from INC. Likewise DMK came to power during 1996 (with support from UF of Janata Dal) and in 2006 with UPA support.

In the 2021 election, DMK in alliance with UPA came to power after winning 133 out of a total of 234 seats. For DMK it was increase from 88 seats in 2016 elections to 133 in 2021. Similar reversal took place for AIDMK winning only 66 seats in 2021 as against 137 in the 2016 elections. Apart from this massive switch, most other outcomes were on expected lines. The transition between 2016 and 2021 shows such a shift with a very high probability⁶.



Ac=Assembly constituency; Source: Computed from the data available from <https://eci.gov.in/>

In recent elections, one notices loss of popularity of AIDMK as viewed from the 2011 to 2021 election. It is to be noted that the regional parties are becoming more and more independent of central rulers; in 2011 AIDMK came to power with support from its regional alliances (and not from New Delhi), in 2016 AIDMK gained power on its own and in 2021 DMK with support from INC (which is not in power in New Delhi).

Table 2: Formation of Governments by the Parties in Tamil Nadu during the Last Ten Elections

Year and Party	Constituencies (Won with Alliance)	Ratio (%) of Main Party/Total Seats won
1980, AIADMK+INC	162	80
1984, AIADMK+INC	195	68
1989, DMK alone	150	100
1991, AIADMK+INC	225	73
1996, DMK+UF (led by Janata Dal)	221	78
2001, AIADMK+INC	196	67
2006, DMK+DPA+UPA	163	59
2011, AIADMK+ Regional alliance	203	74
2016, AIADMK alone	135	100
2021, DMK+INC+ Others	159	84

Source: Computed from the data available from <https://eci.gov.in/>

3.5 West Bengal

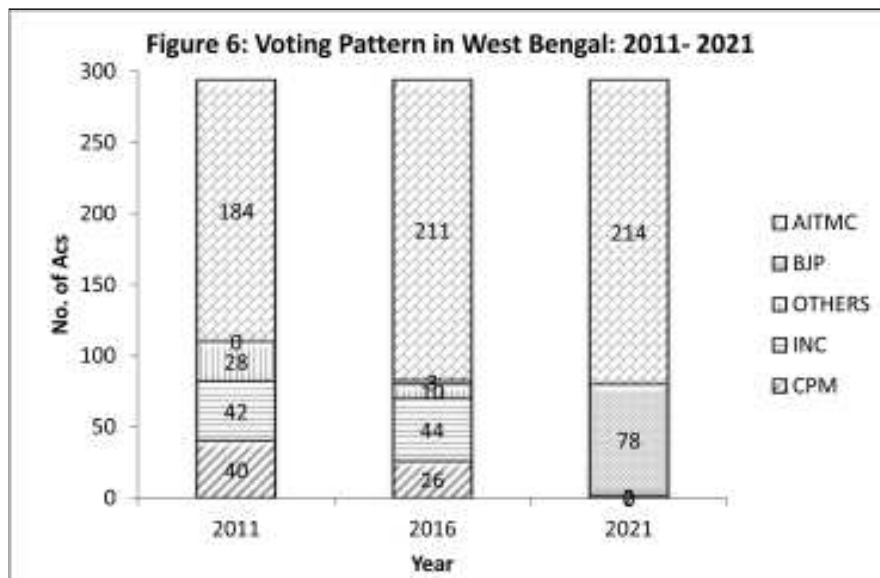
In West Bengal the major parties in fray were the All India Trinamul Congress (AITMC), CPI (M), BJP, INC and several others (including RSP). In the elections, welfare programmes, party leaders' populism,

pride of Bengal versus centres hegemony and Hindutva versus secularism can be considered as the major drivers (Debnath and Chatterjee, 2021). The then ruling AITMC in 2016 returned to power in 2021. Though labeled as an all India party, for all functional aspects, it thrives on regional factors such as clientage and supply of local public goods (Bardhan et al., 2014). AITMC secured 214 seats against 211 seats won in 2016. Out of these are as many as 159 seats (about 75%) retained from its 2016 winning seats. Their nearest competitor BJP stole away 49 of the 2016 AITMC seats. But, AITMC's equally important gain was taking away of 20 seats from CPM and 21 from INC, making both the national parties totally irrelevant in the state. Distinctly, BJP and AITMC had different approaches to face the election.

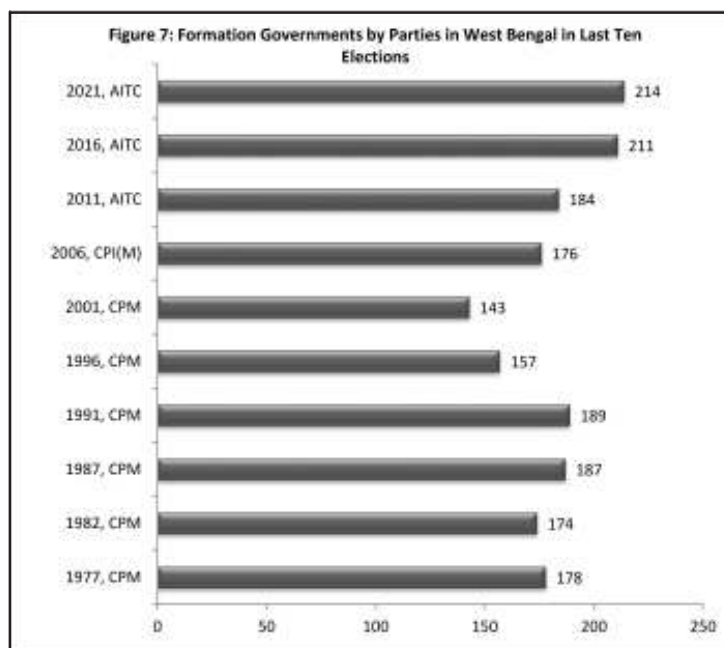
AITMC's tactics of welfare populism combined with addressing to all castes and classes, Hindus and Muslims alike, and balancing urban with rural focus yielded stronger returns (Debnath and Chatterjee, 2021). It can also be said that it was the nearness of the leader within the state, local and regional developments for all sections of people including the younger generation, regional pride, Bengal identity and religious harmony, and a strong anti-CAA stand, that helped AITMC to retain incumbency. As can be seen from Annexure Figure 6 one finds some degree of influence of these in AITMC party's continuity in the three election outcomes⁷.

From 2011 to 2021 elections West Bengal has clearly demonstrated incumbency of a very consistently high degree. In the 2011 elections AITMC came to power for the first time with a total winning of 184 seats. There was no threat then either from BJP (with no seats), nor from INC or CPI(M) with 42 and 40 seats respectively.

A long term view on incumbency should also be made. As can be seen from the pattern the CPI(M) led coalition was reelected to office many times from 1977. The long run was cut short for the first time in 2011 elections when the AITMC came to power. In the 2021 election they were reelected. West Bengal experienced sustained long term incumbency. Though long term sustained incumbency is the *Mantra* in the state, it would be difficult to predict the future.



Ac=Assembly constituency; Source: Computed from the data available from <https://eci.gov.in/>



Source: Computed from the data available from <https://eci.gov.in/>

4. What do we have on Incumbency in India from 2021 elections?

The five state election outcomes throw up several postulates about incumbency or anti-incumbency in India. The table below summarizes their performances listed 'under Incumbency or Anti-Incumbency'.

Table 3: Comparative Politics of Incumbency Vs Anti-Incumbency in India

States	Between 1978 (or 1980) & 2006	2011	2016 & 2021	Comments
Assam	Incumbency with UPA		Incumbency with NDA	Kerala and Puducherry seem to be showing the reversals of one from the other over the years. Strong Anti-Incumbency
Kerala	Anti-Incumbency between LDF and UDF		Incumbency with LDF	
Puducherry	Incumbency with UPA	Anti-Incumbency with NDA and UPA		
Tamil Nadu	Anti-Incumbency switching between AIDMK and DMK			
West Bengal	Incumbency with CPM and CPI	Incumbency with AITMC		

Source: Computed from the data available from <https://eci.gov.in/>

A close look at Table 3 does not suggest the prevalence of any universal political wave in India in the form of Incumbency or Anti-incumbency. Second, one gets the general impression that in the early elections of 1980's, it was incumbency which was the political *Mantra* in India. Understandable from those Nehruvian era with focus on development, poverty eradication, regional harmony and balance, and many such national goals, people voted in favour of incumbency as an avenue to reach the deliveries of economic and social developments. In the early incumbency periods, 'voters' lethargy as a major psychological factor, was also attributed as a reason (Vaishnav and Lillehaugan, 2018) for continuation of incumbency. With more and more difficult and different coalitions in place, in the course of time, this faith and trust on 'development as delivered' withered away among the Indian voters. Third, except for Puducherry and Tamil Nadu in the

remaining three states, Incumbency seems to have surfaced once again since 2011, more often labeled to regional factors. Fourth, going by the length of incumbency, Assam seems to be on top, while anti-incumbency tops in Tamil Nadu over the last 30 years.

Voters in India perhaps still believe that ‘a bird in hand is better than two in the bush’. That is why there is an increasing trend for looking for local or regional parties to come back again and again. In any case, the faith in ‘voting power’ has not diminished, be it during the Covid or draught or flood situation.

This research however, does not predict or propose any specific political *mantra* on incumbency or anti-incumbency as a general tendency for future elections in India. But the tendency of returning to incumbency seems to be the current wave⁸.

Notes

1. Kadekodi and Hanagodimath (2021, p.170) concluded that in Karnataka elections, among other things, ‘voting for development in surfacing fast in Karnataka as an attitude, incumbency is giving up the way, partly retaining historical caste and money power latitudes’.
But Rostow (2021) has altogether stronger views only on ‘anti-incumbency’.
2. One can further add a third category as ‘Deep incumbency’, to mean both the party and the same candidate returning in subsequent elections. There are several other types of incumbency measures. For instance ‘a sitting member seeking re-election has an ‘incumbency advantage’ (with back up of her/his revealed ideology, financial support from the political party and so on. See Gelman and Haung (2008)
3. See Annexure - 1
4. See Annexure - 2
5. See Annexure - 3
6. See Annexure - 4
7. See Annexure - 5
8. This conclusion widely agrees with the position taken by Rostow (2021).

References

1. Aiyar, SA (2021): ‘Anti-incumbency may spur state election surprises’, *Times of India*, in Swaminomics, April 3, 2021.
2. Assadi, Muzaffar (2013): ‘Karnataka Assembly Elections Return of the AHINDA’, *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. XLVIII No 35, August 31, 2013 p.16-16
3. Assadi, Muzaffar (2018): ‘Karnataka paradox’, *Frontline*, June 08, 2018
4. Balu, Sunilraj and Sarath Sasikumar (2021): ‘Kerala Elections 2021’, Commentary, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Commentary, Vol. 56, Issue No. 22, 29 May, 2021
5. Bardhan, Pranab, Sandip Mitra, Dilip Mookherjee, and 6. Anusha Nath (2014): ‘Changing Voting Patterns in Rural West Bengal: Role of Clientelism and Local Public Goods’, *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. XLIX, No. 11, March 15. p. 54-62
7. Barooah, Vani K (2016): *Votes, Parties and Seats: A quantitative analysis of Indian Parliamentary elections: 1962-2014*, Palgrave Macmillan, UK.
8. Bohman, James (1998): Survey Article: The Coming of Age of Deliberative Democracy’, *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 6, No.4, p. 400-425

9. Bohman, James (1998): Survey Article: The Coming of Age of Deliberative Democracy', *The Journal of Political Philosophy*, Vol. 6, No.4, p.400-425
10. Borooah, Vani (2006): Incumbency and Parliamentary Elections in India, University of Ulster, 2006, Online at <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/19420/> MPRA Paper No. 19420, posted 25 Dec 2009 23:38 UTC
11. Chakrabarti, Rajesh, Shubhashis Gangopadhyay, and Shagun Krishnan, (2021): *Incumbency Effects in Indian Elections – A Preliminary Exploration*, India Development Foundation, 2021 Monograph.
12. Christiano, Thomas (1995): 'Voting and democracy', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 25, No. 3, p.395-414
13. Debnath, Kumal and Souvik Chatterjee (2021): 'Populism in Electoral Politics: What We Learnt from the West Bengal Assembly Elections 2021', *Academia Letters*, Article 2855. <https://doi.org/10.20935/AL2855>.
14. Dutta, Prabhasj K (2021): '5 big takeaway from 5 assembly elections', *India Today*, May 2, 2021
15. EPW Engage (2019): 'Identity politics not the evil it is made out to be' May 6, 2019
16. Gelman, Andrw and Zaiying Huang (2008): 'Estimating Incumbency Advantage and Its Variation, as an Example of a Before–After Study', *Journal of the American Statistical Association* June 2008, Vol. 103, No. 482, Applications and Case Studies, DOI 10.1198/016214507000000626
17. Government of India, Election Commission (2004): *Proposed Election Reforms*, Publication Division, New Delhi
18. Jensen, Peter Sandholt and Mogens K Justesen (2014): 'Poverty and vote buying: Survey- based evidence from Africa', *Electoral Studies*, 33, p.220-232
19. José, Alexandre da Silva Junior, Leonardo Rodrigues Morais, Ranulfo Paranhos, Albany Ferreira Lima (2020): 'The Presence of Incumbents Electoral Competition and Reelection in Brazil (1990-2014)', *Brazilian Political Science Review*, Vol. 14 (1), <http://doi.org/10.1590/1981-3821202000010003>, 36 pages
20. Kadekodi, Gopal K and S V Hanagodimath (2015): 'Does Development Motivate More to Vote?', *Economic and Political Weekly*, May 2, 2015 Vol. 1 no 18 ;p.47-57
21. Kadekodi, Gopal K and S V Hanagodimath (2021): 'Transition from Incumbency to Development: Voting Behaviour in Karnataka, India', *Social Science in Perspective*, Vol. 13, No. 2, p.169-190
22. Kashwan, Prakash (2014): 'Botched-up development and electoral politics in India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLIX, No. 34, p. 48-55.
23. Kumar, Sanjiv (2021): 'What data tells us about incumbency in India?', *The MINT*, 19th August 2021.
24. Lee, Alexander (2016): 'Incumbency, Parties, and Legislatures: Theory and Evidence from India', *Comparative Politics*, Volume 52, Number 2, January 2020, pp. 311-331 (21), <https://doi.org/10.5129/001041520X15679432647751>
25. Lee, Dwight R (2013): 'Do the poor vote their self-interest?', <http://www.econlib.org/library/columns/y2013/Letransfers.html>, viewed on 07-07-2014` 23
26. Lewis-Beck, Michale Steven and Richard Nadeau (2011): 'Economic voting theory: Testing new dimensions', *Electoral Studies*, 30, p. 288-294
27. Luca, Davide (2016): 'Votes and regional economic growth: evidence from Turkey', *World Development*, 78, p. 477-495

28. Manor, James (2008): 'Letting a winnable election slip away: Congress in Karnataka', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLIII, No. 47, p. 23-28
29. Persson, Torsten, Guido Tabellini, Francesco Trebbi (2001): Electoral Rules and Corruption, NBER Working Paper 8154, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w8154> (downloaded on October 2, 2018)
30. Ravishankar, Nirmala (2009) : 'The Cost of Ruling: Anti-Incumbency in Elections', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 44, Issue No. 10, 07 Mar, 2009
31. Rodrigues, Varian (2018): 'Changing contours of the political regions of Karnataka', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. LIII, No. 22, p. 10-11
32. Rostow, Richard (2021): 'The quiet decline of anti-incumbency', *Gateways House*, February, 24
33. Saikia, Aranyak (2014): 'A Look at the Economics behind BJP's Victory', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLIX, No. 29, July 19, p. 24-26
34. Tamang, Leena Rikkila (2021): 'Assam, West Bengal, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Puduchery: Indian State Assembly Elections Keep Flame of Democracy Burning', Institute for Democracy And Electoral Assistance (IDEA), Australia, 12th April 2021
35. Vaishnav, Milan and Mathew Lillehaugan (2018): 'Incumbency in India: Or Curse than Blessing?', Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, NY., August 18, 2018
36. Vasavi, A R (2008): 'Caste, Capital and Captaincy in the Karnataka Elections', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XLII, No. 24, June 14, p. 10-11

Annexure

Annexure 1 : Assam's Election Transition Matrix: 2016-2021

The table below shows the movement of winning seats between political parties during the two elections. The matrix representation shows the transition between two election outcomes. In 2016, out of the total of 126 seats, NDA alliance of BJP had a share of 60, followed by its partner AGP with 14; UPA alliance, with 26 seats for INC, 13 for AIUDF and 12 for BOPF. This trend transited in 2021 elections with BJP retailing 60 seats, AGP with 9. This continuity in transition is also confirmed statistically. A statistical test on this transition of the Assam election outcomes between 2016 and 2021 yields no evidence about the transition to be independent of the previous outcome. A Pearson Chi-square value of 137.00 with 9 DF is significant at 1% level of significance (two tailed test), thereby rejecting the hypothesis of independence. A Pearson correlation between the two outcomes of 0.96 reflects that there was indeed a continuation of power between the two elections.

Table 1: Assam: Transition from 2016 to 2021 Election Outcomes

Party and Years		2021						TOTAL
		AGP	AIUDF	BOPF	BJP	INC	Others	
2016	AGP	8	0	0	5	1	0	14
	AIUDF	0	9	0	0	4	0	13
	BOPF	0	0	4	2	0	6	12
	BJP	1	2	0	47	9	1	60
	INC	0	5	0	5	15	1	26
	Others	0	0	0	1	0	0	1
	TOTAL	9	16	4	60	29	8	126

Source: Computed from the data available from <https://eci.gov.in/>

Annexure 2: Kerala's Election Transition Matrix: 2016-2021

The table below shows the movement of winning seats between political parties between two election years 2016 and 2021. In 2016 elections, Kerala's LDF alliance had a clear majority of 77 seats, with CPI and CPM sharing 19 and 58 seats respectively. The trend remained the same in 2021 election outruns with seats shares of 17 and 62 respectively.

Table 2: Kerala: Transition from 2016 to 2021 Election Outcomes

Party and Years		2021					
		CPI	CPI(M)	INC	IUML	Other	Total
2016	CPI	17	0	2	0	0	19
	CPM	0	52	4	0	2	58
	INC	0	6	15	0	1	22
	IUML	0	3	0	14	1	18
	Other	0	1	0	1	21	23
	Total	17	62	21	15	25	140

Source: Computed from the data available from <https://eci.gov.in/>

A statistical test on this transition of Kerala election outcomes between 2016 and 2021 yields no evidence about the transition to be independent. A strong value of Pearson Chi-square of 377.24 is significant at 1% level of significance (two tailed test with 16 DF), thereby rejecting the hypothesis of independence. A further 'Paired t-test' also indicates that the two election outcomes are quite similar. A Pearson correlation between the two outcomes of 0.99 reflects strong continuity between the two election outcomes-in favour of LDF.

Annexure 3: Puduchery's Election Transition Matrix: 2016-2021

The table below shows the movement of winning seats between political parties in Puduchery between two election years, 2016 and 2021.

Table 3: Puduchery's Election Transition Matrix: from 2016 to 2021

Party and Years		2021					Total
		AINRC	BJP	DMK	INC	IND	
2016	AIDMK	0	0	3	0	1	4
	AINRC	6	1	0	0	1	8
	DMK	0	0	1	0	1	2
	INC	4	5	2	1	3	15
	IND	0	0	0	1	0	1
	Total	10	6	6	2	6	30

Source: Computed from the data available from <https://eci.gov.in/>

A statistical test on this transition of the Puducherry election outcomes between 2016 and 2021 yields no evidence about the transition to be independent. A Pearson Chi-square value of 34.11 is significant at 1% level of significance (two tailed test with 16 DF), thereby rejecting the hypothesis of independence. A Pearson correlation between the two outcomes of (-)0.68 reflects that there was indeed a switch of the parties between the two elections.

Annexure 4: Tamil Nadu's Election Transition Matrix: 2016-2021

The table below shows the movement of winning seats between political parties in Tamil Nadu between two election years, 2016 and 2021.

Table 4: Tamil Nadu: Transition from 2016 to 2021 Election Outcomes

Party and Years		2021				
		ADMK	DMK	INC	Other	Total
2016	ADMK	51	67	11	8	137
	DMK	14	64	1	9	88
	INC	0	2	6	0	8
	Other	1	0	0	0	1
	Total	66	133	18	17	234

Source: Computed from the data available from <https://eci.gov.in/>

A statistical test on this transition of the Tamil Nadu election outcomes between 2016 and 2021 does not show any evidence of independence, but rather a negative reversal trend. A Pearson Chi-square value of 74.40 with 9 DF is significant at 1% level of significance (two tailed test). A Pearson correlation between the two outcomes reflects that there was indeed a switch between political forces.

Annexure 5: West Bengal's Election Transition Matrix: 2016-2021

The table below shows the movement of winning seats between political parties between two election years, 2016 and 2021.

Table 5: West Bengal: Transition from 2016 to 2021 Election Outcomes

Party and Year		2021				
		AITC	BJP	INC	Others	Total
2016	AITC	161	49	0	1	211
	BJP	1	2	0	0	3
	INC	29	15	0	0	44
	Others	23	12	0	1	36
	Total	214	78	0	2	294

Notes: Others Includes RSSCMJP, AIFB, RSP, CPI, CPM, GOJAM, IND.; Source: Computed from the data available from <https://eci.gov.in/>

A statistical test on this transition matrix of their outcomes between 2016 and 2021 yields no evidence about the transitions to be independent. A Pearson Chi-square value of 37.87 is significant at 1% level of significance (two tailed test with 12 DF), thereby rejecting the hypothesis of independence. A further 'Paired t-test' also indicates that the two election outcomes are quite similar. A Pearson correlation between the two outcomes of 0.87 reflects a high degree of follow ups between the two elections.

Challenging the Meta Narrative of European Naval Supremacy

Saurav Kumar Rai

Anirudh Deshpande and Muphid Mujawar, *The Rise and Fall of a Brown Water Navy: Sarkhel Kanhoji Angre and Maratha Sea Power on the Arabian Sea in the 17th and 18th Centuries*, Aakar, New Delhi, 2021, 160 pages, Rs. 395/-

Local histories, like micro histories, put bigger historical generalizations to a severe test. Here is a perfect example of such local history published in the form of a small book by Anirudh Deshpande and Muphid Mujawar. This book successfully challenges the deeply ingrained notions about European naval supremacy in early modern times. It uncovers the story of an eighteenth century Maratha Sarkhel (Admiral) Kanhoji Angre who is perhaps little known outside Maharashtra. Commanding an influential brown water navy, Angre not only overpowered the English and the Portuguese in the Arabian Sea, but also forced the central Maratha authority including the Peshwas to recognize his semi-sovereign authority over the Konkan coast.

The book has been neatly divided into seven chapters including the 'Introduction'. Broadly speaking, the chapters talk about the major sea powers active on the Arabian Sea in the age of mercantilism (pp. 41-57), making of a brown water navy by the Marathas (pp. 58-68) and the key role played by Kanhoji Angre in this process including his military and diplomatic acumen (pp. 69-116). Besides, the authors also explicate well upon some of the key terms related to maritime history such as 'piracy', 'privateer', 'sea power', etc. which assist the readers to grasp the finer nuances of these terms.

We are all well aware about the authority which the Portuguese commanded over the high sea in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which was followed by the English in the subsequent centuries. However, closer to the coasts, the big blue water ships of the Portuguese and the English suffered strategic disadvantage. It was here that the indigenous brown water navies of the Mughals and the Marathas thrived forcing the European trading companies to come to terms with the indigenous powers. Kanhoji Angre not only compelled the Europeans to recognize him as a major force along the Konkan coast, but also insisted on buying 'dastak' issued by him for smooth trading operations. *Dastak* was an indigenous version of sea-pass or trade license designed on the line of the Portuguese *cartaz*. However, the European trading companies considering themselves as the masters of sea consistently frowned upon any such system of sea-pass being issued by an Indian power. This soon became a bone of contention between the European trading companies and Kanhoji. In this tussle, Kanhoji emerged as undisputed victor bringing down the European companies to their knees on more than one occasion.

Nevertheless, the Europeans in their records were not ready to recognize Kanhoji and subsequently his successors, as more than pirates. Incidentally, this colonial portrayal of the exploits of the Angre family has been substantiated more recently by Hollywood when the famous series of fantasy swashbuckler films, *Pirates of Caribbean*, referred to the character of Sambhaji Angre (son and successor of Kanhoji Angre) as one among the leading pirates of the world. The aforesaid Hollywood series deems Sambhaji Angre as the 'Pirate Lord of the Indian Ocean' and 'Terror of the Arabian Sea'. This book not only successfully overthrows

the aforesaid colonial portrayal of Kanhoji Angre and his family, but also moves a step ahead of the nationalist rendering of Angre by situating him in his political time and space.

Eschewing the tendency of hero-worship which is common these days while dealing with the Maratha warriors, Deshpande and Mujawar exquisitely delineate the continuously changing power equations of the period between 1789 (following the death of Shivaji) and 1856, and locate the rise and fall of the house of Angre within these equations. Here it is interesting to note that Tulaji Angre, the last Sarkhel in the lineage of the Angre family, was defeated by the combined forces of the Peshwa Balaji Baji Rao and the English East India Company. In fact, in early 1755, it was the Peshwa Balaji Baji Rao who sent three letters to Governor Bouchier of Bombay offering a treaty against Tulaji (p. 139). This reveals the futility of any binary categorization of 'foreign' vs. 'indigenous' in understanding the power politics of the eighteenth century. Thus, besides being an obvious treat for those fascinated with the Maratha history and its 'unsung' warriors, it is a must read for those who want to understand the real political texture of the eighteenth century India which is beyond any binary understanding and grand theoretical generalizations.

Assam Assembly Elections 2021: Themes, Issues and Debates

Jayanta Krishna Sarmah
& Parimita Bhuyan

The complexity of Assam's political discourse merits a study of the Assembly Elections, 2021. The aim of the paper is to provide an overview of the recently held Assam Assembly Elections: to identify the major themes and thereby, to understand the prime issues and debates that have influenced the electoral verdict. The identification of the themes and the subjects of the Assam Assembly Elections, 2021 are carried out with reference to the determinants of voting behavior as social identity, party loyalty, social protection, rational calculation of voters and so on. The paper is qualitative in nature and based on the information collected from secondary sources. The authors have tried to put forward their own arguments.

The establishment of India as a democratic republic since its independence from the colonial rule mandated the provision of conducting free and fair elections at regular intervals. This democratic compulsion of holding elections at regular intervals becomes an issue of serious concern in the midst of COVID-19 pandemic that emerged in India since the beginning of 2020. However, the Election Commission of India (ECI) instructed the holding of Assembly Elections in various states of India in the midst of the pandemic and this has invited academic debates highlighting the responsibility/irresponsibility of ECI (Roy and Singh, 2021) in the midst of pandemic. The Assembly Elections are conducted in various states and the election results have revealed how prioritization of issues by the electorate differs from state to state within the territory of India. The Assam Assembly Election, 2021 reinstated the BJP led NDA government to power and in this connection, there arises the need to entertain an in-depth analysis of the recent Assembly election in Assam. The paper is an attempt to provide an overview of the Assam Assembly Election, 2021: to identify the major themes and thereby, to understand the main issues that have influenced the recent Assembly Elections in Assam.

The Assam Assembly Election, 2021 have primarily denoted the rivalry between two coalitions; namely: the BJP-led Mitrajot (Alliance of Friends) and the Indian National Congress (INC)-led or Congress-led Mahajot (Grand Alliance). The BJP-led alliance could accommodate significant parties within its ambit: AsomGana Parishad (AGP), the party that has been projecting itself as the one committed to the cause of Assamese regionalism; the United People's Party Liberal (UPPL) that is functional in Bodoland and the Gana Suraksha Party (GSP). The Congress-led alliance, apart from the INC, has accommodated within itself All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF), Communist Party of India (Marxist), Bodoland People's Front (BPF) and others. The BJP alone has managed to win 60 seats; while its alliance partners AGP and UPPL have won nine seats and six seats respectively. On the other side, the INC proved its dominance over 29 seats, AIUDF managed to win 16 seats, the BPF registered victory in four seats and finally, CPI (M) somehow managed to grab one seat for itself. The anti-CAA sentiments in Assam provided the fertile ground for the formation of two new regional political parties to contest in the Assembly elections, 2021: Assam Jatiya Parishad (AJP) and Raijor Dal (RD). The electoral strategy of ethnic mobilization could not work in favour of the AJP and the party could not win a single constituency. The RD in a bold tone refused to enter into any alliance and with jailed Akhil Gogoi as the contesting candidate won one seat. Precisely, the BJP-led alliance retained political power in Assam and formed government with a new Chief Minister named Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma, the one adorned as a great political strategist in Assam.

Models of Voting Behaviour: Themes and Issues

The identification of the themes and issues of the recent Assembly Elections in Assam, necessitates reference to the explanatory models of voting behavior; namely: the sociological model, the political identification model; the rational choice model and finally, the patronage-based model or clientelistic relationship in voting behaviour. The sociological model believes that voting behavior is determined by the moulding of a distinctive social identity (Peele, 2004); while, the party identification model, believes in long term loyalty of the voters towards a particular party and stress on their continual voting towards the party (Peele, 2004). The understanding of voting as a calculated effort by the voter, based on voters' perception of own life and well-being, is highlighted by the rational choice model (Himmelweit, Humphreys, Jaegerandkatz, 1981). Finally, the clientelist model holds that the politicians ('patrons') influence the voting behavior of its 'clients' through selective and informal incentives and entitlements. The provision for entitlements in exchange of votes distinguishes the Clientelist model from the social welfare or programmatic politics where "delivery of public services to citizens is not conditioned on their political support" (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2017). In the context of programmatic politics, the social protection and social security policies are based on rule-based eligibility criteria and benefits under them are not conditioned by political support of the voters. The existing studies in voting behavior in the context of India, suggests that rather than being driven by a politics of identity and patron-clientelism; electoral politics in India is being reshaped by development agendas and performance targets (Manor, 2010; Thachil, 2010; taken from CSDA study of voting behavior in South Africa, 2014). However, some other studies prove that even with development-oriented and welfare agendas, the role of caste and region is central in electoral politics in India (De Neve and Carswell, 2011; taken from CSDA study of voting behavior in South Africa, 2014).

The electoral politics of Assam has incorporated within itself complex dynamics and it becomes difficult to situate the voting behavior of its people within a particular model. The greater mobilization of ethnic identity since late 1970s and following this, the formation of a political party on ethnic lines namely AGP clarifies the moulding of a distinctive social identity. The role of religion as a prominent determinant of voting behaviour was not significant in Assam before the appearance of AUDF (later on AIUDF), as the United Minority Front got collapsed and BJP was not significant in Assam politics till 2014. The idea of identification of a group of voters towards a particular party has faced an inevitable decline in Assam, as the tea tribe community that has consistently served as historic bastions of the Congress has withdrawn their support since 2014. The recent Assembly Elections in Assam has revealed the operations of a range of factors: particularly, the intertwining of social determinants with rational choice criteria as well as the stronghold of social grant regime. The authors have referred to the models of voting behavior in the course of providing detailed analysis of the various themes of Assam Assembly elections, 2021. The role of various factors in determining voting behaviour: social determinants, party loyalty, rational calculation of voters, along with the effect of social grants find reference in the paper.

Beneficiary Regime under BJP: Welfarist Politics

The beneficiary regime shaped by the BJP, with the formation and implementation of a range of welfare policies, facilitated the creation of strong support base for the party among various social groups in Assam as women, youths, tea tribes and so on. The adoption of these policies in one or two years before election as well as the temporary relief provided by the schemes in the situation of COVID pandemic generated a sense of trust among the people of Assam towards BJP. In this connection reference may be made of the Arunodoi scheme, launched on 2nd October, 2020 by the Government of Assam promising financial assistance of Rs. 830 per month through Direct Benefit Transfer to around 17 lakh families in the state in order to fulfill their basic needs (<https://assam.gov.in./scheme>). The pro-poor scheme promises socio-economic inclusion of families with composite household income of less than Rs. two lakh per annum (Guidelines, Government of Assam, 2020) and particularly targets female members of the household as the prime beneficiary. In addition to this, the BJP during its tenure has encouraged the provisions of micro-credit and

other SHG based livelihood initiatives as Deen Dayal Antyodaya Yojana-National Rural Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NRLM). The stress on socio-economic empowerment of women through micro-credit was stressed by previous regimes also; nevertheless, the pressure associated with these initiatives prevented the generation of blooming popularity in favour of the previous governments. The BJP in its election campaigns promised waiving of loans of micro-finance loans and thereby, generated huge support for it particularly among rural women. The other vulnerable sections as widows, unmarried women, old age people and others are also accommodated within the beneficiary regime under the provisions of financial assistance or pensions. Precisely, the provision of fulfilling basic needs of vulnerable families in a pandemic situation, along with its pro-women orientation, has helped the BJP to create legitimacy among the vast populace.

The construction and shaping up of a beneficiary regime, in some instances, has helped the BJP to transport and accommodate new social groups within its fold. The penetration of BJP into the tea tribes commenced with the committed efforts of various BJP backed organizations along with the establishment of EkalVidyalyayas in these areas (Dutta, 2019; Bhattacharyya, 2019). The adoption of schemes on social grant has helped the BJP to achieve new heights in accommodating the tea tribe community into its fold. The launching of schemes as Chai Bagicha Dhan Puraskar Mela in 2017-18 helped the “co-opting of the tea tribes” by the BJP (Dutta, 2019) in Parliamentary elections of 2019 and the ceremonial distribution of the third phase of the scheme by Finance Minister in 2021 added to its advantage in Assembly election of 2021. The scheme in the third phase, under the objective of “financial inclusion” of tea garden labourers is to credit Rs. 3000 to all opened accounts of labourers and thereby, promises to benefit around 7.5 lakh tea garden labourers. Earlier in phase I and II, the scheme encouraged the opening up of bank accounts by the tea garden labourers and under various installments the state government has credited amount in bank accounts of 6,58,250 tea garden workers (<https://sarkariyojana.com/chah-bagicha-dhan-puraskar-mela/>). Precisely, the party identification model that traditionally operated in the case of tea-tribes got challenged and simultaneously, politics centered on extended social grant has added a new dimension to the voting behavior of tea-tribes of Assam.

The creation of entrepreneurial spirit among the youths of Assam through financial assistance constitutes a significant aspect of the beneficiary regime created by the BJP in the years before election. The launching of the Swami Vivekananda Assam Youth Empowerment (SVAYEM) scheme in 2017 "to provide financial assistance to the youth of Assam to take up income generating activities in the manufacturing, trading and service sector" is an important initiative in this regard (<https://industries.assam.gov.in>). However, in 2020 the scheme has been “rejuvenated to meet the current situation and the needs of society” and placed under the State Finance Department, Government of Assam (<https://assam.gov.in/scheme-page/264>). The wide coverage of beneficiaries by the scheme: members of SHGs, joint liability groups, micro and small businesses and others; assisted the BJP to manage support of a substantive number of youth population.

The beneficiary regime created by the BJP and the welfare policies that lie at its core, are somehow motivated by populist designs. However, the rule-bound eligibility criteria attached to the schemes, their implementation in a largely corruption-free manner (provision for direct transfer) and the wide coverage of beneficiaries reflects their deviation from clientelistic policies. These populist policies bear some limitations to fit into the framework of programmatic politics; nevertheless, these have generated a sense of trust towards the BJP and accordingly, influenced the electoral mandate in favour of the party. In this connection, Borbora and Borkakati write in The Assam Tribune that the people of Assam developed a “positive perception about the Government’s performance... growth of the connectivity infrastructure, quality of rural education and accessibility to quality healthcare...” added to BJP’s victory (The Assam Tribune, 9th May, 2021).

Hesitant RD and AJP with AIUDF involved Mahajot: No Unified stance against CAA

The Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), 2019 has amended the Citizenship Act, 1955 by providing a pathway to Indian Citizenship for religious minorities who arrived in India before the end of December, 2014 from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Accordingly, the Act provided for granting of citizenship

to those Hindus, Christians, Jains, Sikhs, Parsis and Buddhists who have entered Assam before the stipulated date. The Citizenship Amendment Bill and later on the CAA triggered spontaneous protests across Assam and in some North-Eastern states primarily because of two reasons: threats posed by the Act towards the ethnic composition of Assam as well as towards the secular fabric of the country. The anti-CAA sentiments stood as a potential for all political parties of Assam (certainly except BJP) to ensure political mobilization against the BJP. However, a range of factors led to the fragmentation and dilution of anti-CAA protests and hence, the political parties could not come into one single banner to alter the BJP led regime in Assembly elections, 2021.

The failure of political parties to form a cohesive alliance against BJP, based on anti-CAA sentiments, expresses the critical role of social determinants in electoral politics of Assam. The formation of a pre-poll alliance between the INC, AIUDF and Left Parties was possible in Assam Assembly Elections, 2021 as their criticism of CAA is primarily centered on the non-secular character of the Act. However, the criticism of CAA by RD and AJP is mainly centered on ethnic grounds as these parties fear that implementation of CAA in Assam will accord a secondary status to Assamese language and identity. This sense of Assamese ethno-nationalism prevented these parties to enter into alliance with AIUDF, thereby leaving no scope for a unified political alliance against the BJP. In addition to this, the alliance of the INC with the AIUDF created a sense of discontent even against the INC and this led to declining support base of the party largely in districts of Upper Assam. On an interview with the Deccan Herald, senior Congress leader stated that the alliance with AIUDF “provided the BJP a chance to attack Congress as protectors of infiltrators. This took the indigenous Assamese votes away from us” (<https://deccanherald.com>).

The above analysis reveals that the formation of a cohesive political alliance against the BJP was not attained due to the hesitancy of the RD and AJP to join hands with AIUDF. The AIUDF, as a political party is perceived as the protector of the Bengali Muslim Immigrants and the growing number of these immigrants is perceived as a threat to Assamese Identity. The Bengali Muslim Immigrants entered Assam during the colonial period under the British policy of “Grow More Food” and in the preceding years there has been an exponential rise in their population due to their deplorable socio-economic status and lack of education. However, during the Bangladesh Liberation War, 1971 around 10 million East Bengali Refugees entered India during the early months of the war (www.timesnownews.com); and millions of them got settled in Assam. Besides, there has been huge influx of Illegal Immigrants to Assam in post-1971 and together these factors posed some serious challenge to the identity of the Immigrant Muslims residing in Assam. These Immigrant Muslims, even though are of colonial origin, has to face the suspicion of the Assamese speaking people due to the exponential rise of Bengali Muslim population in Assam. The greater demarcation between Illegal Immigrants and Immigrant Muslim somehow got diluted in public perception due to the upsurge in numbers of Bengali speaking Muslim population in Assam. The Assam Movement, 1979-85 even though remain non-communal and targeted both Hindu and Muslim illegal immigration; nevertheless, Muslim Illegal Immigrants are mostly targeted because of their numerical superiority. The problem of the Assamese speaking people with the Immigrant Muslims is based on some significant criterions. Firstly, their linguistic and cultural dissimilarity with the Assamese speaking people is identified as a threat to the linguistic and cultural identity of the Assamese speaking people. Secondly, the political mobilization of the Immigrant Muslims and the formation of United Minority Front as a reaction to AGP created a sense of fear in the minds of the Assamese speaking people that they will capture political power in Assam. Sarbananda Sonwal, a prominent leader of Assam movement, filed a writ petition demanding a repeal of the Illegal Migrants (Determination by Tribunal) Act as to them the Act expresses the solidarity of the Congress government with the minorities in Assam. The repeal of the Act in 2005 by the Supreme Court, in turn created a sense of fear in the minds of the Immigrant Muslims and accordingly, in 2005 the Assam United Democratic Front (AUDF) came into existence with these Immigrant Muslims as their support base. The launching of the AUDF as a National Party changed its name to AIUDF in 2009 and in the subsequent Assembly elections, 2011 the AIUDF emerged as the main opposition against Congress with 18 seats. The growing political base of AIUDF in lower and middle

Assam, with Immigrants Muslims as support base, created a sense of suspicion and discomfort in the minds of the Assamese speaking people. Thirdly, the discomfort of the Assamese speaking people has further been aggravated by the BJP and the Hindutva organizations. These organizations argued that continuous illegal infiltration of Muslims from Bangladesh is becoming a threat to the indigenous people of Assam and that AIUDF is the patron and protector of illegal Muslim Bangladeshis (Nath, 2019). Simultaneously following the success of AIUDF in 2011, it started “divisive politics” (Nath, 2019) and in both Lok Sabha elections of 2014 and Assembly Elections of 2016 it appealed to people on communal lines (Nath, 2019). The appeal of PM Modi for unity among Hindus in Assembly Elections of 2016 provoked AIUDF chief to appeal for unity of Muslims against Hindus (*AsomiyaPratidin*, 2016, p.4; taken from Nath, 2019). In addition, the growing encroachment of land by Immigrant Muslims; the throwing of Gamosa, a highly revered symbol of Assamese culture, by AIUDF Chief in 2021 and other events prevented the newly formed regional parties to enter into alliance with AIUDF.

Precisely, the social determinant of ethnicity played a critical role in the recent Assembly elections in Assam and the discourse centered on Assamese ethnicity distanced the AIUDF and also the INC and Left (its alliance partners) from both the AJP and RD. This resulted in the fragmentation of the anti-CAA voices and ultimately, worked to the advantage of BJP in the election.

Leadership Crisis in INC vs. Strategic Leadership in BJP

The INC or Congress leadership focused its electoral campaign mainly on five guarantees: guarantee of cancelling CAA; guarantee of five lakh government jobs; guarantee of Rs. 365 daily wages to tea garden workers; guarantee of 200 units monthly electricity free to every household and finally, guarantee of Rs. 2000 per month to housewives as respect (<https://congressor5guarantee.in/>). The promise of employment and wage incentive have failed to deliver results in the advantage of Congress due to its organizational lacuna and emerging leadership crisis both at the Centre and in the state of Assam. Recently, the party has faced pressure from senior party leaders of various states for more freedom and greater say in running the state units of the party (www.indiatoday.in). The organizational lacuna within the party stimulated 23 senior Congress leaders to write to party Chief Sonia Gandhi in August, 2020 recommending ways to revive the party organization. Following the dismal performance of the party in the Bihar Assembly Election, 2020 Kapil Sibal in an interview with the Business Standard pointed out that the lack of introspection by the party for six years has led to its declining support base (www.business-standard.in). The phenomenon of leadership crisis in the context of Assam has received attention from political analysts and in an interview to The Print correspondent, Professor Nani Gopal Mahanta pointed out that the state unit is currently divided into five camps. Accordingly, these are: one led by Ripun Bora; another led by MLA Debabata Saikia and Rupjyoti Kurmi who “openly defied Bora”; another camp led by Rockybul Hussain Pradut Bordoloi, “mutually antagonistic but claim otherwise”, in Central Assam; another one constituting lower Assam leaders who desire association with AIUDF and finally, another MLA who proposed a Museum for ‘Miya’ people or Bengali speaking Muslims (<https://theprint.in>). The internal rivalry within the party even prompted the expulsion of two Congress MLAs for alleged anti-party activities, a few months before election. In this connection, one of the expelled MLA pointed out directionless and lack of discipline within the party and commented that the party “has no vision either” (www.thehindu.com). The party members of Assam themselves have recognized that among the various factors the lack of a strong leader in Assam after TarunGogoi’s death has led to the failure of the Congress (<https://www.deccanherald.com>; <https://theprint.in/>). The anti-CAA sentiments of the people of Assam provided the Congress leadership to consolidate a unified voice against the Act. However, it has been admitted by the party itself that “double stand” of the Congress leadership over the CAA led to the failure of the party to mobilize a unified consolidated voice against the Act, eventually adding to the failure of the party (<https://www.deccanherald.com>). The anti-CAA stance of party’s Central leadership has been contradicted by Congress leaders of Barak Valley of Assam.

The ability of the BJP leadership to project themselves as organized, energetic and united has largely

contributed to the success of the Party in the Assam Assembly Elections, 2021. Following the dictum of the Rational Choice model, the voters of Assam have acted as rational actors: assessing the potential of both BJP and Congress leadership to provide them (the voters) maximum benefits. The public perception that the BJP leadership has efficiently managed the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic worked to its advantage in the 2021 elections (www.indiatoday.in; Barua, 2021). The political strategy of Dr. Himanta Biswa Sarma is considered as “instrumental in scripting the BJP’s victory” in North Eastern states (www.newindiaexpress.com), as BJP now rules in Tripura, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh and serves as a constituent of ruling coalition in Nagaland and Meghalaya. Additionally, the public image of Sarbananda Sonwal as a man of integrity and his prominent role in the Assam movement has worked towards the advantage of BJP. The adoption of CAA by the BJP regime somehow diluted the image of Sonowal as the ‘jatiyanayak’; nevertheless, people in comparison to the Congress leadership people feels that comfortable under the political leadership of Sonowal. In addition to this, the party has relentlessly worked towards building its stronghold at grassroots level through RSS backed educational institutions and campaigns. Precisely, widespread organizational networking and strong image building of party leaders have largely contributed to the success of the BJP in Assam.

Conclusion

The study of Assam Assembly elections, 2021 reveals that the interplay between the various determinants of voting behavior has worked to the advantage of BJP. The projection of leadership skills; the creation of beneficiary regime; the building up of trust towards governance reflects the efforts of the BJP in the line of capturing political power in Assam. The dismantling of long-standing loyalties of certain social groups towards Congress helped the BJP to gain new voters; and simultaneously, the accommodation of targeted audiences through short term reliefs assisted the BJP to accommodate supporters from different strata of the society. The anti-CAA sentiments provided Congress and other parties the opportunity to unite politically against the BJP; nevertheless, ethno-religious differences prevented any such efforts at consolidation. Additionally, the polarization of voters on religious basis under the aegis of both BJP and AIUDF, has furthered the process of fragmentation of voice against the CAA. The hegemonic position of the BJP in Assam’s politics has to be balanced by constructive criticisms from the opposition and this requires organizational strength as well as intra-party democracy on the part of the opposition. The emergence of RD and its immediate acceptance by people may serve as a decisive factor to determine the course of future politics in Assam.

References

1. *AsomiyaPratidin: SamprodayikotarBirudhe*, 1st April 2016, Guwahati, p.4
2. Bardhan, P. and Mookherjee (2017): ‘A Theory of Clientelistic Politics versus Programmatic Politics’, Boston University-Department of Economics- The Institute for Economic Development, *Working Paper Series dp-317*, Boston University- Department of Economics
3. Barua, S. (2021): ‘How BJP won the Assam Elections?’ in *The Assam Tribune*, 5th May, 2021
4. Bhattacharyya, R. (2019): ‘Saffron Wave in Assam: Ekal Vidyalayas Helped BJP, RSS establish strong roots in Assam’s Tribal Areas, Tea Estates’ (24 May, <https://www.firstpost.com/politics/saffron-wave-in-assam-ekal-vidyalayas-helped-bjp-rss-establish-strong-roots-in-assams-tribal-areas-tea-estates-6696851>)
5. Borbora, A.P. and Borkakati, S. (2021): ‘Why BJP-led Alliance won in Assam?’ in *The Assam Tribune*, 9th May 2021
6. Business Standard (2020): ‘Congress vs Congress on Kapil Sibal, infighting & leadership crisis’ (18 November, https://www.business-standard.com/article/politics/congress-vs-congress-on-kapil-sibal-infighting-leadership-crisis-120111800607_1.html)

7. Deccan Herald (2021): 'Assam election result 2021: Leadership crisis, 'double stand' on CAA cost Congress in state' (7 May, <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/east-and-northeast/assam-election-result-2021-leadership-crisis-double-stand-on-cao-cost-congress-in-state-981953.html>)
8. De, Neve, G. and Carswell, G. (2011): 'NREGA and the Return of Identity Politics in Western Tamil Nadu, India', *Forum for Development Studies*, 38 (2), pp. 205-210
9. Dutta, A. (2019): 'Assam's 2019 Verdict and the Anti-CAB Mobilisations', *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. LIV, No. 51, pp. 27 to 32
10. Gupta, S. (2018): "How the RSS Grew Roots in the North-East?", Hindu, *Business Line*.
11. Himmelweit, H. T., Humphreys, P., Jaeger, M & Katz, M. (1981): *How Voters Decide*, London: Academic Press.
<https://assam.gov.in/scheme-page/154>
<https://assam.gov.in/scheme-page/264>
<https://congressor5guarantee.in/>
<https://industries.assam.gov.in/schemes/svayem-scheme-with-guidelines-and-application-form>
<https://sarkariyोजना.com/chah-bagicha-dhan-puraskar-mela/>
<https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/2-expelled-assam-congress-mlas-join-bjp/article33444473.ece>
<https://www.timesnownews.com/india>
12. India Today (2019): 'Congress leadership crisis: Why Gandhis need to let go power' (4 September, <https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/congress-leadership-crisis-why-gandhis-need-to-let-go-power-1595380-2019-0-04>)
13. India Today (2021): "How the BJP returned to power in Assam", India Today Insight (3 May, <https://www.indiatoday.in/india-today-insight/story/how-the-bjp-returned-to-power-in-assam-1798192-2021-05-030>)
14. Manor, J. (2010): 'Beyond Clientelism : Digvijay Singh's Participatory, Pro-poor Strategy in Madhya Pradesh', in P. Price & A. E. Ruud (Eds.), *Power and Influence: Bosses, Lords and Captains*, Delhi: Routledge
15. Nath (2016): 'Communal politics in Assam: Growth of AIUDF since 2006', *Economic and Political Weekly*, LI (16), pp. 88 to 93
16. Nath, M. (2019): 'Muslim Politics in Assam: The Case of AIUDF', *Studies in Indian Politics*, 7 (1), pp. 33 to 43
17. Patel, L., Yolanda, S. Victoria, G., Delany, A. & Baldry, K. (2014): 'Voting Behaviour and the Influence of Social Protection', Centre for Social Development in Africa, University of Johannesburg
18. Peele, G. (2004): *Governing the UK: British Politics in the 21st Century*, Oxford: Blackwell
19. Roy, A. and Singh, U. (2021): 'Elections in a Pandemic: Role of Election Commission of India', *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. LVI, No. 21, pp. 13 to 16
20. Thachil, T. (2010): Do Policies Matter in Indian Elections?, Center for the Advanced Study of India
21. The New Indian Express (2021): 'BJP strongman Himanta Biswa Sarma is new Assam CM' (9 May, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2021/may/09/bjp-strongman-himanta-biswa-sarma-is-new-assam-cm-2300363.html>)
22. The Print (2021): 'Congress without Tarun Gogoi is a divided house and looks rudderless in Assam' (14 January, <https://theprint.in/politics/congress-without-tarun-gogoi-is-a-divided-house-and-looks-rudderless-in-assam/584825/>)

A Mandate for Good Governance and Smart Politics Amidst Odds

**Josukutty C.A.
& Thomas Mathew**

This paper examines the adverse context in which LDF fought the 2021 Kerala Assembly election, the factors that enabled the LDF to break with the tradition of change of government in every five years and secure a second consecutive term in office and how the opposition, the UDF, failed to win the trust of the electorate at the hustings. The major argument of the paper is that the victory of the LDF was an vote for good governance made possible by a right mix of welfarism, crisis management, leadership, and ‘smart politics’ displayed especially in opposing the BJP and taking advantage of the social churning caused by the rising communal and religious politics. Data for this paper are mainly from the study titled, “Changing Dynamics of Coalition Politics in Kerala”, conducted by the Survey Research Centre (SRC), Department of Political Science, University of Kerala on the eve of the Kerala Assembly election in March 2021. Data were collected from a total of 2177 respondents through random sampling spread over 35 Assembly constituencies in Kerala with the help of a closed ended questionnaire.

The victory of the LDF in the Kerala Assembly election 2021 marks the return to power of an incumbent front for the first time since 1977. By all accounts-victory margin, vote share and number of seats won-it was an emphatic win for the LDF. It has broken the customized trend of alternating power between the LDF and UDF in every five years. The LDF clinched 99 seats, 8 more than the 2016 tally with an increased vote share. The UDF had to be satisfied with 41 seats, 5 less than the previous total with a slight increase in vote share (Table:1). For the BJP led NDA, decrease in vote share by around 2% and failure to retain the lone seat it won in 2016 Assembly election was embarrassing and disorienting. It was an vote for the LDF’s good governance marked by a right mix of welfarism, crisis management, leadership, and ‘smart politics’ displayed especially in opposing the BJP and taking advantage of the social realignments. By ‘smart politics’ we refer to the political acumen and skill of the LDF leadership especially that of the CPM in turning the adversities caused by floods and pandemics into political opportunities and advantages. This was also visible in capturing the lead role in fighting the BJP and central government from the largest secular party in India, the Congress, and in generating a kind of ‘Malayali nationalism’ which enabled the LDF to pocket minority and secular votes.

**Table:1 : Vote Share and Seats of Major Coalition Fronts
in Kerala Assembly Elections since 2011**

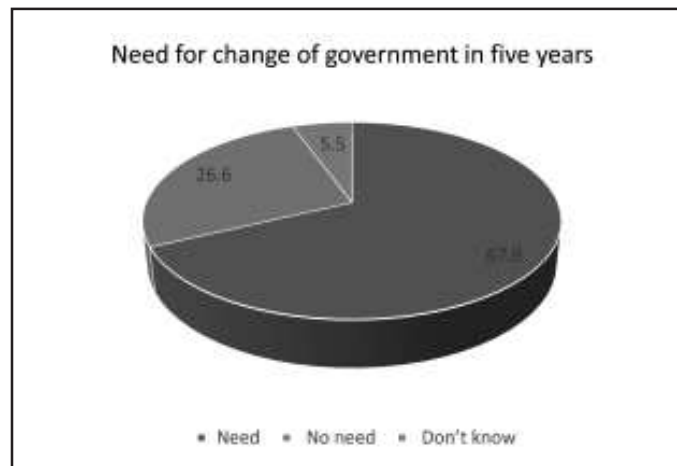
Year	LDF % of votes/seats	UDF % of votes/seats	NDA % of votes/seats
2011	44.94/ 68	45.83/72	6.06/0
2016	43.14/ 91	38.60 /47	14.93/1
2021	45.28 /99	39.41/41	12.48/0

Source: compiled from Chief Electoral Officer Kerala available at <http://www.ceo.kerala.gov.in/home.html> .¹

A Victory Against Odds and Challenges

Though the victory of the LDF was emphatic in terms of seats won and margin secured, it was against many odds and challenges.² First of all this victory was won breaking the customized practice of change of government in every five years. There was a wide spread perception that a change of government would occur by default in every five years. In the study conducted by the SRC 67.9% respondents (Figure:1) felt that a change of government in every five years is ideal for good and effective governance. It was quite remarkable that the LDF could register a great victory against this deeply ingrained trend. Natural calamities and challenges of two devastating floods in 2018 and 2019 and the pandemics Nipah in 2018 and the COVID-19 in 2020 were hard and arduous for any government to manage and win the appreciation of the people.

Figure: 1



Source: Study by SRC 2021

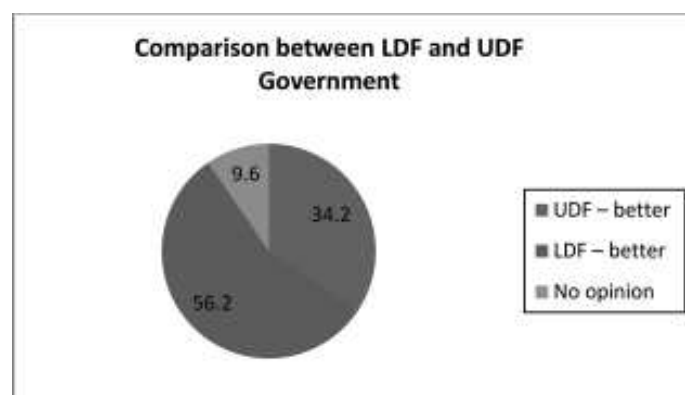
Politically, the rise of BJP, Brahminical revivalism as reflected in the Sabarimala controversy and the resultant realignment of certain religious and caste groups and communal polarization was another formidable challenge to the secular forces especially the Left.³ The LDF successfully arrested the rise of BJP and its expansionist agenda in Kerala. At another level there were serious allegations of corruption and ineptitude. The study by the SRC found that a substantial section of the public believed in allegations of corruption in gold smuggling, housing projects, backdoor appointments and PSC related controversies.⁴ Seventy percent of respondents justified the agitation seeking appointments and extension to rank lists by PSC rank holders in front of the government secretariat.⁵ Around 55.8 % felt that Sabarimala would factor in elections.⁶ The deep sea fishing controversy on the eve of elections also put the government on the defensive. To make matters worse, the government was going through one of its worst financial crises in history forcing it to seek contributions from the public to manage the crunch caused by floods, pandemics and lockdowns.

The impressive victory of the Left by fighting against many adversities and changing them into advantages was realized through a variety of factors. The most important challenge faced by the LDF government in its five year rule was COVID-19 pandemic. The government received wide acclaim for the way it fought the pandemic. According to the study conducted by the SRC 70% of the people approved and appreciated the way the government fought the COVID-19.⁷ The welfare measures during the COVID-19 such as distribution of food kits, community kitchens, compassionate treatment of migrant labourers by the government, generated tremendous goodwill among the public. The stellar performance of Health Minister K.K. Shailaja was not only internationally acclaimed but also reaffirmed by the public with the highest victory margin accorded to her in the history of assembly elections in Kerala. The crisis management was ably supplemented by social security measures like increase in old age pension, increased investment and enhanced infrastructure in education, health and housing. Timely distribution of pension was a great relief for the poor and needy especially during the lockdowns. Through the LIFE Mission the government constructed over 2.5 lakh houses for the homeless.⁸

The enhanced facilities in government hospitals was instrumental in fighting COVID-19. Similarly under Public Education Rejuvenation Mission, Kerala improved school infrastructure and quality of education that increased student intake in government run schools during 2016-21.⁹

The approval rating of the government on developmental activities was very high with 70% applauding the government for its achievements amidst adversities.¹⁰ The Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Board, a novel strategy initiated by the government of Kerala was instrumental in mobilizing fund for infrastructure developments. More importantly, from an electoral point of view, 57 % consider LDF rule more suited for the overall development of Kerala than the UDF.¹¹ The LDF succeeded to a great extent in painting the UDF as a hurdle in implementing the developmental and compassionate activities initiated by the government in the most trying circumstances. This was reflected in the overall better approval rating of 56.4% for the LDF government compared to 34.2 % for the UDF (Figure:2). The margin of around 22% favorable perception for the LDF government over the previous UDF government was instrumental in the electoral victory of the LDF.

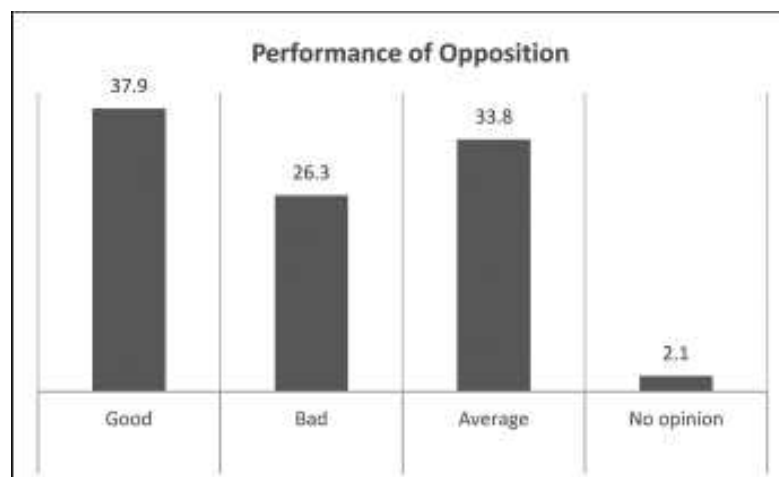
Figure:2



Source: Study by SRC 2021

Corruption is a major issue in any election as it structurally and systematically contribute to the pains of the ordinary and marginalized. The SRC study shows that the LDF is better equipped to fight corruption and, in general, less corrupt compared to the UDF. The LDF also scored high on questions of women’s security and rights as 52% perceive that women are well off under LDF than UDF rule.¹² Again, notably, the performance of the opposition did not get as much approval as that of the government which is rare as there is a tendency to blame the government for most of the problems of day to day life (Figure:3). It shows that anti-incumbency against the government was low compared to previous governments.

Figure:3



Source: Study by SRC 2021

Similarly Panayi Vijayan with 54% support was far ahead of opposition leaders, Oommen Chandy (21%) and Ramesh Chennithala (5.9 %), as the preferred Chief Ministerial candidate (Table:2). This was further supplemented by the organizational strength of the LDF especially the CPM and their well-oiled election campaign machinery.

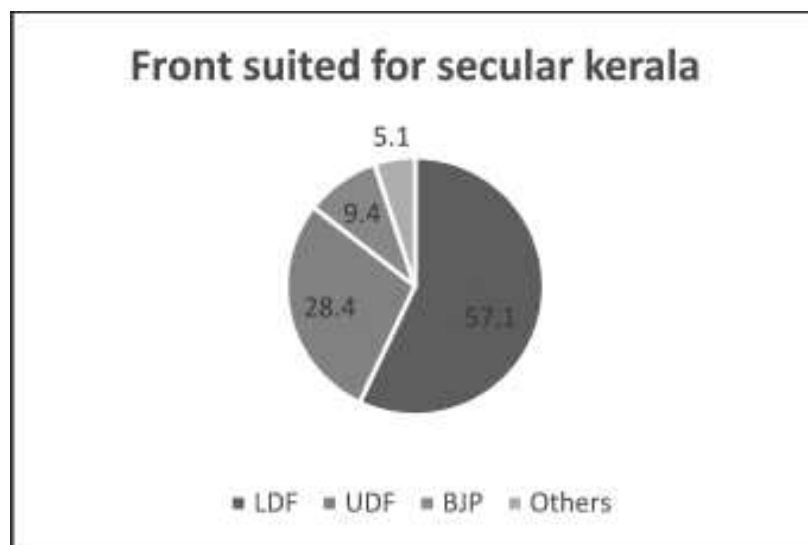
Table:2 : Preferred Chief Ministerial Candidate

	Frequency	Percent
Pinarayi Vijayan	1195	54.9
Oommen Chandy	455	20.9
Ramesh Chennithala	129	5.9
Kummanom Rajashekarana	111	5.1
Kodiyeri Balakrishnanan	8	0.4
Others	279	12.8
Total	2177	100.0

Source: Study by SRC 2021

The good impression among the public about the welfare measures and overall performance of the LDF was supplemented by smart politics played by the LDF in painting the UDF as soft towards BJP and thereby pocketing the anti-BJP secular votes. The LDF campaign was more appealing and effective especially in garnering the support of a large chunk of secular and progressive voters. Opposition to the BJP has been one of the key features of Kerala politics. It is founded on secular and progressive political positions represented primarily by the LDF and the fear of the minority communities against majoritarian right wing politics of the BJP. The LDF and UDF compete to oppose and distance from the BJP to derive electoral mileage by projecting themselves as the best equipped to fight the BJP. They blamed each other for their pro-BJP positions and clandestine understanding with right wing elements. In this game of strident opposition to BJP, the LDF emerged victorious as was evident in the study of SRC where the majority opined that the LDF was better equipped to fight the BJP politically and electing LDF would strengthen the secular framework of Kerala compared to the UDF (Figure 4 & Table 3).

Figure 4



Source: Study by SRC 2021

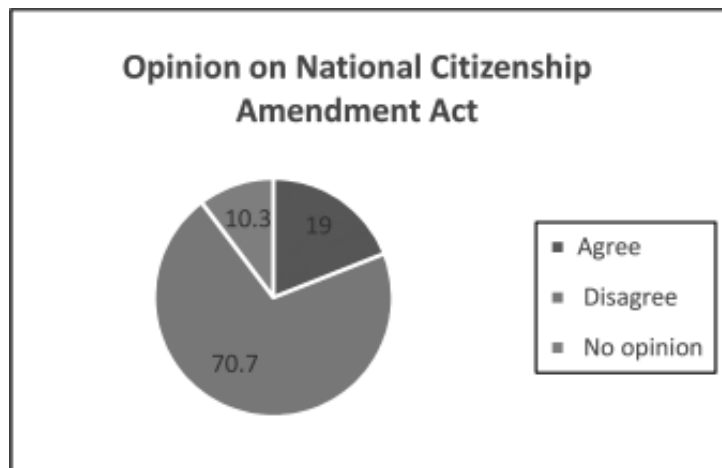
Table:3 : Front better equipped to fight BJP

	Frequency	Percent
UDF	676	31.1
LDF	1181	54.2
No opinion	320	14.7
Total	2177	100.0

Source: Study by SRC 2021

The LDF also succeeded in taking electoral mileage by creating a perception that the central government is blindly against Kerala and its achievements in various fields and exploited ‘mallu nationalism’ to counter the BJP in Kerala. The LDF effectively communicated to the public that investigation by Central Agencies were politically motivated to tarnish the image of the state government. A large segment of around 40% believed that the investigations by the central agencies on allegations of corruption and gold smuggling involving Chief Minister’s Office was politically motivated.¹³ In the same vein, the SRC study found that around 70 % in Kerala disagreed with the National Citizenship Amendment Act passed by the central government.

Figure 5



Source: Study by SRC 2021

The welfare measures, smart politics and strong leadership ensured impressive support for the LDF. The growing influence of BJP in Kerala and increased anxieties of the minorities and secular elements and the resultant social realignments increased support across the spectrum especially among caste and religious groups for the Left as the better equipped to fight the BJP and nurture the secular character of Kerala (Table 4&5). A key finding is that there was a shift of minority votes towards the LDF both from the Christians and Muslims. Unlike previous elections both Christians and Muslims voted for the LDF in bigger numbers.¹⁴ This was caused primarily by the rise of BJP and the anxiety it has caused among the minorities. The strident anti-BJP position of the LDF attracted minorities to the Left than to the UDF. This even worked in Northern Kerala, where the Left clinched three seats from traditional strongholds of the Muslim League. Kerala Congress (Mani group) joining the LDF gave five seats to the Front and was a key factor in attracting Christian votes in many constituencies. Hindus, in general, continue to support the LDF with a good margin. In terms of caste, all castes-Ezhava, SC& ST and Nairs, continue to support the LDF. The support for LDF is highest among the SC&ST. But there is shift of Nair vote mainly from the UDF to BJP. It is to be noted that more Nairs support BJP than UDF.¹⁵

Table - 3 : Which front is equipped to fight the BJP in Kerala Religion-wise response

		UDF	LDF	Don't know	Total
Hindu	Count	261	727	208	1196
	% within Religion	21.8%	60.8%	17.4%	100.0%
Muslim	Count	228	240	57	525
	% within Religion	43.4%	45.7%	10.9%	100.0%
Christian	Count	187	201	52	440
	% within Religion	42.5%	45.7%	11.8%	100.0%
Other General	Count	0	8	0	8
	% within Religion	0.0%	100.0%	0.0%	100.0%
Total	Count	676	1176	317	2169
	% within Religion	31.2%	54.2%	14.6%	100.0%

Table - 4 : Which front is equipped to fight the BJP Caste-wise response

		UDF	LDF	Don't know	Total
SC/ST	Count	36	122	36	194
	% within caste	18.6%	62.9%	18.6%	100.0%
Nair	Count	86	156	58	300
	% within caste	28.7%	52.0%	19.3%	100.0%
Ezhava	Count	76	246	56	378
	% within caste	20.1%	65.1%	14.8%	100.0%
Other OBC/OEC	Count	285	334	78	697
	% within caste	40.9%	47.9%	11.2%	100.0%
Other General	Count	149	237	66	452
	% within caste	33.0%	52.4%	14.6%	100.0%
Others	Count	44	86	26	156
	% within caste	28.2%	55.1%	16.7%	100.0%
Total	Count	676	1181	320	2177
	% within caste	31.1%	54.2%	14.7%	100.0%

What Went Wrong With the Opposition ?

One of the key factors that kept the UDF on the defensive was the poor organizational set up of the party especially at the grassroot level. Apart from high decimal allegations and statements by the top leadership of the party against the government, no systematic effort was made at the ground level to conduct election campaign to corner the ruling dispensation among the general public. The feeder organizations of the UDF except that of the IUML was ineffective on the campaign trail. On the other hand, the campaign machinery of the LDF was active in a systematic way communicating and reaching out to the public with the welfare measures and developmental achievements of the government through an array of party and non party platforms like Kudumbashree and neighborhood groups. The grassroot connect that the Left maintains with common man and the good samaritan image it has created during the COVID and devastating floods kept the LDF in good stead at the hustings. The daily press meeting of Chief Minister on COVID status was

ably supplemented by party workers at the grass root level through pension and food kits disbursement, and community kitchens. The UDF was left clueless how to counter the campaign and organizational onslaught of the LDF. A few mass meetings and road shows by the star campaigners of the Congress was no match for the grassroots connect of the LDF. Conflicting signals emanating from group infighting within the Congress regarding the Chief Minister designate further added to the troubles of the Opposition. The Congress leadership was ideologically confused as to how to position itself on Sabarimala. Allegations of oversized influence of the Muslim League on the Congress was another ticklish issue with communal overtones that distanced traditional Christian votes from the UDF. The Congress had no clear answers to allegation on being soft on Hindutva and being pressurized by the Muslim League. On both fronts the UDF lost at least a small segment of secular votes and minority Christian votes and in some cases majority community votes. The religious and communal realignment in the state had cost the UDF dearly. On the other hand, the unrivalled strongman image of Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan eclipsed the UDF in leadership ratings and contributed to LDF's victory. There was no confusion on the LDF's ideological opposition to the BJP which garnered support from both the minority communities and secular quarters. The BJP led NDA which tried to cash on communal polarization spearheaded by high voltage rhetoric on Sabarimala controversy and love jihad, was marred by leadership crisis and factional infightings. No wonder that the party had to forfeit the lone seat it won last time and its president lost both constituencies contested. The allegations of corruption and ineptitude raised by a discredited and ideologically confused opposition with weak leadership was discerningly rejected by the electorate.

Conclusion

It was the impressive performance of the government amidst adversities that helped the LDF romp home at the fray. The government could create, a feel of good governance and a sense of security among the public through a number of social welfare and developmental activities that included increased pension, distribution food kits, compassionate treatment of migrant labourers, developmental activities, infrastructure additions in education, health and public roads and strong leadership and skillful political campaign. The LDF smartly employed principles of inclusiveness, secularism, egalitarianism, social security, and popular mobilization through its organizational strength to clinch electoral victory.

The allegations raised by the Opposition on various issues related to gold smuggling, backdoor appointment, housing scam, deep sea fishing etc. have figured in public discussions but were not effective enough to alter the good impression created by the government. The LDF was far ahead of the UDF and NDA in communicating to the people and in addressing their problems at the ground level through various organizations and platforms. The LDF campaign was smart enough to create the impression that both the UDF and NDA had been trying to undermine the efforts of the government at good governance. The campaign also created a type of 'Mallu nationalism' against the anti-Kerala and anti-secular positions of the central government. The strong anti-BJP position of the LDF helped it to garner minority votes of both Christians and Muslims. There was an erosion in the support base of the UDF not only among the minorities but also among some Hindu groups.

It is important to note that in the parliament election in 2019 the anti-BJP-secular position of a substantial section in Kerala helped the UDF to win majority seats, whereas in the 2021 assembly election, this worked in favor of the LDF. This is because of the perception among the people (as found in our study) that the LDF is better armoured to fight the BJP-brand of right wing politics in the context of Kerala than the UDF. This perception also helped the LDF to take electoral mileage out of the political realignment of the minorities caused by the rise of BJP. Skillful electoral campaign and organizational expanse of the LDF especially the CPM and its leadership kept the electorate with them. Under these circumstances even Sabarimala controversy which was considered to be an important issue was neutralized and did not adversely affect the electoral fortunes of the LDF. It also displayed the limits of BJP's expansionist politics in Kerala based on communal polarization and Brahminical revivalism. In short, it was good governance marked by

a right mix of welfarism, crisis management, leadership, and ‘smart politics’ displayed especially in opposing the BJP and attracting the minorities that carried the day for the LDF.

Notes and References

1. The strength of Kerala Assembly is 140. In 2016, one seat was won by an independent candidate.
2. Health Minister K.K. Shylaja won from Mattannur in Kannur district with a record margin of 60,963 votes, the highest in the history of Assembly elections in Kerala. Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan, won from Dharmadom, by a margin of 50,123 votes, the second highest margin in history and Electricity Minister M. M. Mani was re-elected from Udumbanchola constituency with a huge margin of 38,305 votes.
3. SunilrajBalu, Sarathand Sasikumar (2021): “Kerala Elections 2021 Mandate for Social Egalitarianism and Deepening Left Democratic Alternative”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 1Vi, No. 22, May 29.
4. “Changing Dynamics of Coalition Politics in Kerala”, Study conducted by the Survey Research Centre, Department of Political Science, University of Kerala, March, 2021.
5. SRC, 2021.
6. SRC, 2021.
7. SRC, 2021.
8. The Hindu, (2021): “LIFE completes construction of 2.5 lakh houses”, January 28, available at <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/life-completes-construction-of-25-lakh-houses/article33686144.ece>. The LIFE Mission is a housing scheme of the government of Kerala to provide shelter to landless and homeless people and to enable them to self-employ and earn a living.
9. The Public Education Rejuvenation Mission was one of four ambitious projects of the LDF government that focused on improving academic standards, digital systems, infrastructure development and child access. As many as 1.75 lakh new students took admission in classes 1 to 10 in State schools in the academic year 2020. Under the Mission Kerala became the first state to take its public education completely digital. For more details see, *The Hindu*, “1.75 lakh new admissions in State schools”, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/175-lakh-new-admissions-in-state-schools/article33464947.ece>.
10. SRC, 2021.
11. SRC, 2021.
12. SRC,2021.
13. SRC,2021.
14. SRC,2021.
15. SRC,2021.

Voting Trends in the Kerala Assembly Election 2021

K.M. Sajad Ibrahim

The voting trends of different categories of Kerala electorate present a very complex picture. The LDF received the highest support from youth.. The young voters up to 35 extended huge support to the LDF comparing with their support to the UDF and NDA. However, among the age category of 36 and above, there is only a marginal difference between the LDF and the UDF. Similarly, the LDF received the men's highest support (47%), while the UDF received only 37%. However, the LDF received only 4% more of women votes. The LDF is more popular in rural areas - 48% votes against 39% received by the UDF. However, in the urban areas, the LDF received only two percent more votes comparing the UDF votes. Among the economic categories, the poor and lower-class support favoured the LDF, while the UDF received an upper hand among the middle and rich categories.

The voting trends in Kerala witnessed a shift in the 2021 Assembly election as it is quite uncommon for a ruling coalition to retain power in Kerala. In the election, it was a sweep for the Left Democratic Front (LDF) with 99 seats securing eight more seats than the last election¹. For the first time after 1977 an LDF government in Kerala received a mandate to retain power. The victory of the LDF in the Assembly election with 99 seats indicates pro-incumbency factors in favour of the incumbent government. It was not easy for a front to retain power in Kerala considering the traditional tough bi-polar coalition politics. The opposition had attacked the government with many scams expecting an easy victory, but failed badly to achieve the desired result. The LDF government had faced several challenges, including two massive floods, the Nipah virus outbreak, and the present Covid 19 pandemic, which no other government ever faced. The post-poll survey conducted by Lokniti- the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), New Delhi illustrates the reasons for the swift victory of the LDF in the 2021 Assembly election.

An Overview of Election Verdict 2021

The LDF sweep in the 2021 election was an unexpected one as the ruling front secured the mandate to continue their rule for five more years. The governance alternated between UDF and LDF inspite of the good performance of governments. Except in 1977, no ruling front has been re-elected. The LDF secured 99 out of the 140 seats in the Kerala assembly, and the Congress-led United Democratic Front (UDF) secured 41 seats. The LDF has been maintaining a comfortable position in the Assembly elections since 2006. In the 2016 election, the LDF had won 91 seats, and UDF 47 seats. In the 2011 Assembly election, the incumbent LDF government had lost the election short of three seats. The UDF received the mandate to rule with 72 seats, while the LDF won 68 seats. In the Assembly election 2016, the LDF had received a considerable majority by obtaining 91 seats. The only setback for the LDF was in the 2019 Lok Sabha election when it got only one seat, loosing the remaining 19 seats to the UDF. However, the Kerala electorate voted differently in the Assembly and the Lok Sabha elections. In the Local-body polls held in December 2020, the LDF almost retained its advantage over the UDF. The LDF victory in 2021 was a clean sweep by obtaining an additional eight seats from the 2016 election. Moreover, the LDF increased its vote share from 42.58% in 2016 to 45.28% in 2021. On the other hand, the UDF lost its six seats from its 2016 tally, 47 to 41 seats, but improved its vote share slightly from 38.6% in 2016 to 39.41%. The setback suffered by the BJP was the most notable outcome in the 2021 election as it lost the single-seat it had in the 2016 election with the considerable decline of the vote share from 14.62% in 2016 to 12.40%. (Table:1)

An important reason for the increase in the vote share for the LDF was the expansion of its coalition

alliance. The LDF inducted four minor parties in 2018, Loktantrik Dal of M P Veerendra Kumar MP, Democratic Kerala Congress of Francis George, Indian National League, and Kerala Congress (B) of R Balakrishna Pillai, which have their strongholds in few pockets of Kerala.¹ However, the most notable one was the induction of the Kerala Congress (Mani) in October 2020. With the demise of K.M. Mani, the Kerala Congress(M) leader, a factional fight developed between his son, Jose K. Mani, and another prominent leader, P.J. Joseph. An attempt was made by the UDF to sort out the issues of the two factions but failed miserably. Finally, the decision of the UDF to support the P.J. Joseph faction led to the split of the party, which provided a golden opportunity for the LDF to align with the Jose K Mani faction.² Later, the Election Commission recognised it as the official faction of the Kerala Congress (M).³ It was a severe jolt to the UDF as the KC(M) was its second-most potent ally after the Indian Union Muslim League (IUML). For the LDF, it brightened its prospects to expand its base in central Kerala and among Christians. In the 2021 election, the role of the KC(M) was quite significant in increasing its vote share from central Kerala.

Table 1 : Kerala Assembly Election 2021 Verdict : Table shows the seats and percentage of votes won by the political parties belonging to the three coalitions (LDF, UDF and NDA)

Front/Party	Seats	Vote(%)
LDF		
CPI(M)	62	25.38
CPI	17	7.58
KC (M)	5	3.28
JD(S)	2	1.28
NCP	2	0.99
Others	11	6.77
TOTAL	99	45.28
UDF		
INC	21	25.12
IUML	15	8.27
RSP	0	1.17
Others	5	4.85
TOTAL	41	39.41
NDA		
BJP	0	11.30
BDJS and Others	0	3.32
TOTAL	0	12.40
Others	0	2.91

Source: Election Commission of India, <https://results.eci.gov.in/Result2021/partywiseresult-S11.htm?st=S11> accessed on June 7 2021.

Pro-incumbency Factors

The CSDS study noted several reasons for the pro-incumbency factors in the election. There were several challenges faced by the LDF government, especially the disaster management of the two massive floods and the COVID-19 pandemic situation. But the effective management of the crisis situations under

the leadership of Pinarayi Vijayan received much recognition from the general public. The CSDS data explains the widespread support from the voters. The data shows that 36.2% of voters supported Pinarayi Vijayan to become the next Chief Minister; the second choice was for Oommen Chandy with 17.8% support, followed by K.K.Shylaja, Health Minister of Kerala, with 3% and Ramesh Chennithala, opposition leader, with 2.5%. The study shows that three-fourth of the voters (73%) consider the performance of the LDF government as best.

The CSDS data noted that seven out of ten voters (72%) were satisfied with the effective management of COVID-19 by the LDF government. The survey data shows a high satisfaction rate among the voters regarding the work done by the LDF government (Table:2). Similarly, on the matters which directly affect the ordinary people, like medical facilities in government hospitals, the status of government schools, supply of electricity, supply of drinking water and public transport service, majority of the voters said it improved comparing with the previous UDF government (Table:3).

As per the CSDS post-poll data 2021, the general mood of the people was in favour of the LDF government. When asked about the best party to run the administration in Kerala, 42% of the voters backed the LDF, and 30.3% of voters supported the UDF. Similar views of the respondents in favour of the LDF include party for the development (LDF 41%, UDF 32) and party for controlling price rise (LDF 37%, UDF 28%). While comparing the previous UDF government, 45% of the respondents said the present LDF was the best, and only 28% of respondents supported the UDF. The voters rated the LDF better than the UDF on many subjects. (Table:4).

Table: 2 : Satisfaction Level of the Voters

Subject matter	Satisfied (fully and somewhat)	Dissatisfied (fully and somewhat)	No Response
Food Kit Distribution	83	10	1
Work done by the LDF government in Kerala	73	22	5
Work done by the NDA Government at the Centre(so far)	38	56	6

Source: CSDS data unit 2021. All figures are percentages rounded off to the next digit.

Table: 3 : Performance of the Government

Work done by the LDF govt. last five years comparing the previous UDF Government.	Improved	Deteriorated	Remain the same	No Response
Medical facilities in Govt. hospitals	73	17	5	5
Condition of Roads	66	22	8	3
Supply of Electricity	65	27	5	3
Supply of Drinking water	52	32	10	7
Condition of Government Schools	72	17	4	7
Public transportation service	51	32	11	6

Source: CSDS data unit 2021. All figures are percentages rounded off to the next digit.

Table: 4 : Evaluation of Parties/Fronts

Topics	LDF	UDF	NDA/ BJP	Others	No Response
1. Best party for running the administration of Kerala	43	30	8	2	17
2. Best party for people like you	41	32	8	2	17
3. Best party for protecting Malayalee culture	38	31	9	1	21
4. Best party for increasing job opportunities in Kerala	37	32	8	1	21
5. Best party for religious harmony in Kerala	38	32	8	2	20
6. Best party for protecting the interest of your religion	35	30	10	2	23
7. Best party for protecting the interest of your caste-community	35	30	9	2	23
8. Best party for controlling price rise	37	28	7	3	25

Source: CSDS data unit 2021. All figures are percentages rounded off to the next digit.

Impact of Election Campaign

In terms of reaching out to people, the data shows that six in every ten voters in the state was approached by all the three alliances in the state, which is a clear testimony that all the parties were making sure that no stone is left unturned in terms of campaigning and visibility. However, among those who were approached by all the three alliances, LDF had an advantage as 43 percent of them voted for the party, 35 percent voted for UDF and 18 percent of the NDA. Only a tiny percentage of the population is involved in the election campaign, as per the data of the CSDS 2021. The study noted that 16% of the voters attend an election meeting, rally or procession, 13% took part in a march or rally, and 11% were involved in the door-to-door canvassing. Furthermore, 47% of voters watched election related programmes or events on TV, phone or computer. The parties used multiple platforms, like phone, voice message, SMS, and WhatsApp for the election campaign. In the CSDS study, the LDF is slightly ahead of other parties in using these platforms. The data shows that 27% of voters received election campaign communications from the LDF, while 20% of voters received such communications from the UDF. The percentage of the voters who received similar communication from the NDA is only 11%.

Response to the Allegations against the Government

The opposition parties had attacked the LDF government for a series of scams. The most serious one was the gold smuggling case in which the Principal Secretary of the Chief Minister was involved. The NDA government was too interested in investigating this scam with the help of central agencies like Customs, National Investigation Agency (NIA), Enforcement Directorate (ED) etc. However, they could not find evidence of any political involvement in the case. Other scams include the corruption and impropriety accusations in charges against KIIFB officials of violating the Foreign Exchange Act, corruption and accusations in charges of kickbacks to employees of the Life Mission Housing Scheme etc. The CSDS study finds that a vast number of voters had either not heard of these scams or did not know whether these charges were correct or not (Table:5). As such, both the UDF and NDA failed to damage the popular image of the LDF government.

Table: 5 : Response to Scams

Issues	Genuine	False/ motivated	Not sure/ Not heard	No Response
Accusations in charges against CM Vijayan in the gold smuggling”foreign currency case	32	27	38	3
Charges of non transparency in the deep-sea fishing deal with a US firm	29	20	47	4
The corruption and impropriety accusations in charges against KIIFB officials of violating foreign exchange act	34	24	39	3
Corruption and impropriety accusations in charges of kickbacks to employees of Life Mission housing scheme	32	21	44	4

Source: CSDS data unit 2021. All figures are percentages rounded off to the next digit.

Caste/Community Voting Trends

The social base of Kerala has a crucial role in determining the verdict in elections. In terms of proportion of the population, this is more applicable to the case of minorities (Muslims 27% and Christians 18%), Ezhavas (26%), Nairs (14%) and SCs (8%). One of the crucial trends noticed among the minorities in the previous elections was the narrow shift of votes between LDF and UDF against the incumbent governments. However, this trend was not found in the 2021 election. Instead, the vote of minorities increased in favour of the LDF. In 2011 when the UDF won the election, the Muslim vote share for the LDF was 31%. But when the LDF won the 2016 election, their vote share increased to 35%. The Muslim vote share increased further to 39% in the 2021 election. The same is the case of the vote share of Christians. Their vote share to LDF increased from 27% in 2011 to 35% in 2016 and 39% in 2021. As these minorities have a 45% population in Kerala, their support had a pivotal role in the LDF sweep in the 2021 election. Another notable trend in this respect was improving the vote share received from the Ezhavas from the 2016 election. The LDF had a substantial Ezhava vote share in the 2011 election. But despite its victory in 2016 election, the vote share from the Ezhavas lost considerably ie. from 64% to 49%. In 2021, it increased to 53%, which was an important factor to compensate for the decline of the vote share from the Nairs. The LDF vote share noted a similar increase (except OBC) from all other categories (See the Table:6).

Table: 6 : Party Preference of Major Communities and Castes

	2011			2016			2021		
	LDF	UDF	NDA	LDF	UDF	NDA	LDF	UDF	NDA
Nairs	42	43	12	45	20	33	32	38	27
Other Upper Castes	30	39	28	36	53	11	27	35	32
Ezhavas	64	26	7	49	28	18	53	21	23
Other OBCs	59	31	7	49	27	19	61	17	18
SCs	64	26	8	51	22	23	69	23	7
Muslims	31	65	1	35	58	3	39	58	1
Christians	27	68	1	35	51	10	39	57	2

Source: CSDS data unit 2021. All figures are percentages rounded off to the next digit.

Voting Trends: Age, Gender, Locality and Economic Class

The voting trends of different categories of Kerala electorate present a very complex picture. The LDF received the highest support from youth, as illustrated in table 7. The young voters up to 35 (about 29% of the total electorates) extended huge support to the LDF comparing with their support to the UDF and NDA. However, among the age category of 36 and above, there is only a marginal difference between the LDF and the UDF. Similarly, the LDF received the men's highest support (47%), while the UDF received only 37%. However, the LDF received only 4% more of women votes (Table:8). The LDF is more popular in rural areas - 48% votes against 39% received by the UDF. However, in the urban areas, the LDF received only two percent more votes comparing the UDF votes. Among the economic categories, the poor and lower-class support favoured the LDF, while the UDF received an upper hand among the middle and rich categories. (Table:9).

Table: 7 : Age-wise Response

	% of Population	LDF	UDF	NDA	Others
Up to 25 years	11	48	37	10	5
26-35 years	18	52	33	11	4
36-45 years	18	44	40	14	2
46-55 years	21	43	41	13	2
56 and above	32	43	42	12	3

Source: CSDS data unit 2021. All figures are percentages rounded off to the next digit.

Table: 8 : Gender - and Locality Response

	% of Population	LDF	UDF	NDA	Others
Male	49	46	37	14	3
Female	51	45	41	11	3
Rural	53	48	39	11	2
Urban	47	42	40	14	4

Source: CSDS data unit 2021. All figures are percentages rounded off to the next digit.

Table: 9 : Economic Class

	% of Population	LDF	UDF	NDA	Others
Poor	18	53	30	15	2
Lower	27	46	36	15	3
Middle	42	41	46	10	3
Rich	13	41	47	8	4

Source: CSDS data unit 2021. All figures are percentages rounded off to the next digit.

Election Strategies of Political Parties

The most notable election strategy was introduced by the LDF, where 33 members of the legislative assembly (MLAs), who have completed two consecutive terms, including Finance Minister Thomas Isaac were not even fielded.⁴ As the 'captain', Pinarai Vijayan led the LDF campaign by highlighting the achievements of the five-year rule. On the other hand, the UDF and BJP used the LDF government's handling

of the Sabarimala issue as the most serious offence. The Supreme Court verdict favouring the women entry into Sabarimala in September 2018 led to a series of issues in Kerala as the government tried to implement it. This led to massive protests led by the BJP and UDF, which badly affected the image of the LDF government. The Lokniti-CSDS post-poll data 2019 had found the Sabarimala issue handling one of the crucial reasons for the LDF debacle in the Lok Sabha election 2019. However, the same campaign in the local-body polls held in December 2020 did not affect the LDF's performance. The CSDS data 2021 cites that the voters did not view the Sabarimala issue as a factor in evaluating the LDF government's performance. This spoiled the election campaign strategy of UDF and NDA. An essential factor attributed to the poor performance of the Congress party was the factional feud on the selection of candidates.

Since the 2014 Lok Sabha election, the BJP led NDA was posing a challenge to Kerala's existing bipolar coalition politics. This was further strengthened when it obtained an Assembly seat in the 2016 election with a vote share of 14.6%. In the Lok Sabha election 2019, its vote share increased to 14.8%. Moreover, in the local-body polls, the BJP failed to make any progress from its previous position. But in the 2021 election, the BJP faced a severe setback, unable to win even a single seat. The CSDS data indicates that the anti-incumbency factor against the central government was vital among the Kerala electorate. The work done so far by the NDA was stated unsatisfactory by six out of ten (62%) voters. Moreover, the issues of the farmers' rally, Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC) led to opposition to the Narendra Modi government. Last but not the least, the BJP-led NDA was not considered by the Kerala voters as the third alternative owing to its unacceptability with the majority section of the population.

Conclusion

The personality of Pinarayi Vijayan, his decision-making at the time of crisis, the work done by his government and various development and welfare projects helped the LDF return to power for a historic second term. The most notable credit for the LDF was its effective management of the major crises, especially two massive floods and the COVID-19 pandemic. The voters gave full marks to the LDF's role in improving the infrastructure facilities, especially the roads, government hospitals, government schools etc. Here, the support of all the leading communities and caste groups was also an essential factor for the LDF victory. Among the voters, the support of youngsters was crucial for the success of the LDF. Similarly, the LDF received more support from economically backward groups and people from rural areas. Last but not the least, the new coalition partners of the LDF, especially the KC(M), helped to inroad into the UDF strongholds. Above all, the voters rejected the insignificant issues raised by the opposition parties against the LDF government.

Notes

1. The United Front under C. Achutha Menon formed the Government in 1969, following the resignation of EMS Namboodiripad. That government got a second term in the 1970 election. C. Achutha Menon was in power till March 1977. The United Front led by him returned to power with a thumping majority of 111 seats in the election held in 1977.

References

1. Ibrahim, K.M.Sajad (2019): 'Decisive Vote for UDF in Kerala', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.LIV, No.34, August 24, p.16.
2. *The Hindu*, 14 October, 2020 : <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/kcm-mani-faction-to-join-ldf/article32851475.ece> accessed on June 7 2021.
3. *The Hindu*, 12 February, 2021 : <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/cec-nod-for-mani-as-kcm-chairman/article33816553.ece> accessed on June 7 2021.
4. Unnithan, P.S.Gopikrishnan (2021) : 'CPI(M) releases candidate list in Kerala, 33 sitting MLAs dropped', *India Today*, 10 March 2021. <https://www.indiatoday.in/elections/kerala-assembly-polls-2021/story/ncp-seat-sharing-with-ldf-to-contest-on-three-seats-1777578-2021-03-10> accessed on 9 June 2021.

LDF 2.0: Grounds for the Left Front Victory in Kerala

K.M. Seethi

The victory of the left front has sent many signals. First and foremost, no major communal mobilization would work in the state given the complex combination of caste and religious demographics in the state. Nearly 45 per cent of the population (of the total 35 million) consists of religious minorities (Muslims and Christians). Nearly 40 per cent of the population consists of backward and depressed classes of the Hindu population. This naturally demands negotiations at different levels for a secular option under coalition dispensations. Religious and caste factors would have been deployed by political fronts at the time of elections (including in the selection of candidates in some constituencies with a particular demographic variant), but the state witnessed people voting beyond religious lines.

Even as new waves of COVID-19 were sweeping across India; West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Assam and the Union Territory of Puducherry went to polls in April-May 2021. The results were quite disappointing to the Indian National Congress (INC) in all the states, and a reminder to the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) in South India and West Bengal. While Assam and Puducherry provided a relief for the BJP-led front, and West Bengal having provided more seats to BJP, its strategy and campaigns in Kerala and Tamil Nadu did not bear any fruit. Even when Modi wave prevailed underway in 2014 and 2019, Kerala and Tamil Nadu ably resisted it.

The poll results in Kerala were more or less on expected lines as all pre-poll surveys, and exit polls had predicted the return of the Left Democratic Front (LDF). For the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M)-led LDF, the results was historic. The left front swept the polls, winning 99 of the 140 seats, an all-time record. It had secured 91 seats in the last elections. The INC-led United Democratic Front (UDF) faced one of its worst defeats securing only 41 seats. The Congress Party's seats got reduced to 21. The BJP, this time drew blank when it failed to retain its lone seat in the last Assembly election. The state of Kerala has been experimenting with 'bipolar' politics for quite a long time, power alternated between the UDF and the LDF in every election. This time the anti-incumbency factor has been made quite irrelevant notwithstanding a heap of issues raised by the opposition parties.

The victory of the left front has sent many signals. First and foremost, no major communal mobilization would work in the state given the complex combination of caste and religious demographics in the state. Nearly 45 per cent of the population (of the total 35 million) consists of religious minorities (Muslims and Christians). Nearly 40 per cent of the population consists of backward and depressed classes of the Hindu population. This naturally demands negotiations at different levels for a secular option under coalition dispensations. Religious and caste factors would have been deployed by political fronts at the time of elections (including in the selection of candidates in some constituencies with a particular demographic variant), but the state witnessed people voting beyond religious lines.

A classic example is how people rejected the temple entry issue on Sabarimala. The wrangle over women's entry into the Sabarimala temple (following the Supreme Court verdict in 2018 that granted permission to women of all ages to enter the temple) reached a high point in the local body elections held in December 2020 with the UDF and the BJP-led NDA blowing it out of proportions. But the left front clinched a remarkable victory in the local body elections. This was repeated in the April 2021 election. The results showed that the Sabarimala issue did not make any impact in the polls.

A similar issue was also deployed by political parties-based on the 'cultural logic' of Islamophobia.

The Hindutva forces were in the forefront in the campaigns, but secular parties too fell in line occasionally. Issues here varied from ‘Love Jihad’ to Triple Talaq and Hagia Sophia. It seems these issues did not matter at all in electoral terms.

Some important decisions by the LDF government has a positive impact like providing 10 per cent reservation to the economically weaker sections (EWS) and the other backward class (OBC) reservation to Nadar Christian communities. Moreover, the left front government has been so committed and determined in resisting the Hindutva agenda. For example, the LDF government took a decision that the Kerala would not implement the controversial Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA), 2019 passed by Parliament given its inherent religious discriminatory provisions. It also piloted and passed a resolution in the State Assembly. More importantly, the LDF also took a bold stand on the controversial farm regulations brought in by the Modi Government. Eventually, the State Assembly passed a resolution demanding that the Union Government cancel the contentious anti-peasant laws. The resolution was passed unanimously with the opposition UDF supporting it.

The LDF meticulously drafted its election manifesto after consultations with a range of stakeholders and experts in different areas. This seldom happens in electoral politics. A sort of bottom-up approach was found appropriate in this exercise of drafting a manifesto for change.

Social Securitization

The hallmark of the LDF manifesto (2021-26) was ‘social securitization’ with several programmes that sought to address questions of livelihood and social security. The manifesto put across a range of employment options which-through the role of both ‘provider and facilitator’-the state government aimed by generating 2 million opportunities for the educated through skill advancement and industrial restructuring. It also sought to bring in livelihood opportunities for half a million people in the farm sector and an additional one million in the non-farm sectors. Given its history of promoting start-ups, the manifesto assured that 15,000 new ventures will be initiated which would be generating an additional 1 lakh new jobs. Likewise, the manifesto promised to raise 3 lakh Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), from its present number of 1.4 lakh, which would also bring in more than half a million new employments.

A major aspect of the LDF social securitization scheme is its welfare pensions. When the LDF took charge in 2016, the amount was Rs.600 and that too was pending payment for more than a year and a half. The LDF raised the amount to Rs. 1600 and it promised to raise it to Rs. 2500 per month. The manifesto also wanted the women engaged in unpaid household work also to be included in the pension scheme. Honorarium for all scheme workers would be raised. It was also aimed that the minimum wages would be increased to Rs 700 daily or Rs 21,000 per month.

Among the other promises were an industrial investment totalling Rs.10,000 crore, creation of an electronic and pharmaceutical hub, 60 per cent increase in agriculture income, piped drinking water for households, universal broad-band internet coverage at an affordable rate, women empowerment, emphasis on water transport, environment protection, insulating the State against the ravages of climate change and hunger, and corruption-free State.

Housing for the poor has been one of the major priorities of the LDF government. During its tenure it had already completed 2.8 lakh houses and another 1.5 lakh more houses would be added soon through LIFE mission and other agencies. The manifesto also aims at building 5 lakh houses in the next five years mainly through apartment complexes for landless homeless, a total housing scheme for SC/ST families and one acre farmland to Schedule Tribes.

Kerala seems to be the only state which makes appropriation for SCP/TSP funds proportionate to their population in the state. The manifesto adheres to disburse funds for Tribal Sub-Plan through *Oorukoottams* (tribal neighbourhood groups) and offers MSP for minor forest products.

Health has also been a major area of state intervention, particularly in the background of the new

wave of the pandemic. The state had already upgraded around 500 primary health centres to family health centres and made super specialty services available even at taluk and district hospitals. The LDF promises to extend the out-patient services in FHCs twice a day. The manifesto proposed free in-patient treatment up to Rs 5 lakh for 20 lakh families in both public and private hospitals and others would be covered under Karunya scheme for treatment up to Rs 2 lakhs.

The LDF manifesto also makes provisions for a lot of infrastructure projects which included power highways, gas pipelines, six-laning of national highways and a state wide fibre optic network aimed at digital revolution. The manifesto, while ensuring to protect the rights of the working class, also extends full co-operation to investors assuring that the LDF would take Kerala to the top ten Indian states in 'Ease of Doing Business' rankings. The LDF door to door campaigns reflected this commitment and promises while the UDF campaigns harped on transient issues.

Successful Crisis Management

Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan was the principal architect of an adaptive leadership of the LDF cabinet. The tenure of the LDF witnessed unprecedented crises—from the demonetization (2016) to Cyclone Ockhi (2017), two major floods (2018 and 2019), the outbreak of the Nipah virus disease (2019), to the most devastating pandemic, COVID-19 with its continuing repercussions for its migrant population living across the world. All caused tremendous pressure on the state's economy and livelihood options, but the pandemic has literally strangled the system necessitating health emergency measures and social securitization.

Chief Minister, Pinarayi Vijayan's able handling of the crises won laurels from all quarters. During the two major floods, this was so evident and even an average citizen in the state began to look upon the Chief Minister with considerable admiration and support. Social scientist Shiv Visvanathan noted that Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan was "a hands-on administrator" who "set a style emphasising concern with no self-denial, a clear-cut statement of the scale of the problem and the long-range effort required to address it." He said: "Mr. Vijayan has no time for blame games or electoral politics. His even-tempered handling of the Centre and the southern States reflects a maturing of leadership. By avoiding nitpicking, he has brought a new maturity to the discourse on floods. There are no blame games but he is clear about the chain of responsibility." Shiv Visvanathan wrote that Mr. Vijayan "signalled that his concern is with people first, regardless of ideology or religion. He has made sure that relief is not parochialised or seen through a party lens. He might be of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or CPI(M), but he has convincingly acted as the Chief Minister of Kerala. He is clear about focus and priority, clear that this is not the time for electoral bickering or factional politics" (*The Hindu*, 28 August 2018).

Pinarayi Vijayan continued this adaptive leadership style in subsequent crises also. His evening press conferences, on all days of the crises, infused confidence in the people. In the process, he also sought to develop and sustain a different sort of 'communicative rationality.' This continued not just for a few days, but months after months since the 2018 flood disaster. Moreover, during the pandemic, the Chief Minister also ensured that during the lockdown, and even months after that, every family in the state would get free food kits, distributed through the public distribution outlets. A lot of other medical emergency measures were also put in place.

The 2021 electoral verdict is a vindication of the LDF claim that the people of the state who were kept close to their hearts would not desert them. The landslide victory is also seen as an acknowledgement of its model of governance and development.

A few days before the elections, T.M. Thomas Isaac, Finance Minister in the outgoing Kerala Cabinet said in an interview with *The Hindu* that it was "not just a re-election that the Left front is seeking in Kerala, but a mandate to build on the meticulously crafted model of governance and development in the years to come." He said, "We want to make Kerala the Yenan of India."

According to Isaac, "Kerala innovated and fashioned a model of fast-paced infrastructure growth to

plug the deficit in that area, while simultaneously retaining its focus on welfare. Using the Kerala Infrastructure Investment Fund Board (KIIFB) vehicle, works that would have taken a quarter of a century to materialise in normal course were undertaken in a very short span of time. A beginning has been made and this has to be taken forward in such a way that it becomes a model for India.”

When Isaac talks about the ‘Yenan of India’ he evidently has a different development entity in mind—different from what Victor M. Fic had referred to way back in 1970. The context of Fic’s volume *Kerala: The Yanan of India: Rise of Communist Power 1937-1969* was clear. Kerala had emerged, in 1957, as the first Indian state to have a Communist government through ballot box. He situated the Kerala experience of communism in the broader context of developments since 1937, which he ended with a host of developments in the last years of 1960s. Fic concluded his work with the following statement:

If for the Communist forces Kerala represents Yanan where the basic strategic and tactical devices have been pioneered and applied, then for the forces committed to social change and progress under parliamentary democracy, Kerala should represent a laboratory of techniques which should have been developed and used and had not been, but which still can be resorted to and applied elsewhere to bring about the desirable alignments and winning combinations to give expression to the people’s will and checkmate the Communist calculus of power. Communism in India has been advancing during the past decades not because it represents in the eyes of millions of her poor an intrinsically superior and more efficient model of nation-building and modernization than can be provided by parliamentary democracy, but mainly because of the division of democratic camps and the ability of the former to maximise power through the united front and coalition politics.

Apparently, Fic’s analysis ended up with a position that the communist party’s ability to intervene in social issues was limited. The efforts put in place by successive left coalition dispensations, including land reforms and social security and welfare measures—of course within all limitations—seemed to have been underestimated. Even the debates on Kerala’s Development Experience (‘KMD’) that emerged in the 1970s offered a different trajectory of the left intervention.

It is true that the advancement of the communist parties in India has been made difficult due to a number of factors. The rise of the right-wing communal forces and its patronage (through covert and overt means) by successive governments created an atmospheric setting for appropriation of institutions and policy regimes. In the post-emergency scenario, particularly after 1980s, this changeover—from a liberal setting to a combination of neoliberal statehood and cultural nation-building rhetoric—resulted in a complex situation of social insecurity and police raj. Consequently, the level of uneven development across states in India is so palpable. It is in this context that Thomas Isaac put across a new pathway of governance and development.

References

1. CPI(M) (2021): *The LDF Manifesto, 2021*, <https://cpimkerala.org/manifesto-2021>
2. Election Commission of India (2021): “Party-wise Trends and Results,” <https://results.eci.gov.in/Result2021/partywiseresult-S11.htm?st=S11>
3. *Interview with Thomas Isaac, The Hindu, 13 March*, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/aim-is-to-make-kerala-the-yanan-of-india-isaac/article34062497.ece>
4. K.M. Seethi (2021): “The Left Front Victory in Kerala: A New ‘Yenan of India’ in the Making?” *Eurasia Review*, 4 May, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/04052021-the-left-front-victory-in-kerala-a-new-yanan-of-india-in-the-making-analysis/>
5. K.M. Seethi (2016): “Left Front Victory in Kerala: A Verdict for ‘Social Re-engineering’” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 51, Issue No. 22, 28 May, <https://www.epw.in/journal/2016/22/2016-state-assembly-elections/left-front-victory-kerala.html>
6. Victor M. Fic (1970): *Kerala: The Yanan of India: Rise of Communist Power 1937-1969*, Bombay: Nachiketa Publications.

Verdict for Continuity: Kerala Assembly Elections 2021

**M.R. Biju
& M.R.B. Anantha Padmanabha**

In this paper an attempt has been made to examine the messages emanating from the assembly election 2021 in Kerala. This study is categorised under four parts. Part one examines the significance of poll manifestoes of the major players in the state politics - UDF, LDF and the NDA. Part two unfolds the major electoral issues. The central theme of discussion of Part three is on the polling statistics and the concluding part makes a critical inquiry on people's verdict. The overall poll analysis undoubtedly shows that a mix of policies in which development and welfare measures were added in the right proportion and executed over the last 60 months paved the way for the spectacular victory of the LDF.

Prelude

The Election Commission of India (ECI) made the formal announcement for the assembly election in the state of Kerala on 26th February 2021, along with the states of Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, Assam and the Union Territory of Puducherry. The election to the Kerala assembly indicates a new social compact that is taking place in the state. It also points to a realignment of Kerala's political landscape. The congress led United Democratic Front (UDF), the CPI(M) led Left Democratic Front (LDF) and the BJP led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) were in the fray. The BJP, long seen as a north Indian political party has made significant inroads in Kerala in the recent past and was hoping to emerge as a third Alternative through social engineering that included wooing a section of the Christians. But the CPI(M) led LDF with some daring political moves won a second term which is quite unusual in the state.

The CPI(M) decision to deny seats to several of its veterans have not been taken positively by its cadres. The party wooed Kerala Congress (Mani) from the UDF into the LDF, which became embarrassing to the party to explain before the cadres. Charges of corruption and nepotism, including a multi-agency investigation into the links between the former Principal secretary to the Chief Minister and a smuggling racket have taken the shine off the governance record of the left government. The Chief Minister, however tried to turn this in his favour by claiming to be at the receiving end of the political conspiracy by the Central Investigating Agencies at the behest of the BJP. On the other hand, the Congress tried its best to keep the leadership squabbles within by not formally announcing a leader, but signalling that the former Chief Minister Oommen Chandy could get another term. The party was struggling hard to hold on to its traditional base. The BJP in Kerala had never imagined itself as a serious contender for power. Internal factional rivalries within the party intensified during the election. No doubt the assembly election was indicative of a new social compact that is taking place in Kerala.

In this context, it has to be added that in the previous assembly election of 2016 the LDF led by CPI(M) secured majority by capturing 91 seats and 43.1 percent votes, defeating the Congress led UDF which won 47 seats and 38.6 percent votes respectively. The BJP led NDA won 1 seat and secured 14.9 percent of the votes. In the polls, the CPI(M) bagged 26.5 percent votes followed by the Congress with 23.7 percent. It has to be added that in the 2019 Lok Sabha Polls the Congress secured 37.3 percent of the votes followed by the CPI(M) which won 26 percent. Seat wise, the UDF captured 19 out of the total 20 seats. The remaining seat went in favour of the LDF. In the 2021 assembly election, unlike the previous election NDA posed a potential threat to the bipolar political order of the state in several places.

Voters and Candidates

As per the electoral statistics of the Election Commission of India, 27446039 voters figure in the integrated electoral rolls published for the 2021 assembly election. Of it 14162025 are women, 13283724 are men and 290 are transgenders. Non-resident Indian voters number in 93415 in the state. Among them 6086 are women, 87318 are men and 11 are transgender voters. Malappuram has the highest number of voters, 3321038. The district has 1664017 women voters, 1656996 male voters and 25 transgender voters. Wayanad with 616110 voters has the lowest number of electors. It has 312870 female voters, 303239 male voters and 1 transgender voter. The electorate in other districts are Kasaragod (1058337), Kannur (2061041), Kozhikode (2558679), Palakkad (2294739), Thrissur (2612032), Ernakulam (2649340), Idukki (888608), Kottayam (1593575), Alappuzha (1782900), Pathanamthitta (1054100), Kollam (2135830) and Thiruvananthapuram (2819710). Of the total voters 5.18 lakh voters are in the age group of 18-19. There are 622064 voters in the age group of 80 plus. More than 4 lakh voters are eligible for postal ballots.

A total of 957 candidates were left in the fray for the assembly election. A total number of 2180 nominations were filed across the state. The number had plunged to 1061 after the primary scrutiny. Malappuram had the highest number of candidates at 111 while Wayanad has the lowest at 18. The filling of nominations had opened on 12th March in the state with the issue of notification by the election commission of India. The number of candidates is much lower this time compared to 2016 election. This time 1119 nominations were rejected on various ground during the scrutiny.

Keeping this in background, an attempt has been made in this study to examine the messages emanating from the assembly election 2021 in Kerala. This study is categorised under four parts. Part one examines the significance of poll manifestoes of the major players in the state politics - UDF, LDF and the NDA. Part two unfolds the major electoral issues. The central theme of discussion of Part three is on the polling statistics and the concluding part makes a critical inquiry on people's verdict.

Part I - Poll Manifestoes

United Democratic Front (UDF) and Major Promises

The United Democratic Front election manifesto guaranteed a minimum monthly income of Rs. 6000 to Kerala's most impoverished families. The unconditional cash transfer under NYAY (*Nyuntam Aay Yojana*) would reduce income inequalities, mitigate starvation and help indigent households escape the worst deprivations of daily life. The scheme would increase spending, spur demand and catalyse the economy. Welfarism seemed to take centre stage in the UDF manifesto. The opposition attempted to outdo the ruling front by promising a monthly welfare pension of Rs. 3000 instead of the 2500 guaranteed by the LDF. The UDF also appeared to cast its net far and wide to draw voters of various income brackets, social background, employment status, age and gender. It seemed social welfare and subsidies trumped economic constraints in the UDF manifesto. The UDF's 2016 election promise to prohibit liquor found no mention in the 2021 manifesto. The UDF targeted home makers aged between 40 and 60 by vowing to transfer to them 2,000 monthly if not already covered by the minimum income guarantee scheme. The UDF fixed the minimum daily wage at Rs. 700. It also proposed a law to recover 5.5 lakh acres from illegal owners and accord the land to landless tribal people and Dalits. At a stroke, the UDF had sought to eclipse the free ration and food kits supplied by the LDF government during the COVID-19 pandemic. The UDF manifesto put immense stock in subsidised health care. It would underwrite the medical expenses of cancer, heart, kidney, organ transplant and haemophilia patients and promised 'no bill hospitals' in the public health sector. One lakh unemployed youth would get two-wheelers at half the market price. An ex gratia one-time payment of 5,000 is on the cards for auto rickshaw and taxi drivers. Free housing for five lakh low-income families and maternity allowance for Scheduled Caste/Tribe mothers are other high lights. The UDF matched the LDF by promising a 250 minimum price for rubber. It would write off agriculture loans up to 2 lakh. It vowed to subsidise public transport and self-owned auto rickshaw and taxi fuel to make travel more affordable. On the political

front, the UDF promised a law to defend the Sabarimala faith. It promised to stop back-door appointments, make it mandatory for government departments to report vacancies to the Public Service Commission and preserve the high seas for traditional fishers.

Left Democratic Front (LDF) and Poll Assurances

The Left Democratic Front (LDF) election manifesto promised increased spending on social welfare, health and education. It pledged modernised transport and urban infrastructure, industrial corridors, high-speed rail connectivity, free housing for the poor, enhanced social welfare pensions, improved public services, better child and elderly care, rapid re skilling of unemployed youth and creation of a knowledge-based world class economy.

Reversing inequality, protecting secular and progressive values, defending federalism, raising the standard of living, and building a welfare state were the overarching political imperatives of the front. The front would increase monthly welfare pension from Rs. 1,600 to Rs. 2,500. An estimated 60 lakh persons would benefit. It would include homemakers in the expanded pension net.

The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes would get free and modern housing. The LDF announced special schemes to rehabilitate Gulf returnees and further bolster the public distribution system. It promised 40 lakh new employment opportunities, a 5,000-crore coastal development package, welfare schemes for taxi and auto rickshaw drivers, coir and agriculture workers, traditional seafaring fishers, toddy tappers and cashew workers. A 50% hike in farm wages was a key election promise.

The manifesto emphasised the state's tourism potential. It projected future Kerala as a Mecca of liberal arts, a magnet for creative persons and an oasis of secular and progressive values. The LDF manifesto strived to shore up its core base while attempting to woo fence-voters as it approached a tight three-cornered electoral contest on April 6. The open-handed blend of increased social welfare benefits with stress on infrastructure development, reservation for economically disadvantaged forward community persons, resistance to majoritarian politics and strident opposition to the Centre's "trespasses" in to federalism lie at the heart of the LDF's election pitch.

National Democratic Alliance (NDA) and Poll Promises

The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led NDA manifesto leaned heavily on populist measures targeted at low-income families. It reaffirmed the alliance's core commitment to nationalistic politics. Union Minister of Environment, Forest and Climate Change Prakash Javadekar unveiled the declaration. The manifesto promised employment for at least one member in each family. An increased social welfare pension of Rs. 3,500 a month, free housing, piped drinking water and power for the poor. Five acres of land to deprived SC/ST families, free laptop for high school students, the promise of a hunger-free Kerala, six free cooking gas cylinders for BPL families, a monthly medical grant of Rs. 5,000 to in-patients from BPL households, travel concession for senior citizens and fair wages are the other highlights. The BPL families would receive medical assistance up to 5 lakh under the Ayushman Bharath scheme. The NDA would open Jana Oushadhi centres in all panchayats. It also promised an AIIMS centre in Kerala and upgrading district hospitals and medical colleges in the State to speciality and super-speciality centres. The NDA promised to be a bulwark against the global Islamist threat and terrorism. It pledged a state law against 'Love Jihad'. It vowed to free temple administration from political control and hand the institutions over to collectives of devotees. The coalition promised to target terrorism, anti-national organisations and end political violence in Kerala for good.

The manifesto seemed to hark back to the principles of "integral humanism" pro pounded by the Hindu right wing ideologue Deendayal Upadhyaya. The manifesto promised to transform panchayats to gram swaraj moored to self-sufficiency in food production, housing, drinking water supply and hygiene.

The NDA vowed enhanced rural road, internet and power connectivity, electric crematoria and garbage disposal units in villages and rapid re-skilling of rural youth to meet the demand of the global economy. A six-lane highway linking Kaliyakkavila in the south to Manjeswaram in the north would open up the State's hinterlands for development. New airports in Idukki, Wayanad and Sabarimala, development of minor ports, a new road parallel to the Thamarassery Ghat in Wayanad are other election pledges.

Professor Pulapre Balakrishnan has made a detailed study on the three political manifestoes presented by the UDF, LDF and the NDA (The Hindu, 24 March, 2021). It would be quite appropriate to reproduce his comments and findings which can be summed up as under:

- The manifestoes have been received with scepticism by the public, for they could not but have wondered how the fresh expenditures will be funded. Kerala today has one of the highest levels of public debt per capita among India's States. Without fresh resource mobilisation of which intent there is no indication in either party's manifesto -enhanced public expenditure assures higher levels of public debt in the future.
- Individual well-being enabled by public action is a perfectly legitimate aspiration in a democracy. However, what distinguishes the decades' long practice in Kerala is that it is a form of welfarism far from what is generally understood when we speak of a welfare state
- What distinguishes a genuine welfare state from the Kerala Model is that in a genuine welfare state, benefits are financed by taxes. There were two considerations underlying this design in the original. The first was the crucial issue of financial viability. The second was to give citizens a sense of ownership of the programmes, signifying that the welfare state is not some sort of munificence extended to them by the political class but something they had contributed to themselves.
- It is difficult to imagine that Kerala will be able to permanently fund its welfare schemes through borrowing. At least, that would only be possible at ever rising interest rates, leading to a higher fiscal burden, if not actually a debt trap. At that stage, the welfare schemes would have to end, or a Herculean effort to raise revenues would have to be initiated.

Part II

Electioneering

The LDF's perceived advantage was its high powered campaign projecting Pinarayi Vijayan as its brand icon. That advantage got zoomed in against the backdrop of the initial disarray in the UDF over the candidate selection. The UDF led by former Chief Minister Oomen Chandi and the leader of Opposition, Ramesh Chennithala conveniently chose to leave unanswered the question of who would lead the government if it came to power. The UDF relied on road shows by Rahul Gandhi and Priyanka Gandhi for its campaign. As for the BJP its election rallies were addressed by its top national leader including Narendra Modi, Amit Shah, Rajnath Singh, Yogi Adityanath which gave a boost to its electoral ambition in the state. The LDF tried to restrict the electioneering discourse to its development track record and social welfare initiatives such as pensions and distribution of ration kits etc. The sparring between the LDF and the UDF over Chennithala's disclosure of over 4 lakh multiple entries on the electoral rolls across the state further augmented the campaign's decibel levels.

Part III

Polling

The state went to the poll on 6th April 2021 in a single phase to elect its 15th Legislative Assembly. As per the data provided by the election commission of India the overall turnout figure for the state was 74.06

percent. The highest polling was recorded in Kunnamangalam constituency (81.52 percent) in Kozhikode district and the least was in Thiruvananthapuram constituency (61.85 percent). Out of the 27446039 eligible voters in the state 20327893 exercised their franchise. The district wise polling percentage are Thiruvananthapuram (70.04 percentage), Kollam (73.11 percent), Pathananthita (67.22), Alappuzha (74.71 percent), Kottayam, (72.21 percent), Idukki (70.41 percent), Ernakulam (74.13 percent), Trissur (73.77), Palakkad (76.25), Malapuram (74.31 percent) Kozhikode (78.34 percent), Wayanad (74.98 percent), Kannur (77.70 percent), Kasaragod (74.92 percent).

As cited earlier the average voter turn-out stood at a creditable 74.06 percent, though it was lower than the 2016 turnout of 77.35. The ruling Left front expressed confidence of retaining power with a comfortable majority. The UDF camp also expressed satisfaction over the voter turnout. According to the leader of the opposition, the people of Kerala expect a change and stated that the LDF government destroyed the state during the five year rule. To him as the left leaders and top officials were immersed in corruption a strong UDF wave was visible. The UDF should win anywhere between 75-85 seats. The BJP lead NDA hoped to make its presence felt with authoritative victories in 5-7 seats in addition to finishing second in about 10 seats. Significantly, the Sabarimala issue dominated the political discourse on the polling day. Chief Minister Pinaryi Vijayan claimed that Lord Ayyapa and all other gods would stand with the Left to which Congress leader A.K. Anthony retorted that the CM should first apologize to the lord for the Sabarimala issue.

The state also witnessed isolated incidents of violence in some districts like Thiruvanthapuram where CPI(M) and BJP workers clashed with each other. Violence was also reported in Haripad where CPI(M) and Congress workers fought each other. In Kannur, an IUML worker was hacked. In many closely fought constituencies the voting percentage remained relatively low with BJP's lone sitting seat Nemom recording 69.80 per cent compared to 74.11 per cent in 2016.

Legislative Assembly Polling Percentage in Kerala 1957 - 2016

Year of Poll	Polling Percentage	Year of Poll	Polling Percentage
1957	65.49%	1987	80.54%
1960	85.72%	1991	73.42%
1965	75.12%	1996	71.16%
1967	75.67%	2001	72.47%
1970	75.29%	2006	72.38%
1977	79.19%	2011	74.92%
1980	72.23%	2016	77.10%
1982	73.51%	2021	74.06%

Source: *The Malayala Manorama Daily, Kollam, 7th April 2021*

Part IV

People’s Verdict 2021

The Left Democratic Front (LDF) won the assembly election with an impressive tally of 99 out of 140 seats, which matches the victory of A.K. Antony led UDF in 2001 and V.S. Achuthanandan led LDF in 2006. In 2001 A.K. Antony emerged winner by bagging 99 seats and in 2006 V.S. Achuthanandan won by bagging 98 seats. Yet another example too can be traced from the political history of Kerala. In 1977 the United Front led by the Congress, CPI and the Muslim League was returned to power by capturing 111 out

of 146. Further the state of Kerala has a unique political record of alternating between the two Fronts in every five years. This record of four decades has been broken now and the LDF government has been voted to power with a two-third majority a second time after 1977. It becomes a landmark as it is rare for an incumbent government to retain power by capturing more seats than the previous time. A mix of policies in which development and welfare measures were added in the right proportion and executed over the last 60 months paved the way for the spectacular victory of the LDF. It is a new experience in the state politics after 1977. In other words the present victory of the LDF can be described as a well thought out political strategy coupled with political pragmatism and social engineering which helped the LDF to capture power. Certainly the entry of Loktantrik Janata Dal (LJD) and Kerala Congress (Mani), the formal induction of Indian National League (INL), the popularity of Pinarayi Vijayan in handling the governance in times of crisis and calamities and the goodwill generated through social security measures especially welfare pension scheme, distribution of food kits through ration shops have helped the Left in an enormous way. Further, the remarkable changes in the education and health sectors and the provision for housing for the poor under Life Mission Project also paid rich dividends for the Left.

Another reason for the spectacular return of the LDF was that after the humiliating defeat in the Lok Sabha Polls of 2019, the LDF took a strategic retreat in the Sabarimala women's entry issue. The civic polls held in November, 2020 was the testing ground for this strategy and the Left made huge gains out of it. The more accommodative stand cured the hurt feeling of majority communities and the reading of the Assembly Poll Results makes it clear that the LDF could win the sizeable number of Hindu votes along with minority votes that was mobilized through strong stands taken during issues such as beef ban and Citizen's Amendment Act. On the other hand, the strategy of UDF to field young, new faces did not fetch the desired results as voters seemed to have made their choices based on policies.

Further, the voting pattern in the poll showed that the party-wise vote share of the CPI(M) stood at 25.38% the Congress 25.12% and the BJP led NDA 12.47%. Incidentally, the vote share of the CPI(M) was 26.70% Congress 23.80% and the BJP led NDA 10.60% in the 2016 Assembly polls. Moreover, the voting pattern of the LDF further reveals that party heavy weights though secured huge margins, many sitting legislators and fresh faces failed to maintain the lead in the previous polls. The overall poll strategies further reveals that both the LDF and UDF secured more votes in 2021 polls compared to the earlier assembly elections of 2016 and Lok Sabha Elections of 2019. The LDF scored the 2.67% more votes this time than the earlier assembly polls and 10.73% more votes compared with the Lok Sabha Polls of 2019. For the UDF it was a marginal increase of 0.78% in 2021 with the earlier assembly polls 2016. But in the 2019 Lok Sabha Polls UDF won 19 out of 20 seats. Compared to Lok Sabha Polls its vote share went down to 7.87% this time. In contrast to it, the NDA recorded a less vote share (minus 429834 votes) this time compared 2016 assembly polls.

Regarding the total votes secured by various fronts, the LDF secured a total number of 8728934 votes (43.10%) in 2016 assembly polls. In 2019, it came down to 7140120 (35.08%) and in 2021 it went upto 9436990 (45.33%), an increase of 708056 compared to 2016 assembly polls. The UDF on the other hand got 7808743 (38.63%) votes in 2016. It went up to 9616265 (47.24%) in 2019. But it came down to 8194991 (39.37%) in 2021. Though the vote share of the UDF came down from 9616265 in Lok Sabha polls 2019 to 8194991 in 2021, compared to the 2016 assembly polls it showed an increase of 386248 votes. In contrast to the performance of both LDF and UDF, the BJP led NDA presented a downward picture in 2021. In 2016 the NDA secured a total number of 3020830 votes and in 2019 it increased its tally slightly by securing 3161922. In 2021 it came down to 2590966 voter i.e., a steady decline of 570956 votes then it polled in 2021. In short the vote variation of the LDF and UDF in 2016 was 4.55%. In 2019 the difference between both the fronts increased to 12.16% and in 2021 it came down to 6.14%.

The following tables further illustrate the details of poll outcome, both party wise and region-wise in a detailed manner.

Kerala Assembly Elections Results 2021

Code	Party	Won	Vote%	Total Votes
CPI(M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist)	62	25.38%	5,288,502
INC	Indian National Congress	21	25.12%	5,233,429
CPI	Communist Party of India	17	7.58%	1,579,235
IUML	Indian Union Muslim League	15	8.27%	1,723,593
IND	Independent	6	5.80%	1,208,419
KEC(M)	Kerala Congress (M)	5	3.28%	684,363
JD(S)	Janata Dal (Secular)	2	1.28%	265,789
NCP	Nationalist Congress Party	2	0.99%	206,130
KEC	Kerala Congress	2	2.66%	554,115
INL	Indian National League	1	0.67%	138,587
JKC	Janadhipathiya Kerala Congress	1	0.23%	48,748
KEC(J)	Kerala Congress (Jacob)	1	0.41%	85,056
KEC(B)	Kerala Congress (B)	1	0.32%	67,276
LJD	Loktantrik Janta Dal	1	0.93%	193,010
NSC	National Secular Conference	1	0.34%	70,704
RMPI	Revolutionary Marxist Party of India	1	0.31%	65,093
C(S)	Congress (Secular)	1	0.29%	60,313
ADMK	All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam	0	0.05%	10,376
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party	0	11.30%	2,354,468
BSP	Bahujan Samaj Party	0	0.23%	48,379
JD(U)	Janata Dal (United)	0	0.00%	87
NOTA	None of the Above	0	0.47%	97,695
RJD	Rashtriya Janata Dal	0	0.00%	511
RSP	Revolutionary Socialist Party	0	1.17%	244,388
SHS	Shiv Sena	0	0.00%	289
Other	Other	0	2.91%	605,246
Total		140	100.00%	20,833,801

Source: Statisticstimes.com

Election Results 2021 in Nutshell

Parties	Seats won	Parties	Seats won
LDF		UDF	
CPI (M)	68	INC	22
CPI	17	IUML	14
KCM	5	KC	2
JD (S)	2	NCK	1
NCP	2	KC (J)	1
LJD	1	RMP	1
INL	1		
CONGRESS (S)	1		
RSP (L)	1		
KC (B)	1		

Women Representation in Kerala Legislature 2006-2021

Year	Seats contested and won			Percentage
	LDF	UDF	NDA	
2006	11/7	7/0	11/0	5%
2011	13/7	8/1	14/0	5.7%
2016	17/7	9/0	12/0	5%
2021	15/10	12/1	18/0	7.8%

Region Wise Vote Percentage - 2016 & 2021

Region	LDF		NDA		UDF	
	2021	2016 (c)	2021	2016 (c)	2021	2016 (c)
Cochin	45.8	3.5	13.7	-1.8	35.8	-2.0
Malabar	37.7	0.3	10.3	-0.8	39.4	-0.6
Travancore	41.5	1.5	14.7	-2.4	36.3	0.2

Source : The Hindu 3rd May 2021, Thiruvananthapuram

Vote Percentage of LDF, UDF and NDA – 2016-2021

Year	LDF			UDF			NDA		
	2016	2019	2021	2016	2019	2021	2016	2019	2021
% of votes	43.10	35.08	45.33	38.63	47.24	39.37	14.93	15.53	12.47
Total No.of votes secured	8728934	7140120	9436990	7808743	9616265	8194991	3020830	3161922	2590966

Note : (a) In 2021, the LDF secured 708056 more votes compared to 2016 assembly polls. (b) The UDF on the other hand scored less than 386248 votes compared to 2016 assembly polls (c) Compared to 2016 assembly polls the NDA got 429834 votes less than 2016 assembly polls.

Source : The Malayala Manorama Dtd. 4th May 2021, Kollam

Erosion in NDA and Sharp Decline in Ezhava Votes

The vote share of the BJP and its allies, which was 6.03% in 2011 Assembly Election, jumped to 10.81% in 2014 Lok Sabha polls. It then saw a considerable rise to 14.96% in 2016 Assembly polls and then to 15.54% in the 2019 Lok Sabha poll. In the local body polls of 2020, the figure dipped slightly to 15.02%. In the present Assembly polls BJP alone had recorded a voted share of 11.33%. If the votes of BJP's allies are also taken into consideration, the NDA has provisional vote share of 12.4% denoting a decline of over 2.5% compared to the 2016 Assembly Election. What worried the BJP more was the 12% erosion of votes in its strong hold Nemom constituency which the Saffron Party proudly calls it as Gujarat in Keala. The Congress national leadership deployed its senior leader and parliament member K. Muraleedharan to the battle field to close the lone account of the BJP in the state. Muraleedharan's mission was successful in ensuring the defeat of BJP but it indirectly helped LDF candidate V. Sivankutty. In fact Muraleedharan turned out to be the biggest spoiler for the BJP. The erosion of BJP votes in Nemom was unbelievable. While BJP's O. Rajagopal polled 47.46% votes in 2016 in 2021 Kummanam could garner only 35.56% of votes. Moreover NSS too extended its support to him. Muraleedharan polled nearly 23,000 more votes than the UDF candidate who contested in 2016. UDF's vote share which was below 10% in 2016 increased to 25% this time.

The state wide performance of BJP further shows that the party managed to emerge as runner-up in nine constituencies this time. Interestingly, the party had emerged as runner-up in seven seats in the 2016 Assembly Election. Among the seats where the BJP emerged runner-up in 2021, the party was able to increase its vote share only in Palakkad (6.26%), Attingal (5.94%), Chathannur (5.69%) and Malambuzha (1.78%), when compared to the 2016 Assembly Election. However it has also to be noted that the Saffron Party suffered vote erosion in Kasargod (-3.89%), Vattiyoorkavu (-3.1%), Kazhakkuttom (-2.84%), Manjeswaram (-1.96%) compared to 2016 Assembly Election. The Ezhava votes depicted a graph of decline. Certainly it is highly damaging to the NDA in general and BJP in particular.

Concluding Observations

1. The overall poll analysis undoubtedly shows that a mix of policies in which development and welfare measures were added in the right proportion and executed over the last 60 months paved the way for the spectacular victory of the LDF. It is a new experience in the state politics after 1977. In other words the present victory of the LDF can be described as a well thought out political strategy coupled with political pragmatism and social engineering which helped the LDF to capture power. Certainly the entry of Loktantrik Janata Dal (LJD) and Kerala Congress (Mani), the formal induction of Indian National League (INL), the popularity of Pinarayi Vijayan in handling the governance in times of crisis and calamities and the goodwill generated through social security measures especially welfare pension scheme, distribution of food kits through ration shops have helped the Left in an enormous way. Further, the achievements in the education and health sectors and the provision for housing for the poor under Life Mission Project also paid rich dividends for the Left. Over and above the LDF also made some daring moves in social engineering.
2. Yet another reason for the spectacular return of the LDF was that, after the humiliating defeat in the Lok Sabha Poll 2019 the LDF took a strategic retreat in the Sabarimala Women's Entry issue. The civic polls held in November, 2020 was the testing ground for this strategy and the Left made huge gains out of it. The more accommodative stand cured the hurt feeling of majority communities and the reading of the assembly poll results makes it clear that the LDF could win the sizeable number of Hindu votes along with minority votes that was mobilized through strong stands taken during issues such as beef ban and Citizen's Amendment Act etc.
3. Though the BJP projected the front as a challenge to the state's bipolar polity, the party miserably failed even to retain its lone seat. Despite working out a Nair-Ezhava binary and securing confidence of a section of Christian community the party could not hold on. Multiple factors led to the poor

performance of the party. Generally the BJP or NDA was unable to match the social base of either the CPI (M) or the Congress.

4. The NDA's vote share in the state had climbed from 6.6% in 2011 Assembly polls to 14.96% in 2016 after BDJS joined its fold. However its vote share declined to 12.04% in 2021. The vote share of BDJS declined from 3.93% in 2016 to 1% in 2021. It seems that a sizeable section of Ezhava voters who were with the Left parties before the formation of BDJS have now returned to the LDF.
5. This electoral verdict can also be considered as a reply to the critics of the Chief Minister within the party and Left Front after the 2019 Lok Sabha poll setback. It has come as a major morale booster from both CPM and CPI which have been cut down to size in the national political scenario. This gives them hope for re-emergence.
6. In conclusion it can be stated that Pinarayi Vijayan broke a long term jinx that prevented any incumbent from retaining power beyond a single term in the state. The state wise picture shows that the LDF was triumphant in both southern and central regions of the state but came a bit short in the northern region. However, the second Pinarayi government will have to deal with serious of challenges in the coming days. The worsening COVID situation, the unpleasant fiscal position of the state and above all the group rivalry within the CPI (M) will certainly pose a threat to the Chief Minister.

References

The New Indian Express, The Hindu, Election Manifesto of LDF, UDF & NDA

Elected Governments and Inclusiveness : A Critique of NDA Government's Policies and Programmes

Mary George

Democracy is hollow and senseless if it upholds only political rights of citizens. Economic democracy built into political democracy, empowers it to pursue re-distributive process to break the vicious cycle of poverty and deprivation. In Indian democracy, introduction of green revolution technology around the middle of 1960s, announcement of 'garibi hattavo', nationalisation of 20 commercial banks in two stages to make way for mass banking from class banking, the introduction of differential interest rate policy, priority sector lending policy, the national education policy, 1986, the flagship education programme of sarva shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and many more such programmes are standing examples of economic democracy inter-woven with political democracy.

"Real Swaraj will come not by the acquisition of power by a few but by the acquisition of the capacity by all to resist authority when it is abused" (Mahatma Gandhi 1962)¹

Democracy Defined

Democracy has been defined differently by different people. Ambedkar (2017)² defined Democracy as "a form and a method of Government where by revolutionary changes in the economic and social life of the people are brought about without bloodshed." It means that a democracy to be christened as democracy has to bring about radical and fundamental changes in the socio-economic fabric of society, which means a committed, planned and strategic move of the elected regime to bring about an egalitarian society. Political scientist Walter Bagehot (1965)³ defined democracy as "government by discussion". Abraham Lincoln (2002)⁴ in his famous Gettysburg speech, which he made after the conquest and integration of the southern states with the Union of United States, defined democracy as "a government of the people, by the people and for the people"⁵. Lincoln practiced what he preached by "signing on 1st January, 1863, the Thirteenth Amendment of American Constitution, prohibiting slavery everywhere in any form in the United States".

A Successful Democracy

For Democracy to be successful, Ambedkar put forward certain conditions which include:

- Absence of glaring inequalities. There should not be oppressed and suppressed classes. There should not be a class with all privileges, such an organization of a society has within itself the germs of a bloody revolution, and perhaps it would be impossible for the democracy to cure them. The privileged will buy the votes of the other by money power. It is not this the Indian experience in each elections to various levels of government?
- Need of strong opposition. Opposition means that the government is always on the anvil. Government's policies and actions must satisfy not only its supporters, but also those of the opposition.
- Equality in law and administration means equal treatment of all in administration. Take the case of Havalas, money, gold smuggling, black marketing, or any sort of corruption, if the ruling party keeps a 'yours and mine' approach, of course roots of Democracy would be decayed. In Ambedkar's words "administration must not be interfered with by the government, and that the functioning of

the government is to lay down policy, but not to interfere and to make any discrimination. This is very fundamental and I am afraid we had already departed from that and may completely abnegate and abolish the thing we have had so far".⁶

- On observance of constitutional morality, Ambedkar admits that "our constitution or any constitution for that matter, which contains legal provisions, is only a skeleton. The flesh of that skeleton is to be found in what we call constitutional morality"⁷. This morality requires that same person should not contest election repeatedly for the same post. Ambedkar quote the example of George Washington, who was like god to Americans. After drafting the constitution, he was the first president. He refused to stand for the second time, and reminded the people that "you have forgotten the purpose for which we made this constitution. We made this constitution because we did not want a hereditary monarchy and we did not want a hereditary ruler or dictator". Ultimately they prevailed upon him to stand for one more term. The third time when they approached him, he spurned them and turned down the request. Ambedkar found no such moral value, nowhere, in any political party in India. Those who come to power like to continue if re-elected, any number of times without shame or sense of guilt.
- No tyranny of majority over minority. In a caste ridden society like India, the constitution protects the minority rights. But in the recent period, if an adjournment motion is proposed it needs to have the support of at least 30-40 legislators. Minority parties will have four or five members in parliament. Hence, an adjournment motion, even if it is urgently required, will not be allowed. Small groups cannot ventilate their grievances.
- According to Ambedkar as well as Laski, the political scientist, moral order is always taken for granted in democracy. Due to the absence of this the fabric of democracy is ruptured and opportunism and defection became the universal character of democracy.
- The last characteristic of democracy mentioned by Ambedkar is strong presence of public conscience. "Public conscience means conscience which becomes agitated at every wrong, no matter who is the sufferer, and it means that everybody, whether he suffers that particular wrong or not, is prepared to join him in order to get him relieved" (P.299).

Any number of examples may be cited in the Indian context to prove that there is very little public conscience working in our democracy. Take the case of Constitution Amendment Act (C AA-2020), or Citizenship Act (2020) and a host of other Acts including the three Farm Bills (2020). TSR Subramanian (2014)⁸, observes that our members of parliament and members of legislatures, once elected from a constituency, do not need it any more, till the next elections come around five years or so later. Rather than acting as a bridge between the constituency and the government, an MP in India perceives his role as one of following his party's directions, apart from, looking after his own personal interests. Subramanian (2014)⁹, further opines that,

the largest and the least regulated "industry" in India is politics. The players make their own rules, break them at will, change their own goal posts and do not want any umpire (Lok Pal? Perish the thought!). Why is the Election Commission an idle spectator, when Constitution and the law, demand of it that it does its job? For quite some time Indian politics is dominated by crorepatis. Representatives with criminal back ground and criminal cases are elected with the support of mafia groups.

Subramanian mentions the confession of a senior BJP leader (name not divulged) that he had actually spent about Rs.8 crore for his election as MP, as against the formally approved limit of Rs. 40 lakh. When one goes through the web site of the Election commission, so far the practice indicates that, in about 10% of cases the candidates have declared their expenditure as going up to 90 percent of the limit; in 90 percent of the cases, only up to 50 percent of the limit. It is a known fact that the limits are exceeded by 20 or 30 times or more in most of the cases. Payment in cash and kind has become a part of the election PR work. In

a poor country like India where inequality is rampant, any pittance will attract voters and the poor being more honest, will cast their vote to the promised. Is it not the responsibility of the Election Commission to introduce fool proof system of election concerning, voting, counting and result declaration using information technology?

Model Code of Conduct

The model code of conduct is powerless because of the lack of accountability and inefficiency of those who handle it. Even after the declaration of the election schedule and code of conduct, cash and kind payments to voters is quite common, but all in dark, or under curtain, no witness, no proof, money power and gun power work together to torpedo evidence. Subramanian (2014)¹⁰, asks “why is the Election Commission so placidly supine? Why can’t it arouse itself and enforce the model code of conduct’ with greater pungency and efficiency? EC is a constitutional authority; it need not behave like a namby-pampy poodle to be cuddled by government. It represents the interests of the people to ensure free elections-this trust is not fully discharged”.

It is pointed out that India has borrowed its election system from U.K, U.S. where mainly two party system prevails. In our democracy multiple parties exist and several candidates contest in each seat. Therefore, if 5 parties are contesting for a single seat, the one who gets 21 per cent votes will be declared elected. This system of representation drains out the essence of democracy. Instead, it is preferable to have a ‘transferable-vote’ system to ensure that the winner or winning party gets at least 50 per cent of popular support. Governments’ formed in this way will be more representative. The parties would be forced to reach a consensus in contentious issues. Indian parliamentary democracy, which is more a proto type of British system than other democracies, has to undergo radical election reforms at the earliest. An interesting observation made by Ambedkar on democracy is worth noting. He observed that “we speak of democracy, but democracy is not always the same. The Greeks spoke of Athenian democracy. But as everyone knows, the Athenian democracy was as different from our democracy as chalk is from cheese. The Athenian democracy did not take into account the 50% of slaves who were not given citizenship rights”.¹¹

Economic Democracy

Democracy is hollow and senseless if it upholds only political rights of citizens. Economic democracy built into political democracy, empowers it to pursue re-distributive process to break the vicious cycle of poverty and deprivation. In Indian democracy, introduction of green revolution technology around the middle of 1960s, announcement of ‘garibi hattavo’, nationalisation of 20 commercial banks in two stages (14 in 1969 and 6 in 1980) to make way for mass banking from class banking, the introduction of differential interest rate policy, priority sector lending policy, the national education policy, 1986, the flagship education programme of sarva shiksha Abhiyan (SSA) and many more such programmes are standing examples of economic democracy inter-woven with political democracy. But two stellar policies which may be considered as the pillars of economic democracy in India are: (1) The National Rural Employment Guarantees Act 2005 (later renamed as Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Program in 2009) and (2) The National Food Security Act 2013. These are Constitutional Acts introduced to make work and food fundamental rights of citizens respectively and are the most powerful inclusive policy measures taken after independence.

Public Expenditure on Health

Another equally important Constitutional Act required to be introduced is on health. Public expenditure on health is highly deficient in India. Monica Das gupta (2016)¹², observes that public health services are conceptually distinct from medical services. They aim at “reducing a population’s exposure to disease, for example through assuring food safety and other health regulations, vector control; monitoring waste disposal and water systems, and health education to improve personal health behaviours and build citizen demand for better public health outcomes. Thus, they involve activities such as improving slaughterhouse hygiene

and cattle-keeping practices, cleaning irrigation canals to discourage vector breeding, and applying public health regulations.” Such services are largely invisible or even unheard of in many parts of India, even in the fully literate state of Kerala, so to say. This is evidenced during our fight with Covid-19 pandemic. Poor public health infrastructure in India is the reason for the pandemic to take the lives of many.

Erosion of Welfare State

Vyas (1962)¹³, points out that ‘modern democracies are election oriented party-dominated power-aimed, centralized, complicated mechanisms. Concentration of authority marks almost all present political systems which have become unwieldy and top-heavy, be they capitalist, socialist or communist systems. The individual has little or no voice in the shaping of the policy of the government. In a welfare state, as in a totalitarian regime, he is reduced to the position of a well-fed, dump, driven animal in human form”.

Musgrave et al. (1958)¹⁴, reminds us Adolf Wagner’s view that democracy must base its economic policies on increasing public expenditures. Wagner prophesied that “pressures for social progress would entail a continuous growth of the public sector and an expanding share of public expenditure in the national income.” The assertion of this law reflected in the foundation of a welfare state in Germany of his times. Globally, in most of the countries, on grounds of poverty eradication, environment protection etc. public expenditure is on the increase. Whereas, in India, on grounds of rising fiscal deficit, high public debt etc. and to give way to multinational corporates, large scale withdrawal of government from public investment is going on. Also through Asset Monetisation pipe line public sector assets are monetised. Strategic disinvestment of public sector companies is speeded up with fixed time dimensions. Government has also set the target of making India a dollar five trillion GDP economy by 2025. Budget apparatus is geared to that end undermining ground realities of growing inequality, poverty and malnutrition.

Riding on Populist Policies

In the 2019 Lok Sabha election, the NDA secured 352 seats. BJP alone bagged 303 seats. Narayanan (2019)¹⁵, after analysing the 2019 parliamentary election observed that this victory could be attributed to the adoption of a new revolutionary approach to ‘data-driven’ communications; the utilisation of ‘influence politics’; and the employment of new ‘social media tactics’ which had the potential to change the behaviour of the electorate.” National Democratic Alliances propaganda strategy was centred around the theme of patriotism grilled on Pulwama and Balakot and defending nation’s integrity from terror threats. Modi Government’s populist policy announcements shortly before announcing election, like the cooking gas subsidy (which is now non-existent) the Atal Pension Yojana and the Ujjwala scheme made election propaganda more spicy. In addition to all other populist measures, the Prime Minister took up the magic wand of Rs 2000 x 3 = Rs.6000 per farmer with less than 2 hectares (5 acres) of agriculture land and the payment of the first instalment before the elections helped him to win the average voter. For this payment of Rs. 2000 each, the government exacted the Reserve Fund of Rs. 76,000 crore of Reserve Bank of India for the first time, after its formation in 1935. “Policy orientation of this nature required a towering symbol and voice. Narendra Modi, with his powerful oratory was the quintessential person for this task. He did his part splendidly, addressing over 100 rallies in the space of 6 weeks, covering over one lakh kilometres, in which economic issues, unemployment, farmer’s distress, Mandal-Mandir were significant by their absence”.¹⁶ Through electoral bonds Modi could attract more than sufficient funds to show extravaganza in election. Election commission remained a mute spectator to all these.

The II NDA Government

When voters gave a second term, with majority in both Lokh Sabha and Rajya Sabha, government considered it as an opportunity to impose anything and everything upon voters and launched an era of Constitution Amendments. The second term of Modi government saw an outpour of constitutional Amendment Acts and New Bills in Parliament. “In the 17th Lok Sabha, in the 2021 Monsoon session, 15 new Bills were introduced in Parliament and all of them were passed in the same session. The share of Bills introduced and

passed in the same session has peaked at 100% in the session”¹⁷. “The share of Bills referred to select committee have drastically decreased since 2014. About 60% and 71% bills were referred to committees in the 14th (Ist UPA) and 15th (2nd UPA) Lok Sabha. This reduced to 27% (Modi-1) and 12% (Modi-2) in the 16th and 17th Lok Sabha. Among those 15 Bills, three are labour related Bills, amalgamating laws on social security, occupational safety and industrial relations. These Bills are (1) Industrial Relation Code, 2020; (2) The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions code, 2020 and (3) the Code of Social Security 2020.

In 2020 three farm bills were introduced in the Parliament. These Bills are (1) Farmer’s Produce Trade and Commerce (Promotion and Facilitation) Act 2020. (2) Agreement on Price Assurance and Farm Service Act and (3) Essential Commodities Act 1955 Amendment Act. These three Bills were introduced in the Parliament on 14th September 2020. The government got it passed in the Lok Sabha without discussion or referring to a select committee and then sent to Rajya Sabha where also it was passed and finally got the President’s assent and was notified on 27th September 2020. The whole process was completed in 13 days. In an agrarian economy like India, when three very significant Bills are introduced, a democratic government is expected to act in the light of economic democracy. As per the constitution, agriculture is a state subject. Any amendment which is expected to change the agriculture sector, lock-stock-and barrel, has to be effected only after discussions with the states. Here, all the federal principles were violated. It is good to note the observation made by Aswini Ray (2021)¹⁸, that “democratic federalism presupposes institutions to ensure equality between and among the units and the centre so that they co-ordinate with each other and are subordinate to the sovereign Constitution - their disputes adjudicated by an independent judiciary with impeccable professional and moral credibility. But India’s federal structure is constitutionally hamstrung by deficits on all these counts, and operationally impaired by the institutional dents in the overall democratic process.” He goes on to comment that “the critical instruments of national governance have been either assigned or appropriated by the centre, with the states left with politically controversial subjects such as law and order and land reforms. Thus, most of India’s federal conflicts are structural, reinforced by operational abuses”.¹⁹

Eroding Values

N.V. Ramana (2021)²⁰, the Chief Justice of India on the occasion of 75th Independence Day celebrations lamented that “now it is a sorry state of affairs. There is a lot of ambiguity in the laws. We don’t know for what purpose they are made. They are causing a lot of litigation and inconvenience to the people, courts etc”. His comments came in the Tribunal’s Reforms Bill of 2021 which has sought the abolishment of as many as nine Appellate Tribunals which was criticized by the opposition as they believed that it undermined the independence of the Judiciary. The CJI, further, highlighted the examples of great leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru etc. and how these lawyers led the nation with constructive debates and discussions. He continued, “Unfortunately, over a period of time, in the absence of quality debate, courts are unable to fathom the intent and object of the new laws” (The Hindu).

Another dark side of Indian democracy is the apathy towards Right to Information Act. Both the Centre and the states are equal in undermining this Act. It was on 12th October, 2005 that the Right to Information Act came into being. This Act is a tool for citizens to demand accountability in governance, with an estimated 40 to 60 lakh RTI applications being filed every year. When a request for information is denied by a government body, appeals are filed in the central and state Information Commissions, which act as transparency watchdogs under the law. According to Satark Nagrik Sangathan (SNS), the nationwide back log of appeals has crossed 2.55 lakh and Central Information Commission would take a year and 11 months to dispose an appeal. Shortage of personnel and inefficient operation are the major reasons for such inordinate delay, the analyst found.

While referring to the Income Tax raid of two news websites, Justice Madan B, Lokur (2021)²¹, observed, that “there is no longer any respect for the citizen’s rights but only a single minded assertion of

unaccountable authority. Gasping for breath-that is how our investigating agencies leave our citizens and now the Press”

Election Commission is another constitutional body, which is tuned by the central government to meet its goals. TN Seshan as Chief Election Commissioner firmly established it as an independent authority. But after him, the EC has become a spineless institution.

Hacking of Indian democracy has become very serious, since the Pegasus issue. Pegasus is a technology sold to governments by Israel to fight terrorism. The Pegasus revelations in India is nothing but an attack on Indian citizen rights. National security is important, but it should respect human rights and civil liberties. The use of surveillance has serious implications for privacy. In the Pegasus case the list of people targeted, prima facie shows that national security is a pretext to suppress political, economic and social dissent in India. India is a signatory to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Article 12 there of provides that “No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to unlawful attacks on his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to protection of the law against such interference or attacks. By virtue of Article 51 of the constitution of India, it has to endeavour to “foster respect for international law and treaty obligations.....” The protection of Human Rights Act, 1993 is the result of this commitment.

Similarly, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) in 2014 made fundamental observations on the digital technology’s ability to enhance the capacity of individuals and institutions to use new tools and expose abuses. These technological tools have also empowered governments, enterprises and individuals to conduct surveillance, interception and data collection. Dushyant Dev(2021)²², asserts that “the government has a constitutional duty to protect the fundamental and human rights of its citizens, irrespective of who they are. Even if the government is not complicit in the surveillance it has miserably failed in discharging this duty. There is clear evidence that the rule of law has been undermined. More evidently, this reflects extremely poor governance. The Intelligence Bureau, The Research and Analysis Wing, and the National Security Council Secretariat should have forewarned the government and citizens against such surveillance, seriously violating privacy and fundamental rights”.

Women Representation in Legislatures

Women constitute 48 percent of India’s population. Only 78 out of the 543 elected members in the current Lok Sabha are women. Between 1952 and 2019, a total of 661 women have been elected to the Lok Sabha. The share of women MPs was less than 10% until 2009 election. In 2019 election it has reached 14.36 per cent. Participation of women in state/union Territory Legislatures was less than 14 percent all throughout (The Hindu, Data Point; 29/9/2021). Rwanda with 61 percent and Iceland with 48 percent elected women legislatures hold first and second positions respectively in the present global democratic situation. However, as the largest democracy, India, struggled too much to introduce 33% reservation to women in the Lok Sabha from 1996 onwards. The shamelessly patriarchal mind of Indian democracy defeated every attempt of passing that Bill.

It is the meagre representation of women in decision making centres that has resulted in the continuing misery of women in India.

National Family Health Survey data (NFHS-5) shows that most Indian households have LPG connection. But they don’t use it for cooking, why? This question is pertinent when poor households are given LPG connection under Prime Minister’s Ujjwal scheme. When LPG subsidy is being withdrawn stage by stage and LPG price is hiked without discretion, poor households are forced to keep LPG connection as a ‘showpiece’ than as a cooking agent. According to NFHS-5, there was a higher prevalence of tuberculosis in households that were using solid fuels compared to those that were using clean cooking fuels.

Study by Srravya et al (2020) based on PLFS report 2017-18 found that there are fewer women than

men in the work force across states. Data show that only 22% of the country's female population is part of the work force, as opposed to 71.2% of the male population. Women earn far less than men do. In casual labour, the difference is more pronounced-men earn 1.5 times more than women do.

Is Indian Democracy Inclusive?

In an audit report presented in parliament on September 23, 2020, the C&AG said over 70% of the government schools did not have running water facilities in the toilets, while 75% were not being maintained hygienically. The Swachh Vidyalay Abhyan was launched by the Human Resource Development Ministry in 2014 and it mandated one separate toilet each for boys and girls under corporate social responsibility scheme. But by 2020, only a small percentage had been completed.

On October 2, 2019, all the villages in India were declared free of open defecation. However when the National Health Survey-5 (NFHS-5) report published recently is examined it is found that not even a single state is open defecation free. The share of access to any type of toilet ranged between 61.7% in Bihar to 99.9 percent in Mizoram. The survey was initiated in mid-2019 and continued till March 2021. Data also show a wide gap in access to toilets between SC/ST households and other households. In rural Gujarat, only 70.6% households had access to toilets while 96.9% urban households had the facility. Such wide disparities exist in Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra.

When focus is shifted to dropout rate, shocking findings are made. Based on Rajya Sabha information the dropout rate among Scheduled Castes (SC) and Scheduled Tribes (ST) students was disproportionately high in India's 72 centrally funded technical institutions between 2016 and 2020. While only 23 of those admitted were from the SC/ST communities, 31.5 of those who dropped out were from these communities. The ST students who dropped out formed 4.4 of ST admissions in the period while the overall average was 2.5% Ramachandra Guha (2016)²³ points out that "the literacy rate of Adivasis is, at 23.8 percent, considerably lower than that of the Dalits, which stands at 30.1 percent. As many as 62.5 percent of Adivasi children who enter school, dropout before they matriculate; whereas this happens only with 49.4 percent of Dalits" Dreze (2016)²⁴ points out that the low quality of schooling in India is a monumental injustice. Millions of children who have the ability to become doctors, engineers or artists are more likely to end up making bricks or pulling a rickshaw for want of decent education. Similarly, Nobel laureate, Banerjee et al. (2016)²⁵ based on survey work in Uttar Pradesh, brings out that the victims themselves often fail to perceive the poor quality of education as a social issue. Village Education committees and parent-Teacher Associations, were also found to be quite dormant. Amartya Sen's (2000)²⁶ observation that "the success of economic democracy in a society is to be evaluated primarily by the substantive freedoms that the members of that society enjoy... substantive freedom depends upon the level of income and the capabilities that an individual would develop with that. He reiterates that deprivation of individual capabilities can have close links with the business of income, which connects in both directions; (1) Low income can be a major reason for illiteracy and ill health as well as hunger and undernourishment, and (2) Conversely, better education and health' help in the earning of higher income"²⁷. He goes on to add that deprivation of elementary capabilities can be reflected in premature mortality, significant undernourishment (especially of children, persistent morbidity, wide spread illiteracy and other failures. For example, the terrible phenomenon of missing women.²⁸

The National Family Health Survey 5 (2019-20)²⁹ found that in the majority of the states, stunting and wasting has increased compared to the 2015-16 survey round. In 20 out of the 18 major states, a higher percentage of children were wasted in 2019-20 compared 2015 -16 (NFHS-4). Only six states performed better on this count. No change was recorded in 2 states. With regard to the prevalence of stunting, in 11 out of 18 states, a higher percentage of children were stunted in 2019-20 compared to 2015-16.

As per the recently published global Hunger Index, India was ranked 101 out of 116 countries. India is one among the 31 nations where hunger has been classified as "serious". The country rank has been on the downward trend since 2016. Four indicators were used to compute the score-1-0 share of the population

that is undernourished, 2. Share of children under 5 who are wasted (low weight for height), 3. Share of children under 5 who are stunted (low height for age) and 4 under 5 mortality rate. Finding of World Health Organization’s Hunger Index survey and National Family Health Survey -5 (2019-20) points to an increase in malnutrition. After 2014, India’s rank in global Hunger Index is worsened as shown in the table below:

Table I : Global Hunger India - Rank of India

Year	India’s Rank	Number of Countries Analysed
2021	101	116
2020	94	107
2019	102	117
2018	103	132
2017	100	119
2016	97	118
2015	80	117
2014	55	120
2013	63	120
2012	65	120
2011	67	122

Source: *The Hindu*; 16/10/2021³⁰

Though 27 mid-day meal programme was started in 2022 to provide a hot cooked meal to more than 100 million school children, its beginning was frugal, with simple turmeric rice or sweetened boiled wheat (Ghoogri). “With vigilant monitoring from the Supreme Court, however, mid day meals made steady progress over the years. Kitchen sheds were built, cooks were trained, financial allocations were raised and the menu became more nutritious. Many states have started providing eggs (aside from pulses, vegetables and the odd fruit) with the school meal at least once a week-up to five times a week in Tamil Nadu. This is a real break-through since eggs contain most essential nutrients” (Jean Dreze)³¹. When the global Hunger Index and National Family Health Survey -5 provide serious warnings on increasing malnutrition, it is time for Supreme Court to interfere once again with its ship to make the rulers aware of the grave situation

Concluding Observations

Sen (2011)³² reminds the government that “democratic governments have to win elections and face public criticism and have strong incentives and other such catastrophe.” To Pope Francis (2020)³³, “by making the integration of the poor and the care for our environment central to society’s goals, we can generate work while humanizing our surroundings. By providing a universal basic income, we can free and enable people to work for the community in a dignified way. It is high time we abandon the trickle-down theory that a growing economy make us all richer. We transcend the narrow individualist frame work of the liberal paradigm without falling into the trap of populism. Democracy is then reinvigorated by the concerns and wisdom of the people who are involved in it. Politics can once again be an expression of love through service”. Thomas Freidman (2006)³⁴ the three times winner of Pulitzer Prize quotes the social entrepreneur activist who won Nobel Peace Prize, 2006, Mohammad Yunus. Yunus championed the cause of the downtrodden and women through Grameen Bank or micro finance programme. He arranged loans without collateral. The scheme was a total success. Yunus opened up his mind before Freidman that “we have more than 80,000 beggars in that program and many already quit begging because they were successful sellers by then. He added that at

Grameen bank 97 percent of the borrowers are women and pay back rate is 98%. He also added that “not having collateral is one thing, but not being credit worthy is another”.

In India Mudra Yojan scheme, perhaps, is an adaptation of ‘Yunus banking’. But it could not launch a collateral free loan revolution in India. May be a ‘Yunus’ is lacking in India. Microfinance has become a weapon of corruption by social, political and spiritual leaders. It has failed to deliver solace to the downtrodden. Corruption has crept in to every walk of life. Paul Mason (2015)³⁵ warns us that the successful crooks and dictators of the emerging world have already bought influence and respectability... can feel their power as you walk through the door of certain law firms, PR consultancies and even corporates... On some campuses you can already hear... ‘china shows that capitalism works better without democracy’. Does democracy contain the seeds of its own self-destruction?

Ambedkar was aware of the importance of the Directive principles for the realisation of social and economic democracy. Jean Dreze (2016)³⁶ who worked in rural India point out the tremendous disempowerment experienced by ordinary people due to lack of information and the inaccessibility of public records. Citizens are ignorant about the nature of ration cards, or services available in health centres or national food available through ICDS. Sam Pitroda³⁷, an Indian-American owning 100 patents and the one who launched the telecom revolution in India observes that building a nation is very different from building a company. Building a nation requires long-term commitment, patience, perseverance and character all strengthened by values, morals, system-level thinking, analytics, hard work and leadership. Piketty (2014)³⁸, warns the world that if democracy is some day to regain control of capitalism, it must start by recognising that the concrete institutions in which democracy and capitalism are embodied need to be reinvented again and again. Let us conclude with Gandhi (1962)³⁹ that” let more commit the mistake of thinking that Rama-Rajya means a rule of the Hindus. My Rama is another name for Khuda or God. I want Khuda Raj’ which is the same thing as the Kingdom of God on Earth. The establishment of such a Rajya would benefit not only the Indian People, but the entire humanity”.

References

1. Mahatma Gandhi (1962) : *Village Swaraj*; compiled by H.M, Vyas, Navajivan publishing House, Ahamedabad -14
2. Ambedkar (2017) : *The Essential Ambedkar*, Balachandra Mungekar (ed), Rupa publications, P. 287
3. Bagehot, W (1965) : *The Collected works of Walter Bagehot*, St John-stevas (ed), London.
4. William K. Klingaman (2002) : *Abraham Lincoln and the Road to Imancipation; 1861-1865*; Penguin Books, P 300
5. *Ibid*,
6. Ambedkar, 2017, P 295
7. Ambedkar, P-295
8. TSR Subramanian (2014) : *India at Turning Point; The Road to Good Governance*, Rainlight Rupa Publishers, P- 130
9. *Ibid*; P-132
10. *Ibid*; P-135
11. *Ibid*; P-287
12. Monica Das Gupta, (2016) : *Public Health in India; in Social Policy*, Jean Dreze (ed), P.21
13. M.K. Gandhi; (1962) : *Village Swaraj*; compiled by H.M.Vyas; Preface.

14. Musgrave, R.A and Peacock, A (eds), (1958) : *Classics in the Theory of Public Finance*, PP. 1-16; Lodon and New York Macmillan
15. M.K. Narayanan, June 26, 2019; “The Future of Parliamentary Democracy”; *the Hindu*, Editorial Page Article, P-8.
16. *The Hindu*, “Out of Order”; 17/8/021; Data Point.
17. *Ibid.* Data Point; 17/8/021.
18. Aswini K. Ray; “Reflections on the ‘Quasi-Federal’ Democracy”; *The Hindu Editorial Article*, October,9, 2021.
19. *Ibid.*
20. Madan B. Lokur; Sept. 27/2021; the Editorial Page Article; “These Investigation Are a Face without a Heart”
21. Dushyant Dev, “The Hacking of Indian Democracy”; *The Hindu*, Editorial page Article, 3/9/021
22. *The Hindu*, Data point; “High Dropout Among SC/STs”; 10/9/021.
23. Ramachandra Guha, (2016) : “Adivasis, Naxalites and Indian Democracy” in *Social Policy* Jean Dreze; (ed), P -460
24. Jean Dreze, (2016) : *Social Policy*, Jean Dreze (ed), P-5
25. Abhijit Banerjee etal (2016) : in *Social Policy* by Jean Dreze (ed), P-5
26. Amartya Sen; (2000) : *Development As Freedom*; OUP; p.18
27. *Ibid*; P-19
28. *Ibid*, P-20
29. National Family Health Survey-4 (2015-16) and National Family Health Survey-5 (2019-20-5)
30. *The Hindu*; Data point; 16/10/021
31. Jean Dreze; *Ibid*; P 9 to 10
32. Amartya Sen, *Ibid* P.16.
33. Pope Francis (2020): *Let us Dream the Path to a Better Future*; Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, London P.-132.
34. Thomas L. Freidman (2006) : *The World is Flat the Globalized World in the Twenty-First century*; Penguin Books.
35. Paul Mason, (2015) : *Post Capitalism A guide to Our Future*; Penguin Random House, UK, P. 291.
36. Jean Dreze; *Ibid*, P-182.
37. Sam Pitroda (2021) : *Redesign the World : A Global Call to Action*; Penguin Random House; P-227.
38. Thomas Piketty (2014) : *Capital in the Twenty-First century*; the Balknap Press, Harward University Press; P-570.
39. Mahatma Gandhi (1962) : P-250

Trinamool Triumph 2021: A Paradigm Shift Within West Bengal or Beyond?

Nirjhar Mukherjee

This paper seeks to provide an analysis of the recently concluded state assembly election in West Bengal. The aim is to describe and provide explanation for the results in various parts of the state as well as that of various demographic groups. It is argued that the TMC's welfare policies and women centric campaign played a big role in winning the elections. It was also abetted by the further decline of the Left and allies which paid the hefty price for equating the TMC with the BJP. The paper also laments that the ignominious culture of political violence and defections continue unabated in Bengal. The TMC's foray into all-India politics is increasing but this might contribute to division of anti-BJP votes in other states.

Introduction

The massive gains by the BJP in the 2019 elections propelled them to the post of the main opposition party in the state dominated by the Trinamool Congress (TMC). The BJP tried its best to come to power in the state. They wanted power in a major state outside the Hindi heartland. Scholars like Dey (2021) have pointed out the strategic importance of Bengal in the South-East Asian region. The BJP's blitzkrieg campaign faced stiff resistance from the Mamata Banerjee led TMC which vowed to defend the state from 'outsiders.' The high voltage contest ended with a rather emphatic win for the TMC and a big defeat for the BJP which lost support as compared to the 2019 Lok Sabha elections despite all the support from the central BJP leadership and massive funding. This election also witnessed the total wipe-out of the Left front and Congress with both the parties scoring a shocking zero (despite being in alliance), a first time for both parties. Despite the defeat, the BJP established itself as the major opposition party in the state (at least electorally) with wins in a few geographically concentric areas. This paper seeks to provide an academic analysis of the election results and its impact on the future of opposition politics in India.

The election results gave a massive mandate to the Mamata Banerjee led TMC which roared back to power for a third consecutive term with its biggest ever mandate securing more than 47% of votes and winning 213 seats out of the 292 seats where elections were held (elections were postponed in two seats due to death of the candidates due to COVID-19). The heavily funded star-studded BJP campaign was unable to better their tally with respect to their best ever performance in the Lok Sabha elections in 2019 where they won 18 (out of 42) seats securing almost 40% of votes. While the BJP largely held on to its vote share (only 2% decline since 2019 Lok Sabha election results), it was left disappointed at being unable to increase its tally. The BJP's dominance remained concentrated to a few geographically contiguous areas corresponding to its successes two years back, but the degree of those wins dwindled with the TMC increasing its tally of seats in North Bengal, Jungalmahal area and Nadia. In many areas like North 24 parganas, the BJP faced massive defeats. The Left-Front which allied itself with the Congress and the newly formed Indian Secular Front (ISF) faced a shocking defeat. The Left Front parties and the Indian National Congress scored ignominious ducks and further dwindled in vote share as compared to the General elections of 2019. Debutant ISF could only win one seat. The TMC campaign was engineered by the Prashant Kishor led IPAC which played a significant role in boosting the morale of TMC workers who were beleaguered in the aftermath of the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, especially after a series of heavyweight defections. However, the recipe for this victory had several ingredients of which the professional electoral consultancy of IPAC was one among many factors.

The following sections would analyse the results in greater detail. However, it would perhaps be useful

to state in advance some of the central arguments of this paper. The win reflects a wide mandate in favour of a bevy of pro-people policies of the TMC such as Kanyashree, Swasthasathi, SabujSathi among many others. The result is a massive repudiation of the BJP and its Hindutva brand of politics. There has been no doubt a consolidation of anti-TMC votes in favour of the BJP. The index of opposition unity once again favoured the BJP. However, there was also a greater consolidation of votes in favour of the TMC. A large anti-BJP sentiment which was aided by movements such as ‘No Vote to BJP’ also had its impact. Since the 2019 elections, the possibility of a BJP victory in the state united large sections of people to resist the BJP at all costs. The Bengali sentiment- an emerging tide of Bengali nationalism also played its part in portraying the BJP as an outside force. The votes of the minority community and women played an important role in the TMC victory. The 38 percent vote, as this paper argues, does not denote that the BJP is a strong opposition party but indicates a consolidation of anti-TMC votes. This election reflects the continuance of the polarised, bipartisan political tradition of West Bengal electoral politics where anti-incumbency votes consolidates towards one political party. The drubbing of the Left-Congress-ISF alliance proves the inability of the CPI(M) led alliance to create a viable political language and voters did not have faith in this alliance as an alternative to the BJP. The space for opposition politics in Bengal is still open as the BJP is not a very strong or viable opposition in Bengal. The latter has been steadily losing support in the post-election political scenario with many defections. This paper also argues that this victory shall provide the TMC with a greater clout in all-India politics especially keeping in mind the upcoming Lok Sabha elections of 2024. However, with Mamata Banerjee’s Prime Ministerial ambitions and the entry of the TMC into the electoral foray in other states such as Goa and Tripura, there is also a concern about the division of opposition votes.

The Results in Numbers and Regions

Before further discussion on the arguments stated above, it is perhaps important to discuss the result in some detail, especially going by the demographics and geographical areas of the state. First, let us have a look at a summary of the most important part of results of the elections.

Party/Alliance	Seats (2021)	Vote%
TMC	213	47.94
BJP	77	38.13
Left Congress ISF alliance	1	9.96
GJM (Tamang faction)	1	0.27

The BJP had performed well in three major areas of the state. North Bengal, Junglemahal (Southwestern Belt-largely an underdeveloped and Adivasi dominated area which was a hotbed of Maoist insurgency) and the areas of Southern Nadia and North 24 Pargana districts (which is a border area with Bangladesh as well as inhabited by the persons of the Matua community). An overwhelming number of the 77 seats won by the BJP comes from these three areas. However, the performance of the BJP has deteriorated. The TMC has been able to hold on to its vote share and win back some of the support that it had lost in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. Other than these three areas, the BJP had also done well in some areas such as the Hooghly district and parts of Burdwan district in 2019. Most of these areas have been wrested back by the TMC in 2021. Out of 42 Lok Sabha Seats in West Bengal, the TMC had won 22 while the BJP won 18 seats. The Congress was able to win two seats while the Left failed to open its account in 2019. However, if we dissect the seats by Vidhan Sabha segments then we will see that the BJP was ahead in 121 segments. The TMC had leads in 154 segments and the Congress and Left front led 9 and 0 segments respectively. The BJP ended up winning only 77 seats.

North Bengal

In the electoral politics of West Bengal, the term North Bengal refers to the seats north of the Murshidabad district. This is one area where the BJP had done extremely well in 2019. It won seven out of

the eight Lok Sabha seats in this area. The lone other seat (Malda Dakshin) went to the Congress which retained it by a wafer-thin margin. Interestingly, the TMC had increased its vote percentage in 2019 as compared to the previous elections but the BJP had built up a massive support base cutting across various sections of the society other than the Muslim population. In 2019 the BJP received close to fifty percent of votes, the Left Front parties, which had a sizeable grip on North Bengal politics even after their loss in 2011, were almost wiped out. However, two years later, the BJP faced an astute challenge from the TMC. As mentioned before, the BJP did manage to repeat its good performance in many parts of North Bengal, but its support deteriorated. The TMC made an all-out attack to regain seats in North Bengal. In 2021, it has been partially successful in the endeavour, especially in the districts of Malda, South Dinajpur and North Dinajpur. While the degree of TMC success has been lesser in the districts of Coch Behar and Jalpaiguri, the TMC did win enough support to win a few seats in those districts as well. Thus, to realise Amit Shah's dream of 200+, a clean sweep in North Bengal was required but the BJP was unable to get anything close to that.

The politics of North Bengal is complicated in several ways. The region is one of spectacular natural beauty but also suffers from long term underdevelopment. The region is one of West Bengal's most neglected and historically disaffected ones. From the days of the Left Front this area witnessed little industrialisation (much less than the rest of the state) or infrastructure development. North Bengal also has some genuine grievance against the Kolkata centric nature of West Bengal politics. This along with various other factors including the Kamtapur movement have created waves of anti-incumbency among a large section of the North Bengal voters. The BJP skilfully exploited many of the grievances which have been brewing in the region. The RSS and its organisations have been working in a number of areas, especially the adivasi dominated districts. The BJP has been especially successful in the districts of Alipurduar, Coch Behar and Jalpaiguri which have a considerable Adivasi population. As this paper argues, a lion's share of the BJP votes are not hardcore Hindutva votes but anti-incumbency votes. A well-funded and vitriolic campaign by the BJP, which promised a number of facilities for North Bengal, helped the BJP consolidate the anti-incumbency in the region. Much of the BJP's gain has been at the expense of the Left, especially the RSP and Forward Bloc which had bastions in this region even after the loss of power in 2011. However, the 2021 elections did not bring as much dividend to the BJP as it was required due to a number of factors. The BJP had colluded with a number of Rajbanshi leaders in 2019. While the trend continued in 2021, the TMC was able to rope in the support of some Rajbanshis and some Adivasi leaders. Moreover, as will be discussed later in the paper, the Matua vote (which had shifted from TMC to the BJP in 2019) partially shifted back to the TMC. North Bengal also has a significant number of Matua voters. Along with this, some pan West Bengal factors such as women voters, support for the TMC's populist schemes and other factors helped the TMC gain support from many sections of the society along with the consolidation of Muslim votes. Unlike 2019 when Muslim votes split in Malda between the Congress and the TMC, it consolidated behind the latter like elsewhere in Bengal. The Left-Congress-ISF alliance performed miserably in this region.

The 'Matua' Belt: NRC and Electoral Fortunes

The Matuas are a Bahujan community (largely of the Namashudra caste) which has a sizeable impact on politics in West Bengal. While Matuas live across the state, their numbers are significant in the districts of Nadia and North 24 Parganas. They also form a sizeable number in some districts of North Bengal. The Matuas have evolved into a significant vote bank since the ascent of the Trinamool Congress. The Matuas claim to be a separate religion which developed under the leadership of Harichand Thakur and his son Guruchand Thakur in the 19th century. The Matua movement has been one of the most significant anti-caste, anti-Brahminism movement in the history of modern Bengal. However, many Matuas have faced the horrors of the partition. A significant number of Matuas (or their forefathers) were forced to escape from East Pakistan/Bangladesh to West Bengal over decades. This has not only scarred the lives of generations but also bred Islamophobia and citizenship anxieties among many in their community. The Matuas being one of the most

deprived communities suffered exceedingly as refugees. Many of them (it is often reported) may not have citizenship papers.

The BJP through its communal politics has exploited these fault-lines. The Matuas were a trusted vote bank of the TMC till 2019. However, through the idea of the NRC, the BJP wooed the Matua community with the promise of 'citizenship' for all 'Hindu' refugees. Unfortunately, the Matua movement was one which sought to reject Hinduism and establish itself as a separate religion. However, the lure of citizenship and latent Islamophobia, largely had brought the Matuas into the BJP fold in 2019. In the Lok Sabha elections, the Matua community largely voted for the BJP. In the past two years a lot of complicated politics ensued between the BJP and the TMC as they jostled for the support of this community which has the potential to decide the fate of dozens of seats. It is perhaps beyond the scope of this paper to go into the detail of such politics, but it might be said that at least a portion of the Matua voters rejected the BJP and returned to the TMC fold in 2019. The enactment of the Citizenship Amendment Act, 2019 (CAA) and the politics of the NRC disappointed many of the Matuas. The anti-NRC movements and work of various organisations like Jai Bheem India Network, Jatiyo Bangla Sammelan, Bangla Sanskriti Mancha might have played an important role in this process. Whatever the factors might have been, the BJP lost many of the seats in the so called 'Matua Belt' of Nadia and large parts of North 24 Parganas. While the BJP still retains the support of a large section of the Matuas, it has been unable to retain the degree of support which would enable them to make a clean sweep in the region and retain/better their performance of 2019.

Guha (2021) maintains that caste-based politics in Bengal hasn't developed in the same way as in North India. The response of the paper would be that the fragmentation of the Matua votes shows that at the moment they are not as unified as a vote bank as they could have been. The BJP has a lead on SC votes in total but that is perhaps better attributed to anti-incumbency than caste solidarity. The BJP needed to consolidate the Matua vote which simply did not take place.

TMC Regains Lead in the Southwestern Districts

The Southwestern districts including the Junglemahal region had been of great consternation for the TMC in 2019. The BJP had largely swept this area which again has a significant Adivasi population. This was one of the most hotly contested areas of the state. Like in North Bengal and the 'Matua belt' the BJP was unable to retain the degree of support that it had received in 2019. In this case the degree of deterioration was much larger. The TMC made a massive effort to make a comeback in this region. The BJP retained plurality in only two districts of Bankura and Purulia. In rest of the districts the TMC was able to win more seats than the BJP. A number of factors including TMC's populist policies and welfare schemes (which shall be discussed in detail later in the paper) along with incessant campaign of the TMC workers aided adeptly by IPAC advisors seems to have made the difference in this region.

Nandigram: Mamata Banerjee Loses a Battle, Wins a War

Perhaps the most awaited contest in this election was the battle for Nandigram. The TMC supremo sent shockwaves across the state when she stated that she would contest from the Nandigram assembly constituency. Nandigram (along with Singur) was the place which propelled the streetfighter Mamata Banerjee to the seat of Chief Minister fourteen years ago. Faced with a menacing BJP, betrayed by a large number of defectors the veteran of many a battle Mamata Banerjee had one trick to offset the BJP charge and boost the dwindling morale of her party workers. Mamata Banerjee has contested elections from various parts of Kolkata. However, following the defection of Suwendu Adhikari, one of the senior-most leaders of the TMC and strongman of Medinipur district, to the BJP, the TMC seemed to have been on the backfoot. A number of analysts had written off the TMC and claimed the BJP's win to be a foregone conclusion. At this juncture, Banerjee's brave decision to contest in Nandigram served two purposes. One, to revive her commitment to the rural masses who propelled her to power and secondly to accost Suwendu Adhikari at his den.

As a TMC leader, Suwendu Adhikari was a TMC strongman. However, with the two- time chief minister

contesting this area herself, the challenge was for Adhikari to retain his turf. Most importantly, the BJP had to devote a large amount of its energy and resources to enable Suvendu Adhikari win a seat which had become a prestige issue. The TMC used this to concentrate more in other areas with Banerjee herself leading the charge. The greatly contested seat of Nandigram witnessed a number of controversies before and during the elections. On the day of counting, the result for this assembly constituency saw a very tight battle with Banerjee losing a wafer-thin margin, that too at the last moment. The TMC would later contest this result questioning the role of the election commission and claiming electoral fraud. The case is still sub-judice and the controversy continues. Here we assume the result to be genuine and consider her defeat to be genuine. Despite the TMC supremo's loss at Nandigram, the TMC was able to win a majority of seats in both East and West Midnapore districts. The Mamata factor, was able to take the Suvendu challenge head on, at the latter's own backyard. His victory, if at all, was a pyrrhic one.

South Bengal Sweep for TMC

The TMC swept the Kolkata metropolitan area by winning all seats in the region. The TMC also won most of the seats in the districts of South Bengal including Hooghly, North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas, Howrah, East and West Burdwan. The BJP was unable to win any significant number of seats in these areas. It must be noted that while the Sanyukta Morcha (Left-Congress-ISF alliance) performed pathetically across the state rendering the fight to be a bipolar one, the alliance candidates did get a significant number of votes (mostly above ten percent) in this region. This split the opposition votes with the BJP failing to come anywhere near the TMC's vote share. Another significant aspect of this region was the resounding defeat of a number of heavyweight defectors who jumped ship from the TMC to the BJP. These defectors including Rajib Banerjee from Howrah district suffered massive defeats at the hands of the TMC. A sweep in South Bengal sealed the fate for the BJP. The TMC also won in the districts of Murshidabad and Birbhum where the BJP was unable to win a significant number of seats. The BJP had to settle for a motely 77 well less than half of the target set by Amit Shah.

A Polarised Election?

The BJP left no stone unturned in its campaign drive to polarise the electorate along communal lines. There was a massive campaign of slander to denounce the TMC and the Left as 'Muslim' appeasers. The RSS backed BJP, aided by visits by dozens of central ministers including the Prime Minister and Home Minister attacked the TMC tooth and nail and attempted to inject Hindutva politics into Bengal. This brand of politics which had few takers before 2014, gained traction ever since the BJP came to power at the centre. Over the past few years, the BJP has doggedly pursued its politics of Hindutva. A false narrative of Hindus being in danger has been regularly carried out in the BJP campaign. This BJP campaign was particularly high on the Hindutva agenda. Temples, religious issues and immigration from Bangladesh became a flashpoint of the BJP campaign. Nath and Chowdhury (2019) have shown how the number of communal conflagrations in Bengal have increased with the strengthening of the BJP. The trend continued in the blood soaked two years since 2019. The BJP IT cell was highly active on the online front.

Bengal rejected the communal polarisation. The attempt to create communal divide among the electorate and reap electoral harvest through communal voting was at best partially successful. No doubt, there were certain areas where it might be said that that voting did take place along communal lines (example Murshidabad district, parts of Maldah, Nadia and Midnapore districts), most of Bengal did not vote along religious lines. The Muslims of Bengal had largely supported the TMC since its ascent to power in 2011. A large number of Muslims did remain supporters of the Congress (especially in its Muslim dominated bastions of Maldah and Murshidabad) and Left parties. However, due to the imminent threat of a highly communal BJP, an overwhelming majority of the entire Muslim electorate voted for the TMC. The Hindu polarisation on the other hand was limited to only a few districts. Most of Bengal did not vote along communal lines. Many areas with huge Hindu majorities voted overwhelmingly for the TMC. It seems that other than a few places, most of the votes for the BJP were anti-incumbency votes rather than hardcore Hindu communal

votes. This will be discussed later on in the paper. Studies like those by Dutta et. al. (2021) and Grover et. al. (2021) show that the online blitz by the BJP did not succeed in making Hindus vote in a herd.

Reasons for the TMC Win

The TMC victory can be attributed to many factors. The first one that needs to be discussed is the number of populist welfare schemes of the TMC. A number of such schemes have been very popular with the masses in West Bengal. The schemes such as Kanyashree (catering to the education for girls) has won international recognition. Such schemes have continued unabated throughout the TMC regime. In the past two years, challenged by an immensely powerful BJP, Mamata Banerjee has sought to go back to the basics. If one has to ask what has been keeping her in power despite massive allegations of corruption and despotism, one of the first answers would be these schemes. Along with the continuance of the various schemes, the TMC government launched two extremely important schemes- Swasthasathi and Duare Sarkar. The former is a healthcare scheme which provides each family with a health insurance of five lakh rupees per annum. The Swasthasathi card works like a Medici claim scheme which provides cashless treatment at private hospitals including hospitals in other states. The Swasthasathi scheme used to exist earlier, but it catered only to a few sections of the society such as government employees. The ambit of this scheme was increased to cover the entire population of West Bengal. This scheme which seeks to provide some sort of universal health insurance has been extremely popular, especially given the pandemic situation. The Duare Sarkar is a programme through which the West Bengal government has been opening camps at the local level (ward/panchayat) where citizens can directly apply for and avail the various government schemes and facilities.

The welfare schemes of the TMC government have been benefitting an overwhelming majority of the population. While some address women, others benefit persons from the scheduled castes and tribes, some address the poor while others provide relief (example: Samabyathi - a scheme which provides money for cremation/burial of the dead). There are also schemes for widows and senior citizens. Through these schemes the TMC regime has been able to reach a wide range of persons. Almost everyone benefits from at least some scheme or the other. This is especially true in the villages where these schemes seek to provide some rudiments of social security. Both the CPM and BJP had denounced these schemes as 'doles' but the electorate judged otherwise.

The welfare schemes also serve another important purpose. Distribution of money to keep money circulation alive at the rural level. Through these schemes, most of which distribute money at the lower rungs of the economy keeps money circulation alive in economy. This flow of cash continually keeps the economy running. Over the past few years, the Indian economy has faced a number of blows including demonetisation and the ravages of lockdowns imposed due to the covid19 pandemic. In this situation, the money circulated by the TMC government through these schemes played a significant role in keeping the Bengal economy up and running. This explains in part why the West Bengal economy suffered relatively less in the pandemic situation.

The Welfare Schemes of the TMC were the central focus of the TMC's achievements. This also shifted the gaze from communal issues to secular ones. While the BJP harped on communal issues, the centrality of welfare schemes in the TMC campaign brought back the focus of the agenda to questions of social welfare and security. While the supporters and detractors of the government debated the efficacy of these schemes, slowly but certainly these secular topics began to come to the centre of the election narrative in Bengal. Ultimately, the vote was about secular issues (in most places) and Hindu-Muslim issues were relegated to a secondary place. With increasing misery rising out of the pandemic situation and rising prices, the BJP had little to argue for on the sector of welfare. On this point, the TMC seemed to be a much better alternative than the BJP. While the BJP retained a significant vote, scholars like Ray (2021) would say that they got it more due to anti-incumbency and disaffection with the heavy-handedness of the TMC rather than Hindutva. The latter is spreading in Bengal but not to an extent that would be able to make the BJP win.

Woman Power

The women of Bengal have played a significant role in the Trinamool victory. According to a number of surveys and articles, including CSDS-Lokniti surveys the TMC historically has an edge with women voters. Mamata Banerjee's image as a fighter inspire many women in the state, especially women. Her simple living and clothing (the dhanekhali sari, hawai slipper image) resonates much among the poor, especially the women. She also has a simple demeanour who effortlessly visits slums and shanties, villages and other remote places. She communicates with the poor as if she is one of them. As she effortlessly shares puffed rice (muri) and common snacks with the people, she is also able to communicate with the psyche of the Bengali homemakers. Many women see a reflection of themselves in Mamata Banerjee. However, converting emotion into votes is also a matter of shrewd politics which the TMC supremo is a veteran of. The TMC, being a vote savvy catch all party that it is, did not shy away from any tactic which could consolidate a lead over this vote bank which constitutes 49.2 percent of the population.

First, several welfare policies in the state have been women centric. Policies like Kanyashree, Ruposhree, SabujSathi directly affected women- especially young girls and students. Moreover, in schemes like Swasthyasathi health card, the cards are issued preferably in the name of the eldest woman in the family. Such gestures also have a woman centric touch which brings about a sense of dignity and empowerment in a patriarchal society. The TMC also designed (aided by IPAC consultants) some very catchy slogans which were woman centric like 'Bangla nijermekeichay' (Bengal wants her daughter only) which sought to touch an emotional chord with the women of the state. Moreover, Banerjee's fluency with shlokas and other Hindu mantras such as Chandipaath also might have impressed a large number of devout Hindu (especially upper caste) women. This also might have contributed in cancelling out the BJP's Hindutva outlook. While this kind of politics of invoking religious mantras in politics is a rather unhealthy sign for secularism in India, all is fair in war they say. No one can exploit these tendencies in the society than Machiavellian Mamata Banerjee.

The TMC played the gender card rather persistently during the elections. The BJP was vilified for rapes and incidents of sexual violence in states ruled by them. Incidents such as Hathras were continuously invoked to portray the BJP as a patriarchal party. The BJP also tried to posit a 'woman friendly' manifesto. However, no one seemed to take it very seriously. At the end of the day, women played a significant role in the TMC's win. The critical question is to what degree? As the CSDS-Lokniti survey reveals, the TMC's support from women cannot be seen as a sweep. It needs to be looked into from an intersectional point of view. Women from all sections of the society did not vote overwhelmingly for the TMC. However, the tendency of women to vote for the TMC was significant among poor women, Adivasi women. Among upper-caste women, the degree was much lesser but still, many more women voted for the TMC than men from their castes. Among the SCs in Bengal, for both men and women, the BJP led the TMC (thanks to the persisting though reduced Matua and Rajbanshi vote and many votes in the Southwestern districts). However, the lead of the BJP over the TMC is a little lesser among SC women. Muslims irrespective of gender voted overwhelmingly for the TMC, with Muslim women voting a bit more than the men. The CSDS-Lokniti survey reveals that the poor women voted much more heartily for the TMC. Among poor women, the TMC lead is again significant. Thus, the TMC didn't sweep the women vote but had a significant edge which helped it win the election.

Bengali Identity Politics

The political landscape of West Bengal politics has witnessed the rise of Bengali identity politics over the past few years. Organisations like Bangla Pokkho, Jatiyo Bangla Sammelan, Bangla Sanskritik Mancha among others have made a significant impact over the politics of the state. While none of these organisations have organised into electoral parties, the demands raised by these organisations have made their mark. Hindi imperialism and imposition is one of the tendencies which has been highlighted by these activists. The slogan 'Joy Bangla' (victory to Bengal) has been popularised as a slogan in West Bengal by Bangla Pokkho and

Jatiyo Bangla Sammelan. Many of these organisations and activists openly identified the BJP as a 'Hindi imperialist' and 'anti-Bengali' force and openly opposed it. The TMC made a remarkable decision in July 2019 by adopting the slogan Joy Bangla, months after the rise of the BJP in the Lok Sabha elections that year.

The TMC is a big tent, catch all party. On one hand it endorses Joy Bangla slogan and on the other it proposes to build a Hindi university in Bengal. The TMC seeks to placate people of all communities in the state and reap electoral dividend. However, for all practical purposes, the TMC remains a Bengal centric party and has sought to defend Bengali interests in the politics of the Indian Union. Since 2019, the TMC found the idea of adopting Joy Bangla slogan and playing the card of Bengali identity politics as a politically viable ploy to secure votes. The idea of projecting the BJP as an anti-Bengali party and a party alien to Bengali ethos and culture was adopted. This factor played a major role in securing TMC's win. The BJP's reputation as a 'cow-belt' party did not help them. Their lack of homegrown, local leadership also hampered their cause. As the BJP increasingly relied on Prime Minister Modi and the central leadership, they lost credibility in Bengal. Chatterjee and Basu (2021) points out how the 2021 election in Bengal largely become the fight between two antagonist slogans, 'Bharat mata ki Jai' vs 'Joi Bangla.' Despite massive campaigns, the BJP was not able to overwhelm the Bengali public with nationalist fervour. The softer nationalism of TMC and regionalist outlook was more popular among the Bengali voters. Facing these problems, the BJP Bengal unit was unable to launch any campaign which would help them increase their tally. While the TMC might have been unpopular among many, the BJP did not cut much ice with a lot of voters. The BJP retained many voters but could not hope for a victory.

If not Mamata then Who?

The lack of a credible CM candidate on behalf of the Bengal BJP also contributed to their defeat. As the author argued in the 2019 Lok Sabha election, the opposition parties failed to project any credible opposition face to counter the image of Narendra Modi, at the state level in West Bengal, the BJP faced a similar problem. Mamata Banerjee is a well-honed politician with a huge mass base of her own. There was no politician of a similar stature on the side of the BJP. The BJP's state leadership lacked any significant leader. Dilip Ghosh and defector Suwendu Adhikari were being projected as possible CM candidates for the BJP by the media. However, neither did the party leadership have any tall leaders from the state nor could they announce a CM candidate before the polls. The Bengal BJP had to increasingly rely more and more on the leadership of Modi and central leaders who campaigned heavily and a bit too frequently in the state. The TMC responded by mocking them as 'daily passengers' exacerbating the stigma of the 'outsider' label of the BJP. Like the TMC, the BJP is also ridden with factions and infighting. However, unlike the former which is led by an Iron Lady who is a political veteran with experience as an MP and Chief Minister, the BJP had nobody to unify the warring factions. Embarrassing infighting between factions led by Rahul Sinha, Dilip Ghosh and others made the going harder for the Bengal BJP.

The lack of a strong alternative leader is a bad signal to floating/undecided voters. A lot of voters cast their vote not on the basis of ideology or party but going by the skills of the administrators. The sitting CM is a proven administrator. With the BJP lacking a viable alternative, many floating, undecided voters might have voted for the TMC.

Turncoats Lose

The ignominious politics of 'aya Ram gaya Ram' genre entered the arena of Bengal politics with the strengthening of the TMC's grip in power. Various kinds of corruption and dubious political practices existed but the state was thankfully spared of the blemish of large-scale defections and horse trading. However, the advent of TMC rule introduced the idea of large-scale defections of panchayat members, councillors and even MLAs. The last five years experienced a number of large-scale defections engineered by the TMC. A large number of MLAs (and an even larger number of panchayat/municipality representatives) who were elected on Left or Congress tickets defected to the TMC. In many places, entire village panchayat samitis,

municipality boards which were ruled by the opposition defected to the TMC. There have been large scale allegations of use of pressure (sometimes criminal force) to compel opposition representatives to defect. With the advent of the BJP as a major player in Bengal politics, the TMC had competition. A much richer and politically adept BJP under the crafty leadership of politicians like Amit Shah caused much consternation for the TMC in this regard. It appeared as if the TMC was getting paid back in its own coin, with interest.

The decline of the TMC in the 2019 elections abetted by the narrative created by the pro BJP media predicted the inevitable defeat of the TMC in 2021. A large number of opportunists from the TMC (and also some from the Left and Congress) joined the BJP. More than half of the BJP candidates for the 2021 elections were defectors from the TMC. A number of defectors from the CPM also got tickets for the BJP. The 2021 elections witnessed a massive hammering for the turncoats. While the politics of defections continues to plague Bengali politics, the voters of the state overwhelmingly rejected the politics of defection. However, there seems to be more than mere idealism behind this result. In line with one of the central arguments of the paper, the BJP vote is largely a consolidation of consistently anti-TMC vote. Scholars like Ray (2021) also are of the opinion that the support of the BJP is more due to dissatisfaction with the TMC than a fervour for Hindutva. When leaders (often notorious ones accused of corruption, oppression and misrule) who were in the TMC till the other day got tickets from the BJP it created disgust and/or apathy among the persistently anti-TMC voters. At least some of those voters must have desisted from voting for the BJP. Basically, fielding a large number of former TMC turncoats did a lot of harm for the BJP.

IPAC Packs a Punch

After the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, the TMC was in a mess. The BJP had already started poaching a large number of party members and leaders. The RSS had been rapidly increasing its shakhas and bases since 2014. The exuberant BJP was breathing down the neck of TMC. Despite winning 22 (a majority of) seats in 2019, it was the BJP which claimed moral victory. Abetted by a pliant section of the media, a BJP victory seemed to be inevitable in 2021. However, the TMC was unwilling to give up without a fight. On the advice of MP Abhishek Banerjee (Mamata Banerjee's nephew and emerging leader on the TMC), the services of Prashant Kishor's IPAC was roped in. The IPAC's foray into Bengal's politics was not looked upon kindly by many including some within the TMC. Many TMC leaders did not appreciate the fact that trained consultants would tell them what to do- when to organise meetings, rallies and so on. However, the results seem to prove that it was a good investment.

It is perhaps impossible to say with precision how much did the IPAC's services contribute to the TMC's victory. However, some important qualitative and quantitative factors need to be mentioned. The IPAC was able to raise the morale of the TMC and keep up the confidence within the Trinamool ranks that it can win in 2021. The IPAC made a massive number of surveys gathering huge amounts of data. Helped by the services of a number of dedicated professionals (many of whom were ex activists or had other important skills at their disposal), the IPAC was able to discern areas of strength and weakness of the TMC. They were able to provide advice on organisational restructuring. Through extensive field reports and data gathering, they were able to discern which leaders were unpopular among the people. Thanks to the advice of the IPAC, the TMC restructured the party organisation thoroughly in the past two years.

The IPAC experts also helped draft a number of policies which helped TMC connect with the people at the ground level and detect problems. An example is 'Didi ke Bolo' which was a campaign where ordinary people could call a number and vent out their grievances to the TMC officials. Of course, this helped IPAC gather data and gauge the situation better. It is also said that a number of TMC policies such as Duare Sarkar were made under the influence of the IPAC.

In short, one of the greatest weaknesses of the TMC is that of allegations of immense corruption. In such a situation, the IPAC did a great job in helping the party restructure its image and field good candidates in the face of massive defections. The professional help of IPAC, especially in designing the campaign and

improving its online footprint helped the beleaguered TMC in the election campaign in various ways that boosted its strength to defeat the BJP. IPAC employees and interns worked both online and offline to help a disorganised party like the TMC take on a formidable, organised behemoth like the BJP election machinery.

Civil Society Contra BJP

The vote share of the BJP declined only by around two percent. However, the vote share of the TMC increased by around five percent (if we compare with the 2019 elections). One factor which can explain this strange phenomenon is that of the massive civil society movements which had taken place in the last two years in West Bengal. A number of powerful movements such as the anti-NRC movements, anti-communalism movements had been taking place since 2019. There have been a number of confrontations between the BJP and the civil society organisations and various anti-BJP activists. A number of such organisations created the No Vote to BJP movement. Various activists across the state joined in a spirited campaign to portray the BJP as an enemy of secularism and democratic values. It projected the BJP as the number one enemy of the people of West Bengal. Representatives of the Samyukta Kisan Morcha and various activists of the ongoing farmers' movement also campaigned in Bengal to defeat the BJP at all costs. These movements had a significant impact on the people of Bengal, especially floating/undecided voters consolidated their vote against the BJP to vote for the TMC. These movements also echoed in the cultural pattern of the state which has historically rejected communal politics.

The aggressive Hindutva brand of politics and brazen attempts to polarise the electorate along communal lines was not taken lightly by many sections of the civil society. While some definitely bought the BJP's narrative, many did not. Since 2019, the firmly anti-TMC votes had consolidated behind the BJP (mostly defecting from the Left). This trend continued unabated. In such a situation, a large number of persons who might not like the TMC in general, voted for it just to keep the BJP out.

As this paper has argued that the votes received by the BJP is largely the committed anti-TMC vote which did not care about voting for a far-right party as long as the TMC can be defeated. However, many other Bengal voters identified the BJP as the main enemy and voted for the TMC. Thus, the TMC got an unusually high number of votes, it must thank the floating voters and the civil-society campaigns and movements for the same. The civil society movements contributed more in terms of quality than quantity, including online content which struck a chord with the cultural sensibilities of Bengal, and a blow to the BJP's prospects.

Left Debacle Once Again

The once mighty Left front once again faced a debacle. Since the panchayat elections of 2018, the BJP had replaced the Left Front as the principal opposition party in Bengal, a trend which further stabilised in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. The Left allied with the Congress and newly formed ISF this time and pitched the TMC and BJP as 'BJMool' or two sides of the same coin. This fundamental aspect of their campaign damaged the prospects of recovery for the Left. The combined vote share of the Left and Congress (though they had contested separately in 2019) was around 13 percent in 2019. It was expected that in the Vidhan Sabha elections they could fare better and win a few seats, especially in areas such as Malda and Murshidabad where the Congress retained quite a lot of their old support bases. However, those districts (with Muslim majorities) shifted their support to the TMC.

The Left leaders played a gamble a few months before the elections by allying with the newly formed Indian Secular Front of ISF. The ISF is led by Abbas Siddique, the firebrand cleric of Furfura Sharif (a Sufi shrine revered by many Muslims in South Bengal). The entry of Abbas Siddique into Bengal politics is a matter of great significance, which is perhaps a topic of discussion for another paper. The Furfura Sharif shrine is known to have played a significant role in the consolidation of Muslim votes in favour of the TMC since 2011, although indirectly. The Shrine avoided any direct contact with political parties. However, the shrine has witnessed a leadership struggle where the erstwhile leadership role of Tawha Siddique has been

replaced (to a significant extent) by Abbas Siddique. Abbas is ambitious about politics and wanted direct entry. He floated a new party called the Indian Secular Front which would participate in the elections.

Abbas sought to forge an alliance of Muslims, Dalits and Adivasis along with other backward sections of the society stitching together an alliance of marginalised people. While this looked really effective and progressive on paper, the reality was quite different from the lofty ideals. In reality the support base of Abbas Siddiqui was nothing but from the supporters of the Furfura Sharif. In reality any support that Abbas mustered outside the Muslim community was little more than tokenism. More importantly, Abbas is no stranger to controversy. He has an ignominious history of making patriarchal and communal remarks.

The left alliance with the ISF did not go well with the people. Rather, it fuelled the BJP's allegation that the Left commits 'appeasement' of Muslims along with the TMC. The left alliance with the ISF alienated many secular voters from the Left alliance. The left hoped to rope in some significant Muslim support due to the presence of the ISF in the alliance. However, that was not to be. Faced with an existential crisis due to the prospect of a BJP victory, the Muslims voted for the TMC en masses.

The left had fielded a good number of young candidates. They fared relatively better than their more experienced counterparts. However, the public simply refused to buy the left argument of "BJP=TMC." The left humiliation was complete as all the four left parties failed to win a single seat. Similarly, the Congress also faced a drubbing. They were wiped out in their former bastions of Malda and Murshidabad as well, a result few (the author among them) could contemplate. The Congress had joined the CPM in equating the TMC with the BJP, something which the minorities of Malda and Murshidabad did not take too kindly. The ISF won one seat. While the future of the party is uncertain, the brand of politics introduced by Abbas needs to be taken into consideration. Perhaps the overwhelming threat of the BJP made the Muslim community keep other considerations aside and vote for the TMC this time but the question of adequate representation, jobs and justice for Muslims and other dalits and bahujans is a pertinent one. The mainstream secular parties of Bengal have been relying on the minority votes for the past seven decades or so. However, the Muslim community remains marginalised and underrepresented in Bengal. It is time that they sincerely cater to the just demands of their community as well as those of the other marginalised communities else organisations like ISF would give them a run for their money. Abbas has introduced a much needed and important narrative into the politics of Bengal.

Aftermath of the Elections

The election, much like its ignominious predecessors, left a trail of violence. The tragedy of violence in Bengal elections could not be averted this time as well. There was much violence both before and after the elections. Massive post-poll violence marred the conclusion of a historic election. There was a massive amount of fake news circulation regarding these violent incidents as well. As Mamata Banerjee was sworn in as chief minister for the third consecutive term, she once again kindled aspirations for a greater role at the all-India level. The BJP failed to breach the bastion in the east and now face a resurgent (not necessarily united) opposition back home in North India. The upcoming elections in Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Uttarakhand will tell how strong the BJP is. What can be said at the moment is that the Modi-Shah juggernaut has taken a beating in Bengal. Under siege by farmers and also by rising prices and post-Covid predicament of the economy, it is to be seen how the BJP manages to salvage majorities in the upcoming elections.

The TMC has continued to enact its welfare policies. Duare Sarkar and other policies continue. The state government has introduced LakshmirBhandar - a scheme by which married women who do not have an income will get a monthly income (Rs 500 for general category, 1000 for SC/ST /OBC categories). This policy is the fulfilment of an election promise. Similarly, the TMC government has fulfilled another election promise by starting a students' credit card where students can avail up to ten lakh rupees as loan for their higher education. Loans taken through this card will not need any guarantor. Moreover, the state government charges only 4 percent interest that too simple interest. These schemes seem to be very popular.

The TMC has attempted to make forays into politics of other states. Two such states where elections are coming up in the next one year or so are Goa and Tripura. Both these states are currently ruled by the BJP. In Tripura, the TMC has roped in a large number of ex-BJP leaders. Similarly in Goa, some prominent faces like former Chief Minister LuzeinhoFaleiro and tennis player Leander Paes have joined the TMC. In Tripura, the fight is expected to be a three-way contest between the BJP, Left and the TMC. The BJP is weakened by defections to the TMC, and the Left still has some hold remaining in Tripura. This three-way fight which also includes some political forces of the indigenous communities of Tripura will be one to watch out for. In Goa, the TMC's chances are less certain. LuzenhoFaleiro is not a very popular leader. On the other hand, the TMC seems to be dividing the opposition vote. This is one concern which would be plaguing the mind of political analysts keeping the 2024 elections in mind. The TMC posters and propaganda openly declare that they want their beloved Didi as Prime Minister. As a veteran politician and three-time Chief Minister she is surely a strong candidate. However, will she be able to form an effective coalition? Will the Congress accept this? Is it possible to have such a coalition? Will it last? Or will a TMC led/backed federal front help in dividing opposition votes? Outside Bengal, these possibilities are all very much possible. The coming days and TMC's participation in all-India politics needs to be seen. Some senior politicians like Yashwant Sinha have joined the TMC. It needs to be seen what role they play in the politics in the near future.

A few months following the results, the politics of defections and violence continued unabated. This time the TMC rules the roost. As far as defections are concerned, the past few months have witnessed the defection of BJP leaders including many MLAs and an MP (Babul Supriyo) deserting the party and join the TMC. Many leaders who had left the TMC for the BJP before the elections have come back to the fold of the TMC. The BJP, which was heavily reliant on defections from the TMC to field candidates in Bengal, seems to be weakening. They lack adequate ground cadre who can take on the TMC. Even today the Left parties have some good ground level organisation left. The opposition space in Bengal seems to be vacuous. There seems to be little effective opposition to the TMC. In the few by polls that recently took place, all the seats were won by the TMC. In all these seats the TMC secured more than fifty percent votes. In some seats they received more than 70 and 80 percent votes. Some of the seats that went into the by polls were held by the BJP. The BJP, which had won them a few months back, lost all of them. The Left increased its vote share significantly in Santipur seat which gives hope that they might be able to comeback as the main opposition to the TMC. The upcoming municipal elections will see if that is a possibility or not.

The historic election is over. For now, the TMC reigns supreme in Bengal. The tradition of one party dominated political scenario is further strengthened in the state. It is to be seen if there is a new opposition. A healthy democracy needs an opposition. It has to be seen if the BJP can remain an effective opposition or if the Left can regain that space.

References

1. Dey, D. (2021): 'The Political economy of Bengal election: Growing importance of Bengal in the South-east Asian economy', *Available at SSRN*.
2. Guha, A. (2021) : 'The caste question in West Bengal politics: continuing inconsequentiality or rising relevance?', *Contemporary South Asia*, 1-25.
3. Ray, S. (2021) : 'Dominant party rule, development and the rise of Hindu nationalism in West Bengal', In *Theory, Policy, Practice* (pp. 200-217). Routledge India.
4. Grover, R., Shekhawat, G., & Pal, J. (2021, June) : Twitter superstars don't win elections: A Poster on Twitter Campaigning and Electoral Realities in the 2021 West Bengal Assembly Elections. In *ACM SIGCAS Conference on Computing and Sustainable Societies* (pp. 428-431).
5. Dutta, S., Sarkar, D., Roy, S., Kole, D. K., & Jana, P. (2021, June) : 'A Study on Herd Behavior Using

Sentiment Analysis in Online Social Network’, In *2021 International Conference on Communication, Control and Information Sciences (ICCISc)* (Vol. 1, pp. 1-6). IEEE.

6. Nath, S., & Chowdhury, S. R. (2019) : ‘Manufacturing polarisation in contemporary India: The case of identity politics in post-left Bengal’, *International Journal of Conflict and Violence (IJCV)*, 13, a652-a652.
7. Shastri, S., & Kumar, A. (2021) : ‘Electoral Dynamics in the States of India’, Bandi, M; *Bengal Politics: Is The Cause of Subalterns Lost In A Battle of Perception*

Important Media Links

1. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/elections/west-bengal-assembly-election/in-bengal-battle-for-matua-vote-heats-up-101616467190256.html>
2. <https://www.thehindu.com/elections/west-bengal-assembly/matuas-consider-cao-with-some-confusion/article34352343.ece>
3. <https://www.thequint.com/news/politics/west-bengal-politics-why-the-matua-community-vote-is-crucial-for-bengal-elections-2021>
4. <https://indianexpress.com/article/north-east-india/tripura/tripura-2023-assembly-polls-tmc-steering-committee-subal-bhowmik-7556213/>
5. <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/tmc-to-contest-municipal-polls-in-tripura-1039076.html>
6. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/tmc-nominates-ex-go-cm-luizinho-faleiro-to-rajya-sabha/article37468630.ece>
7. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/west-bengal-post-election-violence-house-to-house-eight-times-in-two-months-40-families-say-on-the-run-7411038/>
8. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/bengal-government-in-denial-mode-over-post-election-violence-says-calcutta-high-court-2477773>
9. <https://thewire.in/women/how-women-are-bearing-the-brunt-of-post-poll-violence-in-west-bengal>
10. <https://thewire.in/politics/goa-election-tmc-prashant-kishor>
11. Sardesai, R; 2021. See details <http://14.139.58.147:8080/jspui/handle/123456789/3648>
12. <https://indianexpress.com/article/cities/kolkata/west-bengal-santipur-bypoll-vote-share-makes-cpm-rethink-on-alliance-with-congress-7609394/>
13. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/with-many-cpim-leaders-unhappy-will-isf-left-alliance-last-long-in-west-bengal-1808666-2021-05-30>
14. <https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/west-bengal-assembly-elections-2021-who-is-this-man/cid/1809418>
15. <https://thewire.in/politics/west-bengal-abbas-siddiqui-mamata-muslim-voters>
16. <https://thewire.in/politics/interview-our-welfare-schemes-will-ride-us-back-to-power-tmcs-derek-obrien>
17. <https://thewire.in/politics/interview-our-welfare-schemes-will-ride-us-back-to-power-tmcs-derek-obrien>
18. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/cities/kolkata-news/welfare-schemes-get-lion-s-share-in-mamata-govt-s-bengal-budget-101625670260359.html>
19. <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/governance/west-bengal-assembly-election-social-schemes-secured-trinamool-victory-data-suggests-76923>

20. <https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/why-did-bjp-lose-bengal-elections-2021-1798260-2021-05-03>
21. <https://thewire.in/politics/bengal-key-factors-that-led-to-tmcs-defeat-of-the-modi-shah-behemoth>
22. <https://www.livemint.com/opinion/online-views/it-was-largely-hubris-that-led-the-bjp-to-its-defeat-in-west-bengal-11619971288552.html>
23. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/the-inside-story-of-why-the-bjp-lost-bengal-101621240030193.html>
24. <https://scroll.in/article/989711/abbas-siddiqui-might-struggle-against-tmc-but-represents-a-churn-amongst-bengali-muslims>
25. <https://www.livemint.com/politics/news/mamata-vs-suvendu-calcutta-high-court-defers-hearing-on-nandigram-results-till-24-june-11623995284562.html>
26. <https://thewire.in/politics/bengal-polls-civil-society-no-vote-to-bjp-fascism-hatred-authoritarianism>
27. <https://thewire.in/politics/no-vote-to-bjp-a-peoples-campaign-in-bengal-reaches-remote-villages>

Understanding West Bengal Assembly Polls 2021

Oindrilla Dattagupta
& Manish

The 2021 Assembly election in West Bengal was bitterly fought. The BJP fell well short of victory. The TMC swept the state, winning 48% of the vote and 73% of seats, indeed one of its best performance. A close study of the results of Assembly elections shows that the victory of AITMC has been mainly due to the collective support of both Hindus and Muslims. The upper, the lower castes and the adivasis too gave support to TMC. The BJP on other hand had harped mainly on the Hindu population for the vote bank but as the data have shown the caste politics and lack of Hindu consolidation played a significant role in the decrease of the party popularity. This article analyses the major trends in the voting behaviour, the factors that led to the success of TMC and the debacle of BJP especially the caste and identity politics and communal card by evaluating the datasets available from the websites of Election Commission and the West Bengal State Legislative Assembly and media commentaries.

Introduction

The West Bengal Assembly polls have gained relevance and captured the media attention as it had been a major litmus test for the two rival parties-the All India Trinamool Congress or the TMC and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). While the former has shown a strong hold in the state since its glorious rise in 2011 bashing the 34 years of Left-party supremacy; BJP had been making a coordinated effort with the state BJP MLAs to ensure colossal victory in the state. The emergence of BJP as the dominant national party since 2014 and its strings of victory in various states across India has made them confident to fight the much awaited electoral battle. The article analyses the major trends in the voting behaviour, the factors that led to the success of TMC and the debacle of BJP especially the caste and identity politics and communal card by evaluating the datasets available from the websites of Election Commission and the West Bengal State Legislative Assembly and media commentaries.

Demographic and Socio-Political Profile of West Bengal

The state of West Bengal is strategically located sharing international borders with Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. It also borders with Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Sikkim and Assam. Kolkata, the capital city of West Bengal, is the thriving metropolitan city connecting the neighbouring North Eastern region and Siliguri corridor which acts as the crucial geographical space for connecting North East India with the rest of the country. The state thus ,in terms of India's foreign policy, stands in a vital position in the context of the ambitious Act- East policy that ensures the connectivity of India with the South and Southeast Asian countries. The maritime trade links in Bay of Bengal increase the significance of the state geo-politically. Boosting the development within the state is most crucial to implement the foreign policy objectives of the centre and in some of the strategically located north-eastern states. BJP has been successful mainly because both state and centre have the same political party in power. However, the economic development in West Bengal has been much way behind, partly due to the state-centre rivalry, wherein, the cooperative federalism gets negatively impacted due to party feud which has its repercussion in the infrastructural development of the state and the connectivity. Infact, if we look at the foreign direct investment (FDI) and the ease of doing business in the state; it doesn't provide an impressive picture with Kolkata recording the lowest rates of FDI growth, lack of business-friendly environment and industrialisation with majority of the youth leaving the city for other metros for better opportunities. Kolkata and Siliguri can be the major hubs in terms of economic partnership

and the local as well the state government can garner the potentialities to engage in global economic and political networks. Keeping in mind the geo-strategic and geo-economic vitality of the state as well as its political significance for BJP to capture Bengal, the electoral campaigns and political strategies to win over the constituencies had been crucial. The BJP designed its electoral strategy around identity politics. In West Bengal with approximately 71 per cent of Hindus and 27 per cent of Muslims, the Hindutva slogans had been the core of BJP sloganeering in the elections. The TMC, on other hand, knowing the art of winning the hearts of the people of Bengal had consolidated its base by mobilising the Muslims, Dalits and the tribals addressing the BJP leaders as the outsiders who have been trying to hijack the cultural legacy of the state. The TMC managed to win the political game by using the politics of polarisation and communalism to its favour. The slogans of *Jai Shree Ram* by BJP was countered by Mamata's *Chandi- path* chanting and the symbolising of the leader as Maa Durga. Though the BJP targeted Mamata Banerjee's, nepotism, it didn't tarnish her image. BJP also couldn't gain much from CAA and the caste card, which it had played well, barring the North Bengal where BJP performed well due to the development issue being crucial. The election and voting behaviour are much determined by the population, religious and gender parameters. The following data gives a holistic picture of the state as per the census reports.

Estimated population of West Bengal 2021

Estimated population of West Bengal in 2021	100,896,618	
Estimated population of males in 2021	51,741,855	
Estimated population of females in 2021	49,154,762	

Population as per 2011 census

Population	91,276,115	Boys Population (0-6 Age)	5,410,396
Male Population	46,808,264	Girls Population (0-6 Age)	5,171,070
Female Population	44,467,851	Literacy	76.26%
% of Male' Population	51.28%	Male Literacy	81.69%
% of Female' Population	48.72%	Female Literacy	70.54%
% of India' Population	7.54%	Total Literates	61,538,281
Sex Ratio	950	Male Literates	33,818,810
Child Sex Ratio	956	Female Literates	27,719,471
Density/km ²	1,028	Population Rural	62,183,113
Density/mi ²	2,664	Population Rural Percentage	68.13%
Area (km ²)	88,752	Population Urban	29,093,002
Area (mi ²)	34,267	Population Urban Percentage	31.87%
Child Population (0-6 Age)	10,581,466		

West Bengal Religious Data

Description	Population in 2020	Percentage in 2021	Estimated Population
Hindus	64,385,546	70.54%	71,171,783
Muslims	24,654,825	27.01%	27,253,444
Christians	658,618	0.72%	728,036
Sikhs	63,523	0.07%	70,218

Buddhists	282,898	0.31%	312,715
Jains	60,141	0.07%	66,480
Not Stated	228,267	0.25%	252,326
Others	942,297	1.03%	1,041,615
Total	91,276,115	100.00%	100,896,618

When the change in TMC's district-wise vote share is read with the share of Muslim population in each district, it shows a very high positive correlation. The TMC's vote share increased from 4.2% in 2016 to 7.4% in 2021 in the districts of Murshidabad, Malda and Uttar Dinajpur; the top three districts by share of Muslim population. While the TMC did suffer losses in Hindu majority districts, they were much lower. The BJP has lost vote share in all but three districts of the state. However, disaggregating the BJP's performance by Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST) and unreserved ACs highlights an important point. Both in 2019 and 2021, the BJP's performance, both in terms of vote share and seat share, in SC-ST reserved ACs was better than the unreserved ACs. As per the Lokniti-CSDS post-poll surveys the party had failed to gain the Hindu support (57 percent) that it had managed to secure in 2019 Lok Sabha election. The TMC had gained directly from this erosion of Hindu votes as it had shown an increase in the Hindu votes from 32 percent in 2019 to 39 percent in the *Vidhan Sabha* election. Moreover, given the socio-cultural fabric of the state BJP had followed a monolithic and uni- dimensional strategy and failed to understand the social ethos of the state.

The Verdict of West Bengal Election 2021

The intense electoral battle that took place in West Bengal in 2021 has shown the political activism of Mamata Banerjee led-TMC facing intense competition from BJP and Congress - Left Front - Indian Secular Front Alliance. The contestation between the parties had started over the years with several controversies pertaining to Citizenship Amendment Act, communal politics, disaster management, covid pandemic and health care facilities, religion and caste politics, lack of job creation and industrialisation. All these made the Vidhan Sabha elections extremely crucial not only for TMC but also for BJP as it tried to win over the electors by innovative schemes of reaching out to all. The election reflects several trends that had paved the way for the success of TMC.

In West Bengal, there were 292 constituencies in which 208 were general, 68 SC and 16 ST respectively. There were 2116 of contestants. The total valid voters were 59289161 (including EVM and postal). The total voters counted to 72924106, which included 37232533 male, 35690037 female and 1536 third gender. As per the Election Commission report there were seven national parties and eight state parties (including other states). The All India Trinamool Congress (AITMC) won 213 seats out of 288 seats contested and their vote percentage was 48.6%. The Bharatiya Janata Party won 77 seats out of 291 contested seats with a vote share of 38.26%. Other national parties which contested the elections include CPI (10 seats), CPI(M)(138), BSP(162), INC (91) failed to win any seat.

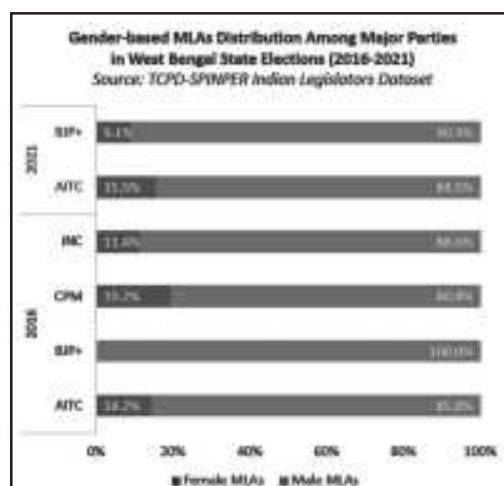
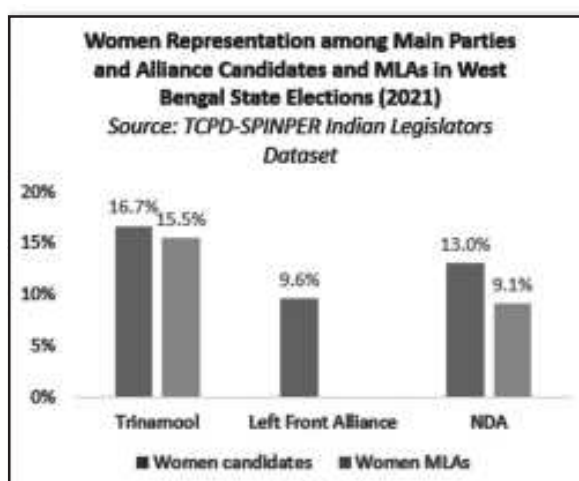
The TMC became the dominant force in the districts of Bankura, Purulia and West Medinipur and West Bardhaman. It is to be noted that out of 77 seats 48 seats were won in TMC strongholds. TMC also bagged 53 seats from the Left and the Congress. Some of the BJP candidates who had defected from TMC lost their sitting seats in 2021. During the Assembly election there was continuous defection of the TMC workers to BJP which had of course boosted the confidence of the latter. The strategy adopted by BJP to open the door to the TMC defectors however worked in a negative manner.

Party Wise Summary West Bengal Assembly Elections 2021:

Party Name	Seats
All India Trinamool Congress	213
Bharatiya Janata Party	77
Independent	1
Rashtriya Secular Majlis Party	1

Source: Election Commission of India

The women candidates play a crucial role in elections of West Bengal as they form a strong vote bank. The state has many women centric schemes for the self-reliance, education and empowerment of women. As per the EC report in 2021 Assembly election 17 percent of total candidates were women. In this assembly election the BJP too left no stone unturned for wooing the women by announcing scholarship for female students, medical and educational benefits.



Caste has always been a key player in the elections. Till 2011 many MLAs belonged to the upper castes (mostly Brahmins). Now, the general category constitutes 71 percent of the total 292 constituencies. Out of 213 MLAs of TMC, 112 (47%) belonged to the upper castes. For the BJP it was 26 out of 77 (34 percent). Muslims and Dalits have gained equal representation in TMC while the SCs occupy a large group in BJP with few seats for OBCs. The representation of Muslims and Scheduled caste has been dominant in districts of Bardhaman, South 24 Parganas, North 24 Parganas, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar. According to the Census report of 2011, there are 24.6 million Muslims in West Bengal with 19 million native Bengali Muslims comprising a total of 77 percent clustered mainly in the rural areas. In the border areas there are many legal migrants in the villages, cities, and towns and this has also led to the significant increase in the Bangladeshi Muslim Population. Muslims have thereby become a major vote bank as they constitute 30 percent of the voters. They influence the final verdict of the elections since long.

Another important factor that plays a vital role in the identity politics of the state is the Matuas, the Hindu refugees from Bangladesh. They constitute around 15 percent of the total voters. The Matuas are the Scheduled Caste Hindu group originally from Bangladesh mainly clustered in Bongaon in North 24 Pargana district of the state located at the border of Bangladesh. There has been caste confusion related to Matuas who are understood as the backward caste like the Namashudra but, however, the sect clarifies that education has been the core of the sect founder Harichandra Thakur. The BJP had made efforts to win the confidence of the sect by emphasising on the Citizenship rights, and has managed to get their support. However, 2021

the verdict reveals that the TMC performed better in some of the saffron bases. The Matuas were dominant in 32 seats in North Bengal and Nadia districts. There the TMC managed to win 20 seats whereas the BJP could win only 12 seats. As per the data published by Lokniti, CSDS the lower caste vote bank had significantly declined from 2019 to 2021 especially amongst the OBCs, Rajbanshis, Adivasis for the BJP.

There are several factors that have dominated the election results in 23 districts. Each district had major issues that played a role in the verdict like minority problem, political violence, migration and change in demographic profile, Maoist threat, demand for Gorkhaland and infrastructural development of the areas affected by the cyclone 'Amphan'. The TMC has a vote share of 47.9%, the second highest vote share for a single party in West Bengal's history after the Congress's 49.1% in 1972, an election in which the opposition alleged large-scale rigging and intimidation. While the BJP has recorded its best ever performance in an assembly election in West Bengal with 77 seats and 38.1% vote share, it has suffered reverses compared to its 2019 Lok Sabha performance when it won 121 seats with a vote share of 40%.

A close study of the results of Assembly elections shows that the victory of AITMC has been mainly due to the collective support of both Hindus and Muslims. The upper, the lower castes and the adivasis too gave support to TMC. The BJP on other hand had harped mainly on the Hindu population for the vote bank but as the data have shown the caste politics and lack of Hindu consolidation played a significant role in the decrease of the party popularity. It also lost the Muslim votes. The CSDS Lokniti data have suggested a gap of around 9.8 percent between the two major parties which is mainly attributed to the Muslim vote bank.

Moreover it has also been noted that the grassroot political outreach of TMC stood in its favour while the BJP failed to make its inroads to villages. The women voters also favoured the TMC. An overwhelming 50 percent of women voted for the TMC for the women centric welfare schemes.

The BJP failed to understand that the communal politics, Jai Shree Ram, Go Maata and Gujarat model of development are not capable to impress the Bangla bhoomi. The state had seen enough of communal violence before independence and it doesn't want to reiterate the history. The powerful centralisation and imposition of the Hindi nationalism lost to the Bengali intellectualism and sensitivities, which would have otherwise worked well in other states where BJP had performed well. On other hand Didi's mobilisation of masses, emphasis on Bengali culture and social harmony, solidarity amongst the people, and social inclusivity along with good schemes in healthcare and education became a challenge to BJP's Hindu nationalism and identity politics.

Various campaigns that took place in different parts of Bengal, speeches in Hindi by the BJP netas were viewed as domination of Hindi in the state and often they were projected as outsiders which was used by TMC supremo in her favour by showcasing how BJP was trying to erode the Bengali linguistic nationalism and cultural identity.

Political defection has been a common phenomenon since 2011 in West Bengal. When TMC rose to power 23 MLAs joined the ruling party from the Left Front and the Congress. After the 2021 election, West Bengal is seeing reverse migration as the BJP MLAs are now coming back to TMC showing a steep rise in the culture of political opportunism in the state.

Conclusion

The 2021 Assembly election in West Bengal was bitterly fought. As the results suggest, the BJP fell well short of victory. The TMC swept the state, winning 48% of the vote and 73% of seats, indeed one of its best performance. The TMC ,since it came to power in 2011, has focussed on measures which includes, amongst other things, regular cash transfers to girls, unemployment dole for young citizens, scholarships for Dalits and minorities, a handout to cover funeral costs and payments to farmers (including compensation on death), pensions for old age and widows. Indeed, it is believed that Mamata Banerjee has a cash transfer ready for

every problem. This strategy has worked for TMC's win in West Bengal. Secondly the fact that the percentage of Muslim population in West Bengal was more than double the national average, was a huge advantage for the TMC. Thirdly, the women factor. According to a 2019 postpoll survey done by Lokniti at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, the TMC was the only party to have more women voters than men. Fourthly, Mamata Banerjee continues to be the tallest leader in the state. According to one of the survey result, Mamata enjoyed a massive 57% approval rating as Chief Minister. Fifthly, the Bengali nationalism, also aided TMC victory. It was framed as " Bengali Nationalism" Vs 'Hindu Nationalism'. The TMC was able to project itself as a nativist force while the BJP was a party of bohiragotos (outsiders). Lastly, the Election Commission decided on an eight-phase election in West Bengal, much of this was seen as helping the BJP, but indeed worked to an extent, to the Trinamool's advantage.

References

1. Bhowmick, S.(2021) : Bengal elections 2021: A factsheet, 5th May 2021 available at <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/bengal-elections-2021-a-factsheet/>
2. Bhattacharya, S. (2021) : Bengal Elections 2021: 'Party Society', 'Subaltern Hindutva', 'Bhadrolok': A Few Terms Dominating Media Coverage, 9th April 2021, available at: <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-bengal-elections-2021-party-society-subaltern-hindutva-bhadrolok-a-few-terms-dominating-media-coverage/379591>
3. Chattopadhyay, S. (2021) : Defection: Reverse Exodus in Bengal, 16th July 2021, available at:<https://frontline.thehindu.com/politics/bjp-tmc-defections-west-bengal-2021-politics/article34990296.ece>
4. Dasgupta, S. (2021): Lessons Learnt, 3rd May 2021 available at: <https://www.telegraphindia.com/opinion/the-results-of-the-west-bengal-assembly-elections-deserve-a-close-analysis/cid/1815369>
5. Election Commission of India, <https://eci.gov.in/> accessed on 5th September 2021
6. Iyenger, P. (2021), Statistical Afternotes: TMC May Have Won Bengal, but BJP Did Not Do Badly, 7th May 2021, available at: <https://thewire.in/politics/statistical-afternotes-tmc-may-have-won-bengal-but-bjp-did-not-do-badly>
7. Kishore, P(2021), Where the national hegemon is the local rebel, 14th April 2021, available at: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/west-bengal-2021-where-the-national-hegemon-is-a-local-rebel-101618295020691.html>
8. Roy Choudhury, P.(2021) : How Mamta won woman vote, 7th May 2021, available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/west-bengal-assembly-elections-mamata-banerjee-tmc-women-candidates-7305104/>
9. Singh, S.(2021) : The Disappearing Opposition in West Bengal, 5th September 2021, available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/kolkata/the-disappearing-opposition-in-west-bengal/article36295124.ece>
10. Singh, S.(2021) : Mamata Banerjee back in Bengal Assembly with Bhabanipur win, available at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/mamata-banerjee-wins-bhabanipur-bypoll-with-record-margin/article36802508.ece>

Issues, Voting Pattern and Peoples Verdict in Tamil Nadu Assembly Elections 2021

P. Sakthivel

Issues such as anti-incumbency, alliance arithmetic, local factors such as development, price rise, cauvery water issue, farmers' issue, rising unemployment and other local issues have influenced the voting behaviour of the voters and finally, they have chosen DMK to come to power after a gap of 10 years. The voters in the state duly rewarded M.K.Stalin for his patience, as there were several occasions when the DMK could have topped the ruling AIADMK government. One noteworthy factor in this election was the emergence of NMK as the third-largest party, by securing 6.58 per cent of votes. The digital campaign played a simplificant role in swaying the minds of the voters especially the young voters in the elections.

Introduction

The outcome of Assembly election 2021 in the state of Tamil Nadu was noteworthy in many respects. The two mainstream Dravidian parties, the DMK and AIADMK tested the electoral waters without its two stalwarts M Karunanithi and J Jayalalithaa. M.K.Stalin of the DMK emerged as a strong and undisputed leader of Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and at the same time, Edappadi Palanisamy managed to emerge as the leader of the All India Anna Dravida Kazhagam Party (AIADMK) by striking a chord with O. Panneerselvam faction within the party.

The Anti-incumbency factor, alliance arithmetic, local factors such as development, price rise, Cauvery water issue, farmers issue, rising unemployment and other local issues favoured the DMK. The State recorded a polling percentage of 72.78. Karur district recorded the highest polling with 83.93 per cent votes and Chennai, as usual, recorded a low turnout of 59.06 per cent. Significantly Palacode assembly constituency recorded the highest number of votes in the election. The DMK led front won 133 seats. This included some seats secured by allies who contested on the DMK symbol.

The Congress performance in this election was impressive as it won 18 out of the 25 seats its contested. The two left parties won two seats each, and Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK) won four seats, of which two were in a general category, showing that it draws its appeal from a base wider than the Scheduled Castes it represents¹. The All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK) managed to win 66 seats, while five seats went to its ally, the Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK). The BJP re-entered the assembly after 20 years with a tally of four². The AIADMK had not benefited much by aligning with BJP and PMK, as the party has a lot more seats in north, central and southern parts of Tamil Nadu. The following table shows the seats contested, won and percentage of votes polled by different parties in the 2021 Assembly decisions in Tamil Nadu.

Table I : Seats contested, seats won and vote share (%) of different political parties in the 2021 Legislative Assembly polls

Party	Contested	Won	Vote Share (%)
Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK)	188	133	37.70
All India Anna Dravida			
Munnetra Kazhagam (AIADMK)	191	66	33.29
Indian National Congress (INC)	25	18	4.27

Pattali Makkal Katchi (PMK)	23	5	3.80
Baratiya Janata Party (BJP)	20	4	2.62
Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi (VCK)	06	04	0.99
Communist Party of India (Marxist) CPI (M)	06	02	0.85
Communist Party of India (CPI)	06	02	1.09
Naam Tamilar Katchi (NTK)	234	0	6.58
Makkal Needhi Maiam (MNM)	180	0	2.62
Amma Makkal Munnetra Kazhagam (AMMK)	165	0	2.35
Desiya Murpokku Dravida Kazhagam (DMDK)	60	0	0.43

Source: *The Hindu*, May 4, 2021.p.2.¹

The AIADMK government decision to introduce 7.5 per cent reservation for government school students in medical admission, 10.5 per cent compartmental reservation for Vanniyars within MBC quota, farmers' loan waiver etc. had little impact on the outcome of the election. For instance, the sub quota for Vanniyar community within MBC quota seems to have limited impact, as the AIADMK-PMK alliance performed below par in the northern districts, where most of the seats were won by the DMK and its allies. The DMK vote percentage in this election was 37.70, the AIADMK's 33.29, the Congress 4.27 and the PMK 3.80 percent. Surprisingly the Naam Tamilar Katchi vote share jumped to 6.58 per cent. It secured the third highest vote percentage in this election. The party's vote share went up steadily from 1 per cent in 2016 to 4 per cent in 2019 and this time it was 6.58 per cent. The party became the first political party in the country that allotted 50 per cent of seats to women in Assembly elections. The party fielded 117 women candidates in the just concluded election.

Western Region: AIADMK Fortress

As in previous elections the western region³ of Tamil Nadu remains AIADMK strong fort as the party won 40 of the 57 seats across eight districts in its bastion. The DMK ally had won remaining 17 seats in this election by improving its tally in this region.

Table II : Seats won by the DMK & the AIADMK in Western Region in the 2016 and 2021 Assembly Polls.

Party	2016	2021
DMK+	12	17
AIADMK+	45	40

Source: *The Hindu*, May 3, 2021.p.²

DMK Gained in South Tamil Nadu

Voters in southern parts of Tamil Nadu have preferred to vote the DMK than AIADMK. As the results clearly show, the DMK won 39 out of 58 seats and the AIADMK and its allies won the remaining 19 constituencies in this region. One of the predominant castes in this region, the Thevar community are considered as traditional voters of AIADMK but this time substantial votes were secured by the DMK. The AIADMK move to introduce a compartmental 10.50 per cent reservation for Vanniyars within the MBC quota has done a dent for AIADMK's vote bank among the Thevar community.

Table III Seats won by the DMK and AIADMK in South Tamil Nadu in the 2016 & 2021 Asembly Elections

Party	2016	2021
DMK+	26	39
AIADMK+	32	19

Source: *The Hindu*, May 3, 2021.p.

Clean sweep for DMK in North

The results show that the AIADMK did not benefit much from its alliance with the PMK and the 10.50 per cent internal reservation granted to Vanniyars. The DMK mustered the majority of the seats by winning 64 out of 78 seats in this region. The AIADMK along with its allies could win only 14 seats in this region. The Vanniar community who constitutes the majority of voters in the North traditionally voted for PMK and its allies. But this time a majority of Vanniyars and other castes voted for the DMK. Apart from caste equations, the AIADMK suffered a major setback due to internal party squabbles: In the Cuddalore district, the party cadres rebelled against the sitting minister which naturally helped the DMK to establish supremacy in this district.

Table IV : Seats won by the DMK and AIADMK on North Tamil Nadu in the 2016 and 2021 Assembly Elections:

Party	2016	2021
DMK+	44	64
AIADMK+	34	14

Source: *The Hindu*, May 3, 2021.p.

DMK Supremacy in Central Region

By winning 37 out of 41 seats the DMK regained its supremacy in the central region. The AIADMK's defeat was mainly due to a clear anti-incumbency wave. The discontent over the farm laws enacted by the BJP-led government at the centre also contributed to this. Further, the poor rehabilitation measures after Cyclones Gaja and Nivar also played a role in the defeat of the AIADM-led alliance in this region. It is worthwhile to note here that the DMK-led alliance posted big wins in Tiruchirappalli, Perambalur, Ariyalur and Karur districts⁴. Similarly the DMK-led alliance won the majority of the seats in the delta district, the Thanjavur, Thiruvarur and Nagapattinam. By aligning with the left parties; the CPI and CPI(M), the DMK emerged victorious in many seats in the Cauvery delta districts.

Reserved Constituencies

The DMK won 28 reserved seats, constituting 64 per cent out of the 44 overall reserved seats for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes in the state of Tamil Nadu. The AIADMK front's tally was 16 seats constituting or 36 per cent. The two fronts shared the two ST seats equally. While analyzing the voting pattern among Rural-Urban voters, the DMK-led front strike rate was 80 per cent in urban constituencies, 76 per cent in semi-urban constituencies and 62 per cent in rural segments. In comparison, the AIADMK - led front's strike rate was 37 per cent in rural, 23 per cent in semi-urban and 20 per cent in urban segments⁵.

Table V – The following table illustrates the percentage of Voter turnout since 1967 in Tamil Nadu Assembly Elections

Voter Turnout since 1967

Year	Percentage	Year	Percentage
1967	76.57	1996	66.95
1971	72.10	2001	59.07
1977	61.58	2006	70.82
1980	65.42	2011	78.01
1984	73.47	2016	74.24
1989	69.69	2021	71.79
1991	63.84		

Source: The Hindu, April 7, 2021.p.5.

Meagre Women Representation

Compared to male voters’ the female voters are high in number in the state of Tamil Nadu. The number of Male voters show a figure of 3,09,23,651 and female voters 3,19,39,112. There are also 7,192 transgender voters in the state⁶. The allocation of seats in the 2021 Assembly elections shows that the DMK, AIADMK and most of the mainstream political parties have not given adequate seats to women. For instance, only 376 women contested in this election and only 9 were elected to the state legislature. Out of the nine elected, 4 women MLAs are from the DMK, 2 from AIADMK, 2 from BJP and 1 from Congress. It is significant to note that in the last elections (2016) 21 women MLAs were elected. The DMK contested 173 seats of which 162 seats were allotted to male candidates leaving the remaining 11 to women. Similarly, the AIADMK has contested 179 seats, 163 were male and 16 were women. The NTK has fielded 50 per cent of women candidates, but none were elected to the state legislature. No mainstream political parties came forward to allot more seats to women.

Issues Affecting the Results

Issues such as unemployment, price rise, farmers’ issues, power shortage, water scarcity and other local issues had always influenced the voters in the state to vote either for the DMK or the AIADMK. The *Lokniti - CSDS and The Hindu* post-poll survey report that was published in *The Hindu* show that, a strong anti-incumbency sentiment against the ruling AIADMK was visible throughout the state. The populist measures such as farmer loan waivers and 10.50 per cent separate reservations for Vanniyars possibly helped to marginally reduce the anti-incumbency sentiment.

The survey report reveals that the anti-BJP sentiment was found to be quite widespread across all regions of Tamil Nadu with respondents in the Cauvery delta expressing the strongest apprehensions about the BJP. The only region where the sentiment against the BJP was less intensive was the western region, as the AIADMK-BJP alliance won more seats. The strongest apprehension about the rise of BJP in state politics was visible among the minorities in the state of Tamil Nadu, as it was evident from the data that the AIADMK - led alliance fared very poor in minority-dominated constituencies. The DMK-led alliance performance in minority-dominated constituencies was impressive in this election, as the party won all the three minority-dominated segments such as Perambur, Egmore and Harbour in Chennai city. The DMK’s decision to align with IUML, a Muslim mainstream political party and a traditional ally of the DMK, was another factor that accounted for securing minority votes in Muslim dominated areas.

Influence of Social Media Platform

The digital campaign played a vital role in swaying the minds of the voters especially the young voters in the age group of 18 to 30, as the DMK and AIADMK faced the election in the absence of stalwarts namely M.Karunanithi and J.Jayalalithaa. The DMK Information Technology team was spearheaded by Indian Political Action Committee (I-PAC). It handled the entire political campaign of the DMK. The DMK tried to reach the masses through sending voice messages, SMS to first-time voters, caller ring tone of the DMK leader M.K.Stalin voice etc. Significantly, the party reached the masses through a famous video, floated in almost all the social media platforms, #WeRejectAIADMK#. All these sufficiently influenced the voters' minds.

The AIADMK's IT wing released a mini-short film, under the banner "Vetrinadai Podum Tamizhagam" (Tamil Nadu is on a winning streak). Further, the speeches of the key campaigners were well-drafted by the IT wing of the respective political parties. Similarly, the BJP had also reached the Netizen/voters by releasing 'Vel Yatra' promotion video. The Congress under 'Oru Kai Parpom' (Let's look at a piece) reached the voters through the social media platform.

Significantly, one question that looms large in everybody's mind is, how far the campaign through social media influence the outcome of the poll verdict? Some political analysts observed that the digital campaign not only helped the mainstream Dravidian political parties, but also smaller parties such as NTK and MNM to expand their political base in the state. Further, Covid-19 pandemic restrictions too necessitated intense digital campaign. This had a significant impact on voters especially in the age group of 18 to 30. This age group accounts for nearly one crore voters in the state.

Conclusion

The DMK and AIADMK contested the Assembly election 2021 in the absence of stalwarts M.Karunanithi and J.Jayalalithaa. Like previous elections, Tamil Nadu witnessed the major contest between the DMK-led front and the AIADMK-led front. Notwithstanding national political parties hectic election campaign, for instance, the BJP, the DMK emerged as the single largest party in the state by winning 133 seats on its own.

Issues such as anti-incumbency, alliance arithmetic, local factors such as development, price rise, cauvery water issue, farmers' issue, rising unemployment and other local issues have influenced the voting behaviour of the voters and finally, they have chosen DMK to come to power after a gap of 10 years. The voters in the state duly rewarded M.K.Stalin for his patience, as there were several occasions when the DMK could have topped the ruling AIADMK government. One noteworthy factor in this election was the emergence of NTK as the third-largest party, by securing 6.58 per cent of votes. The party's vote percentage rose from 1 per cent in 2016 to 6.58 in the 2021 election.

The DMK's performance in all the regions was impressive. The party secured a significant number of seats in the Kongu or Western region, which was well known as the AIADMK's fort. While analyzing the impact of social media, it is seen that it was not only mainstream Dravidian political parties that benefitted from it. The smaller political parties such as NTK and MNM reached out to the voters, especially the young voters in the age group of 18 to 30, through the social media platform. The people's verdict in this election once again proved that Tamil Nadu is still a Dravidian fort and that the national political parties like the Congress and the BJP are insignificant as they can win seats only by aligning with mainstream Dravidian parties. The DMK's stand against the NEET NEP 2020, Farmer's laws etc. had reaped favourable results for the party in the Assembly election 2021.

References

1. *The Hindu*, May 5, 2021.p.6.
2. C.Jaisankar, *The Hindu*, May 3, 2021.p.3.

3. *Times of India*, May 4, 2021.p.2.
4. *The Hindu*, April 6, 2021.
5. The Lokniti - CSDS and the Hindu post-poll survey was conducted in the state by adopting scientific techniques of selecting the constituencies and sampling size, *The Hindu* May 5, 2021.p.7. Scholars from author's institution have also participated in the post-poll survey for collecting the data for *Lokniti - CSDS The Hindu*.
6. *Indian Express*, January 26, 2021.

Election Commission of India and 2021-Assembly Elections

Patibandla Srikant

In the recently concluded elections to the four state assemblies and one union territory, elections in West Bengal generated much debate and discussion about the impartial role of EC. In order to understand the role of EC in India, it is pertinent to raise some questions like, what kind of role did EC play in the democratic process in India? Did the EC fail or succeed in fulfilling its institutional role? What role did the EC play in the recently concluded Assembly elections in four states and one union territory? For understanding the role of institutions in general and EC in particular, Gramsci's concept of 'cultural hegemony' is applied. Accordingly, the paper is divided into five parts, where in part-I gives the introduction and part-II deals with the theoretical framework in order to understand and analyse the role of EC in Indian democracy. Part-III specifically deals with the genesis and historical trajectory of the EC in India, while part-IV looks at legitimacy erosion of the EC. Part-V offers concluding remarks.

In India, elections are celebrated like any other festival in the country. The Election Commission of India (ECI) is seen as the high priest of this festival. However, in the recent times the Election Commission (EC) is coming under severe criticism from the political parties and people alike. The recently concluded Assembly elections in Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry and Kerala have once again brought the role of Election Commission of India (ECI) into the forefront. While, ECI was subjected to severe criticism with regard to the manner in which the elections were conducted, in the end it appeared that the elections were held smoothly. In fact, it is a common practice in India to blame the EC for the electoral debacle of a party. In the recent times, the shift from ballot paper to Electronic Voting Machines (EVMs) has further cast doubts on the role played by the EC. Often allegations are made that EVMs are tampered or hacked in favour of a particular political party. Interestingly, such allegations are made by both ruling and opposition parties.

Introduction

The EC, on 26th February 2021, notified elections for four states and one union territory, namely Assam, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Puducherry. The number of phases that the EC has notified for the elections has attracted criticism from various political parties. The table below shows the number of phases in which elections to four states and one union territory were held.

Table-I: Details of Election Dates conducted in Four States and Union Territory

Sl. No.	Name of the State	Polling Dates	No. of Phases	No. of Assembly Seats
1.	Assam	27 th March; 1 & 6 th April 2021	3	126
2.	West Bengal	27 th March; 1 st , 6 th , 10 th , 17 th , 22 nd , 26 th , 29 th April	8	294
3.	Tamil Nadu	6 th April	1	234
4.	Kerala	6 th April	1	140
5.	Puducherry (Union Territory)	6 th April	1	30

Source: Election Commission of India, <https://eci.gov.in/>

Ever since the ECI came into being on 25th January 1950, the EC has conducted and supervised numerous elections at the national as well as the state level. However, in the recent past the image of EC has depleted not only due to its conduct but also due to wide spread allegations and speculations about the supposedly compromise of EC as an institution. In addition to the regular criticism, the EC also received severe criticism with regard to the conduct of five Assembly elections in the backdrop of COVID pandemic. Therefore, it is pertinent to understand the genesis, growth and trajectory of the EC in India. It will help us to understand the role played by the EC at crucial intervals in the democratic process of India.

In order to understand the role of EC in India, it is pertinent to raise some questions like, what kind of role did EC play in the democratic process in India? Did the EC fail or succeed in fulfilling its institutional role? What role did the EC play in the recently concluded Assembly elections in four states and one union territory? In order to understand the role of institutions in general and EC in particular, Gramsci's concept of 'cultural hegemony' is applied. Accordingly, the paper is divided into five parts, where in part-I gives the introduction and part-II deals with the theoretical framework in order to understand and analyse the role of EC in Indian democracy. Part-III specifically deals with the genesis and historical trajectory of the EC in India, while part-IV looks at legitimacy erosion of the EC. Part-V offers concluding remarks.

Theoretical Framework: Cultural Hegemony or Institutional Decay?

Hegemony, for Gramsci, meant the use of institutions like mass media, schools, popular culture and other institutions by the ruling class to maintain their domination over the people. Indoctrination through institutions ensures 'false consciousness' among the people, where they tend to believe that the ruling class and institutions exist for their own good. Bates (1975) argues that hegemony is about the political leadership that is based on the consent of the people and this consent is secured by the 'diffusion' and 'popularisation' of the ruling class' world view.

The ruling class uses State established institutions, in addition to other private institutions; to not only establish legitimacy, but also to control the masses. Accordingly, institutions play a crucial role of maintaining *status quo* and stability by promoting beliefs, norms and practices that are in congruence with the ruling class objectives. Such control of masses is often indecipherable as it is not visible power like in the case of using force through military or police forces. Thus, institutions act as the vehicles to make believe the masses that the existence of the State and concomitantly the institutions is for the protection of the masses.

For Gramsci, while the ruling class operates in the realm of 'political society', institutions operate in the realm of 'civil society' (Heywood, 1994: 100-101). In India too the fact that anyone can approach institutions to seek justice or to represent themselves allows the masses to believe that institutions exist to protect them from the power that operates through force. Institutions like the Supreme Court, National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), Election Commission of India (ECI) and others in principle allow anyone to approach them. At times they deliver justice or protect them from the injustice meted out to them. In this backdrop, scholars studying Indian politics had argued that the failure of these institutions has led to discontent among the masses (Kohli, 1988; Kothari, 1994; Sheth, 2004; Srikant, 2010).

One of the key principles of democracy is not only the people's participation but also the existence of working political institutions in order to ensure democratic process. In spite of numerous pitfalls, political institutions in India had not only survived but contributed to the Indian democracy. Though, institutions played key role in independent India, yet scholars in Political Science have not studied them comprehensively. In fact, scholars in Economics have studied institutions in India in greater detail. Most of these studies are carried out to understand the success story of India's growth rate (Murali, 2006; Subramanian, 2007; Bhattacharyya, 2011). Almost all the studies in Economics argued that growth rate is often triggered by stable institutions that are consistent in nature.

Scholars in Political Science have generally commented upon the decline of institutions and growth of people led movements, often in search of alternative mechanisms or institutions (Kothari, 1994; Sheth,

2004). For instance, Kothari (1994) argues that decline in the democratic political process and the faith in capacity of the modern-state and the erosion of institutions had led to the emergence of social movements. Sheth (2004) argues that the decline of mainstream politics and institutions in accommodating growing aspirations of the people gave birth to numerous micro-social movements. Sheth puts forward the context and background of social movements by highlighting the failure of institutional politics. To quote Sheth,

The decline of institutional politics led to revitalization of the old social movements. More importantly, in the period between the mid-1970's and 1980's it gave rise to thousands of new micro-movements in the country. These movements were led by young men and women, with quite a few of them leaving their professional careers to join them. They took up issues and constituencies abandoned by political parties and trade unions, and those ill-served by the bureaucracy. The organizational form they evolved for themselves was not of a political party or a pressure group. It was that of a civil associational group, leading political struggles on issues articulated to them by the people themselves. The key concept they worked with was democratising development through empowerment of the people (Sheth, 2005).

In other words, people-led movements or initiatives have often helped in ensuring that the institutions perform their prescribed role vis-a-vis providing justice to the people. Further, such movements often led to widening of the bases of institutions by articulating increased responsibilities on the part of institutions.

Genesis and Role of Election Commission in India

The very birth of the Election Commission of India (ECI) was debated as to whether it should be an independent and autonomous body, if so the amount of autonomy, etc was debated. To quote the Chairperson of the Drafting Committee, Dr BR Ambedkar,

Many people felt that if the elections were conducted under the auspices of the Executive authority and if the Executive Authority did have power, as it must have, of transferring officers from one area to another with the object of gaining support for a particular candidate who was a favourite with the party in office or with the Government of the day that will certainly vitiate the free election which we all wanted. It was therefore unanimously resolved by the members of the Fundamental Rights Committee that the greatest safeguard for purity of election, for fairness in election, was to take away the matter from hands of the Executive authority and to hand it over to some independent authority (29 July 1947, Constituent Assembly Debates, IV: 973).

Thus, the ECI was envisaged with centralised structure in order to avoid violation of minority rights by a decentralised structure. Accordingly, Article 324 of the Indian Constitution vividly states that the EC is an independent and permanent body, while Articles 325, 326, 327, 328 and 329 details out the role of EC in India. The parliament has later passed two relevant legislations - the Representation of the People Act, 1950 and 1951. The 1950 Act is largely about preparation of electoral rolls, revision of the same, qualification of voters, boundaries of constituencies, etc, while the 1951 Act deals with actual conduct of elections, eligibility of contesting candidates, and election administration.

Institutions in India in general are heavily burdened due to the enormous diversity - religion, region, language, other primordial loyalties, traditional society, illiteracy and geographical diversity as well as size. Election Commission is not above these factors and in general institutional functioning is determined by these factors.

The long duration and institutionalisation of colonial rule in India has created rigidities, legacies and various vested interests (Kothari, 2012:86). In contrast to the long colonial rule and various groups encouraged by the British, the independent India had given universal franchisee to men and women. The universal adult suffrage was adopted through the Indian constitution that came in to being on 26th January 1950. Only two years later elections were held, where minimum age to vote was fixed at 21 years, which was later brought down to 18 years as the voting age through 62nd constitutional amendment in 1988.

It is in this backdrop, that many felt that the first general elections would end up in failure. In order to understand the herculean task of the EC in the first general elections of India in 1952, one needs to look at the numbers. One scholar, Guha (2007: 133) puts the first general elections in numbers. Voters that are eligible for voting, aged 21 or above, were 176 million and among them 85 per cent could not read or write. To further quote,

At stake were 4,500 seats - about 500 for Parliament, the rest for the provincial assemblies. 2,24,000 polling booths were constructed and equipped with 2 million steel ballot boxes, to make which 8,200 tonnes of steel were consumed; 16,500 clerks were appointed on six-month contracts to type and collate the electoral rolls by constituency; about 3,80,000 reams of paper were used for printing the rolls; 56,000 presiding officers were chosen to supervise the voting, these aided by another 2,80,000 helpers; 2,24,000 policemen were put on duty to guard against violence and intimidation (Guha, 2007: 134).

As per 1951 data, Indian literacy rate was 18.33 % - a very low literacy rate considering that India chose democratic elections to elect the Government. In fact, many scholars predicted that soon India will break down as conditions for democracy in India are not conducive. In this context and the sheer size of numbers mentioned above the first general elections conducted in 1952 were perceived to be a success. The EC has delivered its objectives without much known controversies. Considering the numbers, geographical size, coalition politics, finances, number political parties and voters, the EC by and large has been successfully conducting elections periodically.

One of the key factors was the EC's changing role in the context of changing socio-economic, political situation in the country. From a single party rule to coalition politics, from an umbrella party to identity based political parties, the EC has changed its role to suit the changing times. In spite of political turmoil and COVID pandemic like situations, EC has adapted to changing times without much hiccups. Even today, in spite of huge technological advancement, staff conducting elections travel to interior booths by elephants and donkeys along with the EVMs to conduct polls.

The structure of EC was altered radically when the President on 1st October 1993 signed two notifications. Accordingly, three Election Commissioners were nominated thus adding two additional Election Commissioners. The Chief Election Commissioner and other Election Commissioners (Condition of Service) Amendment Ordinance, 1993 was converted in to an Act of Parliament known as the Election Commission (Conditions of Service of Election Commissioners and Transaction of Business), Act 1994. This in turn drastically reduced the powers of the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC) by stating that all decisions must be by majority vote among the three Commissioners (Butler, *et al.*, 1998: 134).

The trickling of democracy to the grassroots level has allowed new groups to assert their political identity and claim their share of power. This process of democratic trickle down had directly and indirectly impacted the functioning of various political institutions in India. The coalition politics, allowed hitherto unrepresented sections of the Indian society to establish their own political parties and contest in the elections. This in turn resulted in the increased role of EC, particularly in controlling various new political outfits operating within the democratic arena. As a part of this control, EC has to often accommodate and make compromises to suit the situations, which further impacted the functioning of the EC.

In spite of several impediments, including a court judgement, the EC was able to conduct elections without the use of paper ballot. The first experiment with the electronic voting machine (EVM) took place in 1982, but a Supreme Court judgement in 1984 withheld the use of EVMs. Interestingly the Court held the EVM's use on the grounds that the Representation of People's Act, 1951 has the words, 'votes shall be given by ballots' (McMillan, 2021: 104). For the first time, since 2004 all voting was carried out through EVMs. EC further went on to reform the process of EVM voting by introducing voter verifiable paper trail (VVPAT), so as to reassure the voter about their vote. Ever since the introduction of the EVMs for voting doubts are being raised about the accuracy of the technology.

Erosion of EC's Legitimacy

The institutional degradation of Election Commission happened in the early years itself. In a way, institutional degradation has been true in almost all cases of institutions in India. As Kaviraj (2010) argues, institutions in India are sandwiched between the 'modernist decision maker' at the top elite level and the 'traditional clerk' at the ground level or local level is supposed to implement those decisions and deliver the institutional objectives (p. 155).

Another key factor that eroded the legitimacy of EC was the issue of electoral bonds.¹ Electoral bonds were introduced with a view to usher in greater transparency. However, the clause, that neither the receiver nor the donor need to disclose the details of donations to public, raised serious doubts about the legitimacy of these electoral bonds. The anonymous donations through electoral bonds encourages money laundering as foreign companies as well as shell companies can make donations through electoral bonds and there is no clause to declare the details to public. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has received 60.17% share of the donations made to political parties during financial years 2017-18 and 2018-19 out of total amount of Rs. 2,760.20 crore. The ruling party garnering more than 60% of the share has given rise to serious doubts on the veracity of the electoral bonds (Chopra, 2021).

In the run up to 2019 general elections, 66 former bureaucrats have written to the President of India to ensure free and fair elections (Yadav, 2019). To quote from the letter,

We write to express our deep anguish that the Election Commission of India (ECI), which has had a long and honourable record of holding free and fair elections despite the enormous challenges of scale and complexity, is suffering from a crisis of credibility today. The ECI's independence, fairness, impartiality and efficiency are perceived to be compromised today, thereby endangering the integrity of the electoral process which is the very foundation of Indian democracy (Cf. Yadav, 2019).

There is severe 'trust deficit' over the role of EC in conducting elections. The EC as an institution was built painstakingly over a period of time through trust (Basu, 2021).

The recent Assembly elections held in 2021 for four State Assemblies and one Union Territory (UT) attracted criticism with regard to the number of phases. Tamil Nadu based Citizens Commission on Elections (CCE), has released two volumes on free and fair elections in India. The first volume was released in January 2021 and the second one in March 2021. Both the volumes had indicated that the EC is eroding its autonomy due to several reasons. The reports looked at various aspects related to elections like legitimacy of the electronic voting (EVM/VVPATs) criminalisation, use of financial power, inclusiveness in the electoral rolls and integrity.

Electoral bonds became one of the prominent issues in the run up to assembly elections in four states and one union territory in 2021. The SBI sold 695.34 crore worth bonds from 1st to 10th April, 2021 as a part of elections to Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Puducherry, and West Bengal Assemblies. Interestingly, the highest amount was sold at the Kolkata branch in West Bengal. A total of 972 bonds were encashed out of the total 974 bonds (Nath, 2021). As per the report of Association of Democratic Reforms (ADR), number of political parties have increased in the country after the introduction of electoral bonds. For instance, in January 2017 there were a total of 1500 political parties in India, this number grew to 2,628 political parties as of 30th September 2020 (ADR, *National Election Watch*).

In the recently concluded elections to the four state assemblies and one union territory, elections in West Bengal generated much debate and discussion about the impartial role of EC. The manner in which elections were held in 8 phases in West Bengal had pointed the suspicion towards the EC. It was time and again alleged that the EC has chalked out 8-phase elections in West Bengal only to please the ruling party, the BJP (Sircar, 2021). The EC was time and again unable to communicate or justify the reasons for 8-phased elections in West Bengal, which questioned the very foundations of the EC. Additionally, the demand

for counting both EVM votes and VVPAT slips by the opposition parties was not accepted by the EC, which again invited criticism.

One area that the EC has drawn severe and repeated criticism was the manner in which the EC has imposed sanctions against Trinamool Congress, while being flexible with the BJP. The EC's role in West Bengal elections has been famously described in three words, (i) Inaction of the EC, (ii) Underaction of the EC and (iii) Overaction by the EC.²

Political parties like Shiv Sena, in far away states like Maharashtra too criticised the EC for their biased role in West Bengal elections. The general criticism against the EC gained strength with the comments made by the High Court of Tamil Nadu in Chennai (Chandrababu, 27 April 2021). The High Court in response to public interest litigation (PIL) filed with regard to the spread of COVID due to elections schedule, termed the EC as 'most irresponsible'. Simultaneously, the High Court of West Bengal too blamed the EC for not taking proper action regarding implementation of COVID norms. The High Court of West Bengal in Kolkata held that the EC had to enforce COVID norms and not just leave it at issuing circulars (*The Hindu*, 22 April 2021).

Another crucial aspect of criticism levelled against the EC was appointment of booth agents from anywhere in the Assembly constituency. This rule, it is alleged, has been brought at the behest of the BJP leadership and not due to COVID situation. Earlier, the rule stipulated that only people registered as voters from that particular booth where they are appointed as the booth agent. The EC in the name of COVID pandemic had relaxed this rule and allowed any one registered as voter in that Assembly segment (*The New Indian Express*, 27th March 2021). This move, critiques have argued, would make the role of booth agent irrelevant, he/she would not know the voters in the booth.

Conclusion

The legitimacy of Indian democracy, whether functional or not, rests to a large extent on the free and fair conduct of elections. Hence, it is in the interest of the State in India to ensure that the dominant cultural hegemony of the EC prevails, partially so as to ensure legitimacy of the State in India. The Indian State has often celebrated the conduct of 'free and fair' elections by calling it the festival of democracy. For long, the EC has been criticised time and again about veracity of electoral rolls. It has been generally observed that the ruling party omits and excludes some voters from the final list of electoral rolls - as the responsibility of finalising electoral rolls largely falls on the bureaucrats working in the State governments. In spite of annual affair of deletion and addition of voters in the electoral rolls, the EC's role is severely doubted with regard to finalising genuine electoral rolls.

Even to this day, election results are legitimised largely because of the hegemonic role that the EC as an institution plays. The winning party does not question the EC, while the losing party's criticism of EC is branded as illegitimate. The winning party's legitimacy rests upon the dominant hegemony of the EC as a democratic and autonomous body that ensures free and fair elections. Without this dominant hegemony of the EC as an institution, even the winning party would lose its legitimacy. However, today the role of EC as a dominant cultural institution is coming under serious question, largely due to the erosion of its legitimacy and deepening of 'trust deficit'.

Some of the key factors that have eroded the legitimacy of the EC are the issues that are part of Indian polity. Issues like criminalisation of elections, money flow in to elections, use of primordial identities like caste, religion, region that are divisive in nature during election campaign, are very much external to the EC. Concomitantly, issues like lack of implementation of Model Code of Conduct (MCC) and aligning with the ruling or dominant party are issues that are internal to the EC. Sadly, EC in the past few years had neither acted on external nor on internal issues.

In addition to the institutional aspect of the EC, there is also another major factor that contributed to

the erosion of EC's legitimacy. It is the personality factor that had earlier steered and driven the EC towards fulfilling its constitutional obligation. The first Election Commissioner, Sukumar Sen had laid strong foundations in building and upholding the legitimacy of the EC from scratch. The Chief Election Commissioner, Sunil Arora who retired in April 2021, had garnered severe criticism for his role in the skewed conduct of elections.

The EC is often dragged in to mainstream political debates on various issues like money flow, criminalisation of elections, EVM authenticity, removal or exclusion of certain communities from voter list, autonomy and independence of the EC, etc. Partially some of these issues are external to the EC, while the other issues are internal to the EC. Over a period of time, EC has while updating itself to suit the needs of the changing times, has often failed to reform elections and election process through its own initiative.

Notes

1. Electoral bonds were introduced in 2017 as the Finance Bill. It was notified as the Electoral Bond Scheme on 29th January 2018. As per these bonds a donor with Know Your Client (KYC) compliant account can purchase the bonds in multiples of Rs. 1,000; Rs. 10,000; Rs. 1,00,000 and Rs. 1 crore and can donate them to the party of individual of their choice. The receiver in turn can encash the bonds through the party's verified account. This bond will be valid only for 15 days and will be available in 29 specified branches of the State Bank of India (SBI). The bonds are available for 10 days only for purchase in the beginning of every quarter - January, April, July and October. Additionally the bonds will be available for a period of 30 days during the year of Lok Sabha elections as specified by the Government.
2. In a representation submitted to the EC on 14th April 2021 by All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) MPs had used the three different categories by the EC. Subsequently, in the discourse of criticising the EC, the same categories were adopted. See <<https://theprint.in/politics/tmc-mps-list-ecs-inaction-understand-overaction-during-bengal-polls/640066/>> accessed on 26th September 2021.

References

1. Association of Democratic Reforms, (2020): <https://adrindia.org/sites/default/files/ElectoralBondsNote_March_July2021_updated.pdf> accessed on 28th September 2021.
2. Basu, Narayani, (2021): "The Election Commission of India was built on public trust", <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/election-commission-of-india-autonomy-powers-7238870>, accessed on 15th July 2021.
3. Bates, Thomas R., (1975): "Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 36, No. 2, April-June 1975, pp. 351-366.
4. Bhattacharyya, Samit, (2011): *Five Centuries of Economic Growth in India: The Institutions Perspective*, Munich Personal RePEc Archive (MPRA), Paper No. 67901, <<https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/67901/>>
5. Butler, David, Ashok Lahiri, Prannoy Roy, (1998): "India Decides: Elections 1952-1995", in Partha Chatterjee, Ed., *State and Politics in India: Themes in Politics*, Oxford India Paperbacks, New Delhi, pp. 125-176.
6. Chandrababu, Divya (2021): "Madras high court blames Election Commission for surge in Covid cases", <<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/madras-high-court-blames-election-commission-for-surge-in-covid-cases-101619488095052.html>> 27th April 2021, accessed on 26th September 2021.
7. Chopra, Ritika, (2021): "Explained: Why is the electoral bond scheme being opposed by transparency activists?" in <<https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/electoral-bond-scheme-transparency-elections-7243078/>> accessed on 28th September 2021

8. Citizens' Commission for Elections (2021): *An Inquiry into India's Election System: Report of the Citizens' Commission on Elections*, Volume-I, January, New Delhi.
9. Citizens' Commission for Elections (2021): *An Inquiry into India's Election System: Report of the Citizens' Commission on Elections*, Volume-II, March, New Delhi.
10. Gramsci, Antonio, (1971): *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, translated and edited by Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, Lawrence and Wishart, Boston.
11. Heywood, Andrew (1994): *Political Ideas and Concepts: An Introduction*, London, Macmillan.
12. Kapur, Devesh, Pratap Bhanu Mehtra and Milan Vaishnav, Eds., (2017): *Rethinking Public Institutions in India*, Oxford Scholarship Online, <DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780199474370.001.0001>
13. Kaviraj, Sudipta, (2010): *The Trajectories of the Indian State: Politics and Ideas*, Permanent Black, New Delhi.
14. Kohli, Atul, (1988): *Democracy and Discontent: India's Growing Crisis of Governability*, Cambridge University Press.
15. Kothari, Rajni, (1994): "Fragments of a Discourse: Towards Conceptualization", in T. V. Satyamurthy, (ed.), *State and the Nation: the Context of Social Change-Vol-I*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, pp. 38-54.
16. Kothari, Rajni, (2012): *Politics in India*, Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, 2nd Edition.
17. Manor, James, (2001): "Centre-State Relations", Atul Kohli, Ed., *The Success of India's Democracy*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, pp. 78-102.
18. McMillan, Alistair, (2021): "The Election Commission", in Niraja Gopal Jayal and Pratap Bhanu Mehta, Eds., *The Oxford Companion to Politics in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, Student Edition, pp. 98-116.
19. Murali, Patibandla (2006): *Evolution of Markets and Institutions: A Study of an Emerging Economy*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London.
20. Nath, Damini, (2021): "Electoral bonds worth Rs. 695 crore sold during recent Assembly polls, highest amount in Kolkata", <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/electoral-bonds-worth-695-crore-sold-during-recent-assembly-polls-highest-amount-in-kolkata/article_34583437.ece> accessed on 28th September 2021.
21. Sheth, D. L., (2004): "Globalisation and New Politics of Micro-Movements", *Economic and Political Weekly*, 34 (1), January 3, pp. 45-58.
22. Sheth, D. L., "Micro-movements in India: Towards a New Politics of Participatory Democracy", <<http://www.ces.fe.uc.pt/emancipa/research/en/ft/futurodemocracia.html>> downloaded on 04-10-2005.
23. Sircar, Jawhar, (2021): "Sins of Commission and Omission: EC vs Mamata Banerjee", <<https://www.deccanherald.com/specials/sunday-spotlight/sins-of-commission-and-omission-ec-vs-mamata-banerjee-975642.html>> 18th April 2021, accessed on 26th September 2021.
24. Srikant, Patibandla, (2010): 'Reconceptualising Rights: A Study of Micro Social Movements in India', *Unpublished Thesis*, Institute for Social and Economic Change (ISEC), Bangalore and University of Mysore, Mysore.
25. Subramanian, Arvind (2007): *The Evolution of Institutions in India and its Relationship with Economic Growth*, <<https://www.piie.com/publications/papers/subramanian0407b.pdf>> Johns Hopkins University.
26. *The Hindu*, (2021): "West Bengal Assembly polls | Calcutta High Court flags EC's implementation of

Covid norms”, <<https://www.thehindu.com/elections/west-bengal-assembly/west-bengal-assembly-polls-calcutta-high-court-flags-ecs-implementation-of-covid-norms/article34385497.ece>> 22nd April, 2021 accessed on 26th September 2021.

27. *The New Indian Express*, (2021): “TMC delegation asks EC to bring back rule which allowed parties to appoint only locals as poll booth agents”, <<https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2021/mar/27/tmc-delegation-asks-ec-to-bring-back-rule-which-allowed-parties-to-appoint-only-locals-as-poll-booth-2282375.html>>, 27th March 2021, accessed on 25th September 2021.
28. Yadav, Puneet Nicholas (2019): “66 Ex-Bureaucrats Including Najeeb Jung, Shivshankar Menon Write To President, Say EC Suffering From Credibility Crisis” <<https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/india-news-election-commission-is-suffering-from-credibility-crisis-66-ex-bureaucrats-write-to-president-kovind/328385>>

Use of ICT in the Election Process : A Case Study from Tenkasi District (TN)

Raju Narayana Swamy

The battle of hustings has gone through radical reforms during the decades since the Election Commission of India came into existence as the vanguard of democracy. In fact, these are the heydays of nanomanagement of the electoral process. Appointment of microobservers, detailed expenditure monitoring mechanisms and VVPATs (Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail systems) have become the order of the day. The latest innovation in the pipeline is the introduction of ICT through a dozen-odd apps. The need of the hour is to improvise these apps based on feedbacks from the field so that participative democracy does not remain as a premise on paper. The Tenkasi experiment is a humble step in this direction.

Introduction

India has been characterised as the biggest democracy in the world. It is the cherished privilege of every citizen to participate in the electoral processes which place persons in the seats of power. Free and fair election has been considered as a basic feature of the Constitution. In order to ensure impartial elections, the Election Commission has been established as a body autonomous in character and insulated from political pressures or executive influence. According to Article 324 (1), “the superintendence, direction and control of the preparation of the electoral rolls for, and to conduct of all elections to Parliament and to the legislature of every State and of elections to the offices of the President and Vice-President...” have been vested in the Election Commission. Though the Commission primarily exercises administrative functions, it has some adjudicative functions as well. Article 324 is a reservoir of power for the Election Commission to act for the avowed purpose of pursuing the goal of a free and fair election and in this view, it also assumes the role of an adviser (Kudip Nayar Vs Union of India, (2006) 7SCC1). But a word of caution is needed here. Under Article 324(1) the Commission does not exercise untrammelled powers otherwise it will become an imperium in imperio which no one is under the Indian Constitution.

Use of ICT by Election Commission

In its endeavour to discharge its functions in a more efficient and transparent fashion, the ECI has embarked on the ICT route. Some of the major initiatives in this direction include:-

(a) c VIGIL App

This enables citizens to report violations of the model Code of Conduct as well as expenditure violations during the election period. The app provides clicking of live photos/video/audio along with geo tagging and time stamping thereby providing evidentiary proof for taking prompt action. The app (which is available on Google Play Store) is based on GIS technology and the unique feature of auto location provides fairly correct information which can be relied upon by flying squads to navigate to the right spot of incidence. Every c VIGIL case is acted upon and replied back with the action taken within a timeframe of 100 minutes. This real time status tracking and monitoring helps to fill in all the existing gaps and creates a fast-track complaint reception and redressal system. The app also allows the citizen to complain anonymously without revealing their personal data/identity. The violations are classified into the following categories

- (i) Money distribution
- (ii) Gifts/Coupons distribution

- (iii) Liquor distribution
- (iv) Poster/banners without permission
- (v) Display of firearms/intimidation
- (vi) Vehicles or convoys without permission
- (vii) Transportation of voters on polling day
- (viii) Campaigning within 200 meters of the polling booth
- (ix) Campaigning during ban period
- (x) Religious or communal speeches/ messages
- (xi) Use of speakers beyond permitted time
- (xii) Posters without mandatory declaration
- (xiii) Transportation of public for rallies
- (xiv) Others.

The inbuilt features of the app prevent its misuse. For instance, the user will get only five minutes to report an incident after having clicked a picture/ video. To prevent false alerts, the app does not allow uploading of pre-recorded photos/ videos. Moreover, users are not allowed to save photos/ videos clicked from this app into the phone gallery. The app is designed in such a way that it can only be active in the States where elections have been announced. The moment a citizen exits such a state, the app automatically becomes inactive.

The Commission also incorporated a feature - Cornerstone/ Leader board - into the app to identify and reward the most proactive citizens. This will create an incentive for others also to actively use the platform besides creating reputational benefits for civic-minded users.

(b) EMS App

It is a mobile app (available on Google Play Store) for scanning and tracking of machine units and ensures that each machine is tracked in real time. All the machines are barcoded and they are moved from one place to another by the use of EMS App only.

(c) Voter Helpline App

This Android and iPhone based mobile app is a comprehensive application for voter centric services. Users can apply for new registration, request for migration/ correction in EPIC details etc. Voters can search their name and find the polling station by simply scanning their ID card. This app is also available on Google Play Store.

(d) Pwd App

This app is meant for persons with disabilities and is available in multiple regional languages. Electors can make requests for marking them as Pwd, for migration, for correction in EPIC details and also for a wheelchair. The App has also new features like Know Your BLO, booth locator, track your complaint status and navigate to the polling station. It utilizes accessibility features of mobile phones for voters with blindness and hearing disabilities. This app is available on Google Play Store.

(e) Voter Turnout App

On poll day it captures live voter turnout data as recorded by polling stations and displays it in the mobile app. This is very popular among contesting candidates and media to know real time voter turnout.

(f) Suvidha App

During elections, candidates/ political parties need to take permission from the authorities to hold rallies and organize events. All permissions once applied can be tracked from the Suvidha App.

(g) One-Way Electronically Transmitted Postal Ballot(ETPBS) for Service Voters

All registered service voters will be delivered e-postal ballot of their respective constituencies through ETPBS. This will be printed and sent back to the Returning Officer by post after casting the vote.

(h) Encore App

This app is meant for decision makers who can monitor poll turnout and deployment of manpower enabling them to track the deficiencies thereof. Each event is seen as a notification in the mobile app and the officer is presented with real-time information about events and incidents reported by the field officers. Encore also provides easy processing of candidate applications in a multilingual format. As and when applications are digitized by Returning Officers, information about the status thereof is reflected on the mobile app.

(i) Monitor App

It has been made for the ECI/CEO/DEO. Officers can view complaints registered by citizens and mark any complaint for high priority resolution. Officers can also view details of reports submitted by flying squad team etc.

(j) Decider App

It is meant for Returning Officer/ Assistant Returning Officer who can view complaints assigned to them as well as reports submitted and either drop, dispose or escalate the complaints.

The cVIGIL Survey in Tenkasi

During the 2021 General Elections to the Legislative Assembly of Tamil Nadu, I was deployed as General Observer in Tenkasi District (Sankarancoil and Vasudevanallur Constituencies). During this period, a survey was conducted with the support of the district administration to solicit feedback from the general public as to the cVIGIL app and to elicit suggestions for future improvement. The total number of participants was 300 (150 per constituency) all of whom belonged to the age group 20 to 40. They were randomly selected from the cross section of voters who had been conscientised about the app as part of the SVEEP (Systematic Voters' Education and Electoral Participation program) campaign. Their educational background ranged from minimal or no education to SSLC, HSC and in the case of a few, Bachelor's Degree. The participants included college students and working women from Magalirhittam (Self Help Group for Women). The following 14 statements were circulated among the participants and their feedback solicited in the following format : Strongly Agree/ Agree/ Neutral/ Disagree/ Strongly Disagree.

- Statement 1 : cVIGIL App is easy to download and register.
- Statement 2 : While installing the app, I am receiving OTP without any trouble.
- Statement 3 : Signal issues are experienced in my area due to the network (Airtel, BSNL etc) not being available.
- Statement 4 : If cVIGIL App is available in the regional language (Tamil) , it will be more easy to handle.
- Statement 5 : While installing the app it asks for more permissions. This is the reason for not using it.
- Statement 6 : Smartphones are available with me.

- Statement 7 : I feel that if the App is installed it consumes mobile battery.
- Statement 8 : Cyber security issues are experienced in using this App.
- Statement 9 : Difficulties are experienced in live recording of photo/ audio/video and submitting it from an incident location.
- Statement 10 : My smartphone does not support GPS accurately.
- Statement 11 : I feel that security/ privacy features need improvement.
- Statement 12 : I trust this App as my complaints are resolved by election machinery within 100 minutes.
- Statement 13 : I feel that election MCC violations can be curbed using this App.
- Statement 14 : I am proud to be a vigilant citizen.

As regards Sankarancoil constituency, the responses of the participants were as follows:

Table 1

Statement No	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	66	67	2	6	9
2	4	20	4	80	42
3	40	20	6	66	18
4	67	68	3	5	7
5	30	31	2	50	37
6	56	56	1	16	21
7	24	24	1	50	51
8	25	25	1	48	51
9	18	10	5	59	58
10	15	16	3	60	56
11	51	51	4	21	23
12	52	52	7	21	18
13	100	13	7	15	15
14	120	15	5	5	5

Fig 1

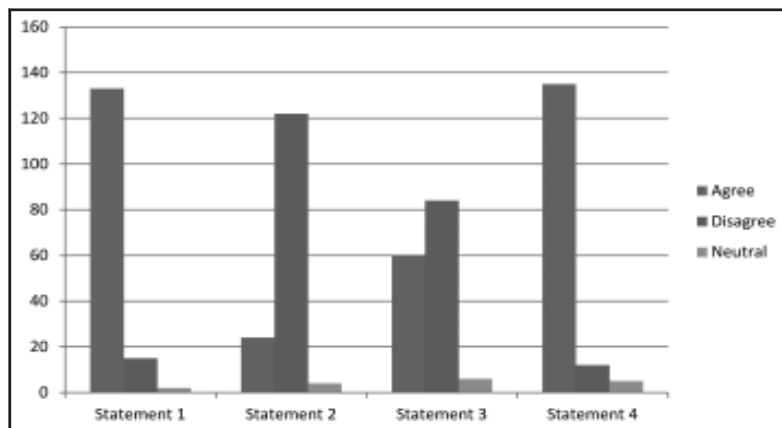


Fig 2

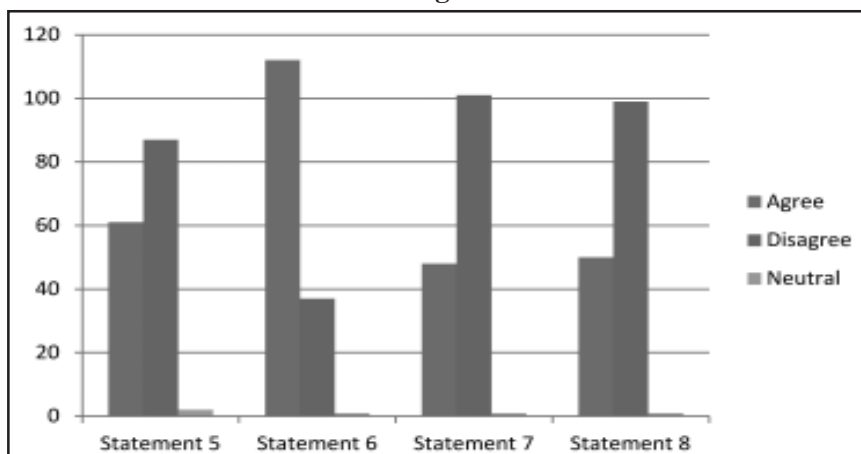
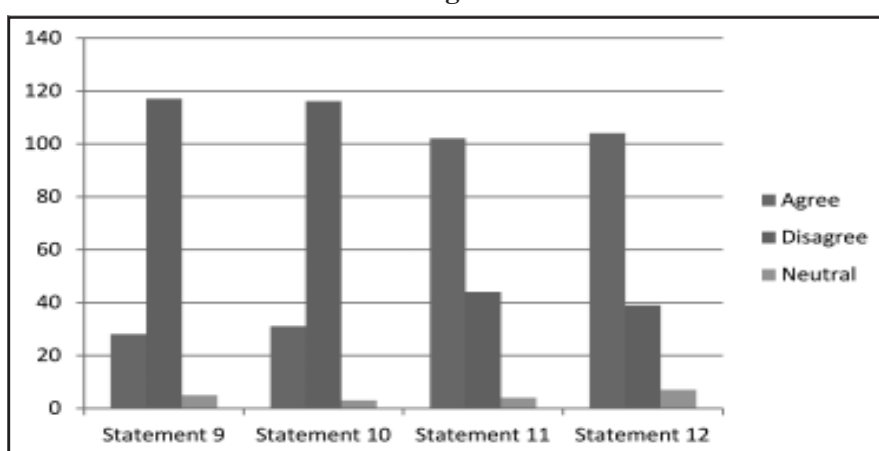


Fig 3



As regards Vasudevanallur constituency, the responses of the participants were as follows:

Table 2

Statement No	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	67	67	4	6	6
2	3	21	2	71	53
3	38	22	3	71	16
4	68	68	3	6	5
5	31	30	4	44	41
6	59	58	5	14	14
7	24	23	5	49	49
8	26	26	5	48	45
9	16	12	1	60	61
10	16	15	8	60	51
11	51	53	4	21	21
12	51	52	4	21	22
13	102	14	4	15	15
14	120	16	5	6	3

Assigning scores of (-2) to strongly disagree, (-1) to disagree, 0 to neutral, 1 to agree and 2 to strongly agree, the scores of statements 1-14 for Sankarancoil constituency are as follows:

- Statement 1 : $66*2 + 67*1 + 2*0 + 6*(-1) + 9*(-2) = 175$
- Statement 2 : (-136)
- Statement 3 : (-2)
- Statement 4 : 183
- Statement 5 : (-33)
- Statement 6 : 110
- Statement 7 : (-80)
- Statement 8 : (-75)
- Statement 9 : (-129)
- Statement 10 : (-126)
- Statement 11 : 86
- Statement 12 : 99
- Statement 13 : 168
- Statement 14 : 240

Hence the responses can be assigned ranks as follows:

- Statement 1 : 3
- Statement 2 : 14
- Statement 3 : 8
- Statement 4 : 2
- Statement 5 : 9
- Statement 6 : 5
- Statement 7 : 11
- Statement 8 : 10
- Statement 9 : 13
- Statement 10 : 12
- Statement 11 : 7
- Statement 12 : 6
- Statement 13 : 4
- Statement 14 : 1

As regards Vasudevanallur constituency, the scores are as follows:

- Statement 1 : 183
- Statement 2 : (-150)
- Statement 3 : (-5)
- Statement 4 : 188
- Statement 5 : (-34)
- Statement 6 : 134
- Statement 7 : (-76)
- Statement 8 : (-60)

Statement 9 : (-138)
Statement 10 : (-115)
Statement 11 : 92
Statement 12 : 89
Statement 13 : 173
Statement 14 : 244

and hence the ranks are as follows:

Statement 1 : 3
Statement 2 : 14
Statement 3 : 8
Statement 4 : 2
Statement 5 : 9
Statement 6 : 5
Statement 7 : 11
Statement 8 : 10
Statement 9 : 13
Statement 10 : 12
Statement 11 : 6
Statement 12 : 7
Statement 13 : 4
Statement 14 : 1

Calculating the Rho Correlation,

Table 3

Statement	Ranking Sankarancoil	Ranking Vasudevanallur	D (Difference in ranking)	Square of D
1	3	3	0	0
2	14	14	0	0
3	8	8	0	0
4	2	2	0	0
5	9	9	0	0
6	5	5	0	0
7	11	11	0	0
8	10	10	0	0
9	13	13	0	0
10	12	12	0	0
11	7	6	1	1
12	6	7	-1	1
13	4	4	0	0
14	1	1	0	0

We find $\sum D^2 = 2$. Hence $Rho = 1 - \frac{6\sum D^2}{N(N^2-1)} = 1 - \frac{6*2}{14(14-1)} = 0.9956$ showing that the correlation is very high.

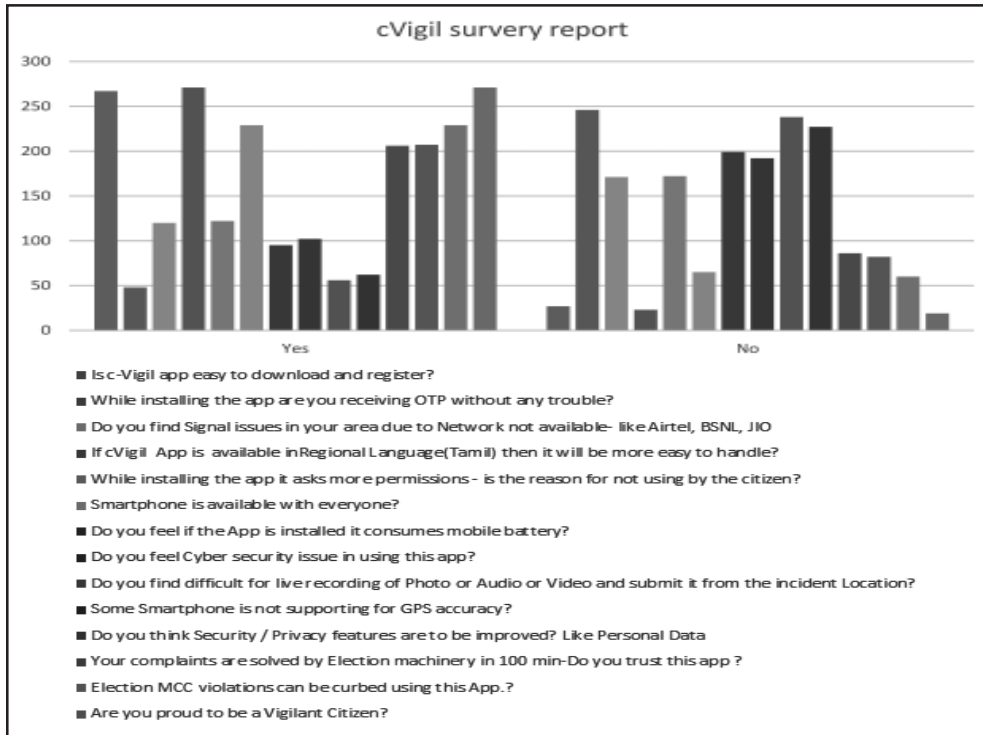
Even if we calculate the Karl Pearson's coefficient of correlation (r) using

$$r = \frac{\sum dx * dy}{n \text{ standard deviation (x) Standard deviation (y)}}$$

we can find that the correlation is indeed very high.

In fact, arranging the questions in an easier Yes/ No format accounting for both the constituencies (with both Agree and Strongly Agree accounted under the head "Yes" and both Disagree and Strongly Disagree accounted under the head "No" we get the following graph:

Fig 4



The feedbacks from the survey can be summarised as hereunder:-

- (1) A majority of the respondents (83.67%) responded that they are facing trouble in receiving OTP. This is an issue that needs immediate attention.
- (2) Signal issues due to the network not being available have also been reported by some respondents (41.23%). Perhaps the matter can be investigated by the district administration and loose ends can be tied up.
- (3) An overwhelming number of the participants (92.17%) are in favour of making cVIGIL available in the regional language. This response needs to be flagged.
- (4) As regards cyber security and privacy issues (including permissions sought by the app in the installation process) confidence building measures are needed. For instance, many users shared apprehensions as to whether the app gets full access to the user device through read and write permissions. Some even went to the extent that in future they will only use the toll free number (1950- Voters Helpline) due to the fear that the app might encroach upon their privacy platform. The technical wing of the ECI can perhaps look into this issue in right earnest.
- (5) Hardware and software problems for GPS support of the device have also been pointed out by around 27.3% of the respondents. The importance of resolving this issue cannot be underestimated.

The most heartening part of the story however is the feeling of pride in the lion's share of the electorate of being vigilant citizens. It points out that though the country is not fully free from the fetters of institutional misrecognitions, it is a strong and vibrant democracy.

Conclusion

The battle of hustings has gone through radical reforms during the decades since the Election Commission of India came into existence as the vanguard of democracy. In fact, these are the heydays of nanomanagement of the electoral process. Appointment of microobservers, detailed expenditure monitoring mechanisms and VVPATs (Voter Verifiable Paper Audit Trail systems) ¹ have become the order of the day. The latest innovation in the pipeline is the introduction of ICT through a dozen-odd apps. The need of the hour is to improvise these apps based on feedbacks from the field so that participative democracy does not remain as a premise on paper. The Tenkasi experiment is a humble step in this direction.

Notes

1. Introduced in 2013 to provide even greater transparency to the poll process, the VVPAT is an additional unit attached to the EVM which prints a small slip of paper that carries the symbol, name and serial number of the candidate voted by the voter which is visible for seven seconds in the viewing window. These paper slips are automatically cut and stored in a sealed compartment of VVPAT and can be used later to crosscheck the votes in the control unit as per the prescribed procedure.

Assam Assembly Election 2021

The Incessant Ride of BJP and Temporal Crisis of the Congress and AGP

V. Bijukumar

The astounding victory of the BJP and its alliance in the assembly election is due to its well-crafted political strategy of dealing with the anti CAA sentiments and protests in the state. While the ruling dispensation could sail through all adversaries which might have decisively influenced its electoral prospects, the grand opposition alliance led by the Congress failed to decode the situations in their favour. The BJP's strategies of invoking indigeneity and developmental rhetoric, attracting various communities and regions with political sops and populist gestures, projecting itself as the new torchbearer of ethnoregionalism without deviating from its hardcore cultural nationalism, and dumping and inducing split in its old allies such as BPF dashed the hope of the Congress and its allies in recapturing power in the state.

The verdict of the Assembly election 2021 in Assam mandated the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to continue in power for another five years and dashed the hope of the Congress and the smaller parties to emerge as the decisive force in the electoral politics of the state. When the result of the three phases of polls extending over March 27, April 1 and April 6 for the 126 seats announced on the 2 May, the BJP secured 60 seats, Congress-29, All India United Democratic Front (AIUDF)- 16, Asom Gana Parishad (AGP)-9, United People's Party Liberal (UPPL)-6, Bodoland People's Front (BPF)- 4, Rajjor Dal (RD) - 1 and Communist Party of India (Marxist) CPIM -1. By winning 60 seats in the 126 member Assembly, the BJP emerged as the single largest party and formed its government for the second consecutive term. With this, the BJP continues to control most of the states in the region, such as Meghalaya, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura and Nagaland, either on its own strength or in alliance with regional and other smaller parties. In fact, Chief Minister Sarbananda Sonowal added the BJP's success from the Majuli constituency and the Finance Minister, Himanta Biswa Sarma from the Jalukbari constituency for the fifth consecutive term. The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance's (NDA) vote share spread over both rural and urban areas. In the Bengali community dominated Barak valley, comprising the three districts of Cachar, Karimganj, Hilakandi and gateway to Manipur, Mizoram and Tripura, which contribute 15 seats to the assembly, the BJP secured eight seats. In Cachar, the BJP won 6 seats out of the seven seats and in Karimganj it bagged two seats. While the AIUDF bagged five seats, Congress could win in 3 only. It has to be reminded that the visit of Yogi Adityanath, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh, during the election campaign in the Barak valley roused the Hindutva sentiments hoping to win all 15 seats. In the 2016 election, the BJP had contested the election in alliance with BPF and AGP and won 60 seats. The BPF got 12 seats and the AGP 14 leading to the formation of the first BJP government in Assam ending 15 years of Congress rule in the state. This time though the BPF left the alliance, AGP remained with the BJP.

Electoral Performance of Major Parties

National Democratic Alliance			
Party	Seats Contested	Seats Won	Vote Share (in%)
BJP	93	60	33.21
AGP	29	9	7.91
UPPL	11	6	3.39
Grand Alliance			
Congress	95	29	29.67
AIUDF	20	16	9.29
BPF	12	4	3.39
CPI (M)	2	1	0.84

Source: www.eci.gov.in

Beating the Wave of Anti CAA Sentiment

Amid the rising sentiment against the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the BJP was banking on direct cash transfer and another welfare scheme under Sarbananda Sonowal government. The BJP further made use of the “Look East” vision of Prime Minister Modi throughout the election campaign. It is to be reminded that the Brahmaputra Valley opposed the CAA and welcomed the NRC, the Barak Valley, on the other hand, opposed the National Register of Citizens (NRC) and welcomed the CAA. In the election campaign, the Congress raised the issue of CAA and its consequences to the people. The Party, in its manifesto, promised the repeal of the CAA and the socio-economic upliftment of the people of Assam. However, the overall performance of the BJP reveals that its developmental plank scored over the anti CAA sentiments, thereby overcoming the anti-incumbency factor.

The BJP promised measures to protect the “Jaati, Maati and Bheti (Community, Home and Hearth) of the indigenous people of Assam. In order to tackle the menace of “Love Jihad” and “Land Jihad” (land encroachment) by the outsiders, the government promised financial aid of Rs. 2.5 lakh to all Namghars (Vaishnavite worship places). The BJP in its Sankalpa Patra promises “corrected” NRC to “secure”, Assam, protection of indigenous rights - detect illegal foreigners and promised developmental scheme for women, youth, etc. It has to be reminded that the final NRC was published on 31 August, 2019 in which around 19 Lakh people in Assam have been excluded from the NRC and 3.11 crore qualified for citizenship. Interestingly, there was no mention of CAA, which was heavily invoked in the election campaign of the neighbouring West Bengal. Promising to preserve Assam’s cultural identity and the legacy of Mahapurush Srimanta Shankar Dev, the BJP emphasized its cultural nationalism. The Sankalpa Patra also promised to strengthen the *Namghars* and protect the rights of *Satras*. *Namghars* and *Satras* are modelled like Hindu temples known to be the institutions promoting the traditions of neo - Vaishnavism by Shankar Dev. It was BJP’s politically calculated strategy to use the indigenous faith of the Assamese to counter the anti CAA sentiments against it.

Unexpected Setback for the Congress

The Congress which fought the election knitting a grand alliance of 10 parties consisting of BPF, Asom Jatiya Parishad (AJP), Rajjor Dal and Anchalik Gana Morcha (AGM), AIUDF, three left parties (CPI, CPI (M) and CPI-ML), and others could not secure simple majority in the assembly. The Congress was able to strike an alliance with new political parties such as AGM, which was formed by veteran journalist and Rajya Sabha MP, Ajit Kumar Bhuyan. The AJP and RD formed in 2020 were in the forefront of the anti-CAA protests and were backed by All Assam Students’ Union (AASU) and Asom Jatiyatabadi Yuba Chatra Parishad (AJYCP). The RD was formed in 2020 by Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti (KMSS), a peasant

organisation and 70 other organisations representing ethnic communities. The newly formed AJP lost in all the 85 constituencies it contested. The CPI(M) won the Sorbhog constituency after a gap of 10 years in the Assam assembly being a part of the grand alliance. Perhaps, the shining victory of Raijor Dal leader Akhil Gogoi in the Sibasar constituency added a new chapter in the midst of the dismal performance of Congress-led grand alliance. Akhil Gogoi, the former AASU leader, Right to Information (RTI) activist, peasant leader and anti-CAA crusader who contested from jail, emerged as the centre of anti BJP mobilisation in the state. For the Congress, perhaps its surprising setback was the defeat of Ripun Bora, the pradesh congress committee president, who lost the election to the sitting BJP legislator Utpal Bora. After the announcement of the election, the Congress went through many doldrums due to its internal fighting and lack of unity. For instance, in the run-up to the election, Susmita Deb, the All India Mahila Congress president, resigned from the post, expressing displeasure over the selection of candidates by the central leadership of the party. Susmita Deb, the daughter of former Union Minister Santhosh Mohan Deb, represented Silchar constituency in the Lok Sabha in 2014. She is considered to be the most influential face of the Congress in Silchar, the Head Quarters of the Barak Valley. This added further blow to the Congress' attempt to coming back to power in the state. The Barak Valley, the Bengali community dominated region is considered to be the fertile political soil for the BJP. It imprinted its footprint in the Barak Valley when it opened its account in the 1991 Assembly Election winning 9 seats. It seems that the internal schism in the Congress cost it dearly.

The opposition grand alliance could not put up a united fight against the ruling BJP in spite of a slew of favourable issues such as the CAA and the anti-incumbency. The Congress's tie-up with the AIUDF of Badruddin Ajmal was interpreted by the BJP as its collaboration with a Muslim party to take on the BJP. The AIUDF contested in 20 seats and was able to win only 16 and the Congress contested 95 seats and won 29 only. The Congress' alliance with the AIUDF cost the fortune of grand alliance as it seems that the Assamese Hindus rejected the Congress alliance with a Muslim party. The new regional outfits which were included in the grand alliance failed to carry the vanguard of ethno-regionalism against the BJP's Hindu nationalism. The AJP an RD failed to gain the trust of the people as they could not capitalise the anti-CAA sentiments. Their attempt was to emerge as the champions of ethno-nationalism in the vacuum created by the diminishing role of the AGP in the state politics. The BPF, which contested the last assembly election as part of the BJP alliance, ditched the NDA and became part of Congress' grand alliance. However, it could not secure electoral dividends in the Bodo areas of the state. Though the overall performance of the Congress in the state was dismal, there was some solace in the Barrak valley and Lower Assam where the grand alliance secured 45.2% votes compared to 43.5% of the NDA and 51.2% against the 39.8% of the NDA respectively. However, in Upper Assam, the Grand Alliance secured only 35.7% against the 48.9% of the NDA.

Bodo Factor in the Election

The Bodos, the single largest plain tribal community constituting 5-6% of the state's population (around 3.1 crore), is the third largest linguistic community after the Assamese and the Bengalis. To emerge as a decisive force in the electoral politics of Assam, the BJP had to give special attention to wretched conditions of the Bodos. Earlier, when the BTC area witnessed frequent Bodo-Muslim conflicts, the BJP accused the Muslims for the deprivation of the Bodos. In the 2016 assembly election, the BJP allied with the BPF and formed its first government in the state with the support of the BPF. In due course skirmishes erupted between the BPF and the BJP. The BJP wanted to weaken the BPF strength in the Bodo Territorial Council (BTC). In its eagerness to firm up its footsteps in the Assembly election 2021, the BJP focused on BTC election in December 2020 and extended its support to the UPPL, formed in 2020 by Pramod Boro, former President of All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) and one of the signatories of the Bodo Peace Accord 2020, breaking its long alliance with the BPF. Of the 40 seats in the council, the BPF secured 17 seats, UPPL 12, BJP 9 and the Gana Suraksha Party (GSP)-1. In the election, though the BPF emerged as the single largest Party, the BJP extended its support to the UPPL and the combined strength of UPPL, BJP and GSP with 22 seats enabled them to wrest the BTC. The GSP, led by Lok Sabha member from Kokrajhar and former United Liberation Front of Asom (ULFA) commander Hira Sarania, emerged as a potential political force challenging the

authority of the BPF in the Bodo areas. However, in the Bodo region, the UPPL is emerging as an alternative political force to the BPF with the support of the BJP.

The BJP's highly propagated Bodo Peace Accord in 2020 did not satisfy the BPF. It further strained relations between these two parties. It is to be reminded that the tripartite Bodo Peace Accord 2020 is considered to be a renewed attempt to bring peace in Northeast India in general, and Assam in particular. Signed by the Government of India, Government of Assam and the Bodo groups such as ABSU and the National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB), the Accord provides political rights and economic packages to the tribal areas, without seeking a separate Bodoland state or union territory. According to the provisions of the Accord, the number of seats in Bodo Territorial Areas District (BTAD) were to be increased from 40 to 60. The Accord promised a central university to be set up at Barama in the name of Upendra Nath Brahma. It also provided for a special industrial policy for BTA, railway coach factory to be set up in BTAD area, Sports Authority of India (SAI) centres at Udalguri, Baksa and Chirang, and also a national sports university to be set up. Apart from all these, it promised to appoint Deputy Commissioner (DC) and Superintendent of Police (SP) in consultation with BTC authority, establish Autonomous Welfare Council (AWC) for the Bodo people living outside BTAD areas and a cancer hospital and medical college to be set up in Tamulpur. Further, the Government of India has to expedite granting hills tribe status to Bodos living in hill areas and set up a veterinary college at Kumarikata and a central university and regional institute of medical sciences in Udalguri. The Accord mandated that the Government of Assam "will notify Bodo language in Devanagri script as the associate official language in the state." The current accord is the third one signed between the Bodos and the government. The first was signed on 23 February 1993, with 21 clauses, which created the "Bodoland Autonomous Council" (BAC). However, it failed to deliver more autonomy to the area. The second was signed on 10 February 2003 during the Vajpayee government, which created BTC. It had 16 clauses and the main Bodo negotiating group was Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT).

The Bodo Territorial Region (BTR) covers four districts - Kokrajhar, Baksa, Udalguri and Chirang and under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution has 12 seats in the state assembly. In the last three assembly elections, all 12 were held by the BPF. In 2021 assembly election, the BJP contested four seats in the BTR and the UPPL contested the remaining eight seats. The UPPL, entered into "friendly" contests with the BJP in three seats. Of the 12 seats, UPPL won 6, BPF 4 and the BJP for the first time, got 2 seats. Perhaps, the BJP's strategy of dividing the BPF in the BTR added a new dimension to the electoral politics in the Bodo areas. In fact, the BJP's alliance with the UPPL deserting its old ally BPF recreated the story of Nagaland where the BJP dejected its long ally Naga People's Front (NPF) and entered into an alliance with the breakaway Nationalist Democratic Progressive Party (NDPP) and formed its government in 2018. The BJP, perhaps, thought that deserting BPF and entering into alliance with the newly formed UPPL would give it more electoral advantage in the region and cut the importance of the BPF.

Eroding Political Space of the AGP

Of all trends set by the verdict of the assembly election, perhaps the unnoticed signal was the declining significance and eroding the space of the AGP, which is a constituent of the BJP-led NDA in the state. The AGP, contested the election as part of the BJP alliance, in spite of the brewing discontent of the Assamese against the CAA, won only 9 seats, five less than last time (14 seats) though it contested 26 seats in alliance with the BJP. Even though AGP is the largest ethno-regional organisation in the state, the Party is losing reduced its pre-eminence in state politics over the years. Like in the 2016 Assembly election, the Party allied with the BJP despite the growing anti-CAA sentiments. The AGP manifesto interestingly did not talk about the CAA. In the 2011 Assembly election AGP got only 10 seats and in 2016, 14 seats. In the general election too, the AGP's representation in the Lok Sabha was discouraging as it drew a blank in 1998 and 1999, two in 2004, one in 2009. It lost all the seats it contested in 2014 and 2019.

The current existential crisis of the AGP, the prominent ethnic-regional party in Northeast India, can be looked at from a historical perspective. As a regional party, the AGP focused on the ethnic identity of the

Assamese. It demanded regional autonomy for Assam and the control of the state over the resources through a genuine federal system. The AGP did not favour secessionism and, on the contrary, reposed its commitment to secularism, democracy and socialism. It always insisted on decentralisation of power. It wanted the central government to exercise control only in sectors like defence, external affairs, foreign currency, communication, economic cooperation, etc. It shows that though AGP championed the cause of ethno-regionalism initially, it has undergone many political churning in its fundamental ideologies and programmes over time. The AGP not only played a vital role in the politics of Assam, but also in the national politics. The Party was a constituent of the V.P. Singh-led National Front government in 1989 and the Deva Gowda and I.K. Gujral-led United Front governments in 1996-97. Later it became a part of NDA, and the BJP and AGP jointly contested the 2009 general election in the state. In the 2011 Assembly election it parted away with NDA, but joined the alliance again in the 2016 Assembly election.

The electoral performance of the AGP in the last three Assembly elections shows its diminishing role in Assam politics. The BJP emerged as an alternative opposition force to Congress in the political space vacated by the AGP. The regional politics of AGP has certain limitations as it was based on ethno-regionalism. The 2014 general election witnessed the virtual rout of the AGP as it was not able to win a single Lok Sabha seat though it contested 12 seats. The AGP could secure only 3.87% against its 14.61% (with one seat) of the 2009 general election in terms of vote share. Congress and the BJP got the upper hand in the election. The Muslim voters, who constitute one-third of the electorate in the state, which had supported the AGP once, shifted their loyalty to the AIUDF. In 2014, the AIUDF won three seats with 14.8% vote share in contrast to one seat with 16.1% vote share in 2009. The people of Brahmaputra Valley of Assam, once a stronghold of the AGP, also drifted away from the AGP and moved towards the BJP. Many Assamese caste Hindus feel that the AGP deviated from the provisions of the Assam Accord, especially those related to the detection and deportation of foreigners from Assam. In Assembly Election 2016, Assam became the first state in the north-eastern region, where the BJP could form its own government with the support of the AGP and BPF, ending the 15 consecutive years of Congress government led by Tarun Gogoi. In May 2016, when the election results were declared for the 126 seats of the State Assembly, the BJP won 60 seats with a vote share of 42%, while its alliance partner AGP secured 14 seats with a vote share of 8%. The BJP's pre-poll alliance with the AGP and the BPF consolidated anti-Congress votes in its favour. Initially, local protests were against the alliance from both the BJP and AGP in certain regions like Bongaigaon, Sivasagar, Sonitpur, Amguri and Tezpur. The growing marginalisation and setback of the Party compelled the AGP to align with the BJP as a junior partner. Although the AGP struck an alliance with the BJP in the Assembly Election in 2016 and became a partner in the BJP government, the issue of Citizenship (Amendment) Bill (CAB) 2016 brought by the BJP-led NDA government at the centre continued to strain its relationship with the Party. However, it preferred to be a junior partner with the BJP led coalition than asserts its past pre eminence or champions the cause of ethno-regionalism.

Aborted Attempt of the Smaller Parties

Filling the vacuum created by the AGP in Assam politics is often emerging as the contested political issue as newly formed smaller ethno regional parties project themselves as the new torch-bearers of ethno-regionalism against the highly penetrating Hindu nationalist politics. A sizeable section of the attuned Assamese middle class and shrewd political class speak the language of unity and urge for solidarity among the various ethno-regional groups and parties to unite against the BJP and its policies as they feel that it would endanger the cultural heritage and diversity of the Assamese society. The election verdict, on the other hand, proves that such attempts are not gaining wider currency in the state. The AJP, was formed by the functionaries of both All Assam Students' Union and Assam Jatiyatabadi Yuva Chatra Parishad to emerge as a strong regional force to assert the rights of the people of Assam in the context of the CAA. By asserting that regional politics is directed by and connected to the very soil of Assam, the AJP promises the cooperation and assimilation of people of Assam irrespective of their native tongue, religion, caste and tribe. The AGM

was formed in June 2020 by Ajit Kumar Bhuyan, former Rajya Sabha MP, in the wake of the growing protest against the CAA to rout the BJP from power and to assert the regional identity of the state. However both AJP and AGM could not emerge as an alternative political force to the AGP to counter the Hindu nationalist politics in the state. The BJP, on the other hand, successfully adopted a well-crafted strategy of fusing its cultural nationalism with ethno-regionalism, invoking indigeneity among the plain tribal communities and making schisms in the BPF in the Bodo areas.

Conclusion

The verdict of the Assembly election reaffirmed the politics of BJP and rejected the possibility of the emergence of ethno-regional politics by the new political outfits in the state. The Congress party's attempt to regain its lost space by forging a grand alliance in the state failed. Contrary to the widely prevailed thinking that the BJP would loose due to the anti-incumbency factor and resentment created by the protests against the CAA, it smoothly sailed through and formed its government for the second consecutive term. Adopting multiple strategies and reaching out to multiple communities and regions in the state and creating political schisms within the BPF and using its developmental rhetoric, the party emerged victorious. On the other hand, the Congress and other smaller opposition parties, could not exploit the opportunities. The opposition alliance miserably failed to highlight the poor state of affairs of the Adivasi tea garden community who constitute 17% of the Assam population and electorally decisive in 40 constituencies. In 2016, the BJP had promised to hike their daily wage to Rs 351 and give them Scheduled Tribe status which remained unfilled. On the other hand, the direct cash deposit of Rs. 5, 000 in the bank account of around 7,00,000 permanent tea workers in two instalments ahead of the 2019 general election helped the BJP to emerge as the winner.

References

1. BJP Sankalp Patra for Assam Assembly Elections 2021.
<https://eci.gov.in/files/file/13620-assam-general-legislative-election-2021>
2. Government of India (2020), *Bodo Peace Accord*, New Delhi: Ministry of Home Affairs. Accessed from <https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1703510>.
3. The Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, Accessed from <https://egazette.nic.in/WriteReadData/2019/214646.pdf>. www.eci.gov.in