

Performing *Poriborton*

Bhanu Joshi, Ashish Ranjan
& Neelanjan Sircar

Introduction

Kolkata looks quite different now. Large portions of the city are manicured, and many of the thoroughfares are well-paved. It's a noticeable shift from the dilapidated, crumbling aesthetic that characterized the city just a few years ago. At night, blue and white festival lights, snaking around trees and railings, decorate the City. It's a little over-the-top, but it's certainly less garish than the miniature Big Ben near the airport or the bright pink/purple train stations that have come up recently. We mention to our fellow car passengers, residents of the City, that Kolkata looks more beautiful than before. "Why are these blue and white lights on all night? It costs a lot of money. Who's paying for it?" snaps back a passenger. "We are," answers another acerbically.



When Mamata Banerjee and her party, All India Trinamool Congress (TMC), came to power in 2011, it did so under the simple slogan of *poriborton* (change). And in order to fulfill its mandate, the TMC had to devise ways to demonstrate this change. The Left Front, which had controlled West Bengal for 34 years, had been stung by ill-fated attempts to acquire land in Nandigram and Singur in addition to a general discontentment that typically accompanies a coalition that has been in power for so long. The challenge for a newly elected party or leader is to demonstrate that it is doing work, and doing so more effectively than the previous government. This often leads such new governments to invest in highly visible projects, investing in the *aesthetics of development*.

This is not to be confused with the kind of development discussed by economists, which is based on defined metrics of need. As one villager on the agri-urban outskirts of Kolkata complained, "People talk about the roads getting better. But no one mentions the money scandals or the rising prices of foodstuffs. She's taking money from us to fund these things." Another doctor grumbled, "I'm still owed a lot of salary. All of the government officials are. I'm sure she's using the money to pay for all of the bicycles she's giving to children." In the aesthetics of development, the planner shifts funds towards tangible, visible products on a mass scale like roads, bicycles, and overall city beautification.

It's not just Kolkata; the aesthetics of development are evident all throughout West Bengal, especially in rural areas. Apart from a noticeable improvement in road quality in the villages, the TMC initiated a number of schemes like the *sabooj sathi* program to provide cycles (complete with unmistakable logo) to students in classes 10 through 12 or a scholarship program, *kanyashree*, targeted towards impoverished female students. It's easy to be cynical about these as politically-motivated sops, but the programs do allow the state to directly interact with the rural poor. More than a few villagers complain that the Left all but abandoned them in the final years, implicitly a rebuke of Buddhadeb Bhattacharya's Left Front government in Bengal.

A Look at TMC's Performance

Enemies-turned-friends Congress and the Left Front formed a *jōt* (alliance) to contest this election against the TMC, even though the Congress had fought alongside TMC in 2011. While this is seemingly a big shift, not much changed in the minds of voters; the election was still primarily a contest between the TMC and the Left Front. This was a strange election in which both sides, the TMC and the Congress-Left Front alliance, were judged by previous performance. Because the Left Front ruled in Bengal for such a long time, its performance for the 34 years it ruled the state (until 2011) was directly judged against the TMC's performance in the last 5 years.

The most visible change in the last five years of TMC's government, in terms of infrastructure, has been improvements in roads and bridges across the state. Almost everyone we spoke to, including supporters of the Congress-Left Front alliance, agreed that they had seen marked improvements in the past few years. Data from the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MOSPI) suggest that while West Bengal is way behind many states in terms of road infrastructure, rural road infrastructure seems to have improved under TMC. The surfaced length of "below standard" and "standard single lane" state highways, the most crucial roads connecting rural areas, saw an increase of 15% in 2013 after three stagnant years. While data only available until 2013 severely limits any serious analysis of road improvement in West Bengal, it does give prima facie evidence for what one perceives on the ground.

West Bengal is still a highly indebted state, with a debt-to-GSDP (gross state domestic product) of 32.9%, but this has come down from 41.9% in 2011, suggesting the present government has made some ground on the debt issue. But West Bengal remains saddled with the worst loan debt in India, with 21 rupees out of every 100 rupees earned by the state going to interest payments. The per capita income of Rs 33,889 at constant prices (2004-05) for 2012-13 of West Bengal also continues to lag behind the all-India figure of Rs 39,904.

As through much of Eastern India, a familiar thorn in the side remains, unemployment. Unemployment data are not updated rapidly enough at the state level for us to make claims about TMC's performance in this area, but we hear many complaints. In a village between Kolkata and Barrackpore, we meet a man who finished college 15 years ago but is now reduced to selling newspapers in nearby villages. He had gone to Gujarat shortly after graduating college, only to come back after family pressures. "Look at my situation. It's even worse under this government than under the Left Front. There are no jobs for the educated." Nonetheless, he maintains that he is a TMC supporter.

Distribution and Attribution

In a village outside of Baruipur, we strike up a conversation with a group of young men outside a grocery stand. We've had been traveling extensively across the state. To orient ourselves, we ask them, "Who is the MLA (member of legislative assembly) here?" We get back blank stares. After a long pause, someone gives a name. Another responds, "I think that's the MP, not the MLA." Another one jumps in, "Wait. What's an MP?" A confused conversation ensues, but they can't come up with the name of their MLA.

Yet, these same young men give us highly detailed information about all three levels (village, block, district) of their *panchayat*, from the partisan compositions to the boundaries of surrounding panchayat constituency. In fact, most villagers we meet across Bengal can give detailed information about which of the three levels of panchayat is responsible for each road or tubewell, and where the funds are coming from, whether it be from the central government through the *pradhan mantri gram sadak yojana* (PMGSY) or local funds.

In a village outside of Krishnanagar, a young man declares, "Here the panchayats do all of the work, not the MLA." As he explains, the local MLA is a representative of the state government, and can put pressure on the panchayats, but the ultimate work has to be done by the panchayat. West Bengal is unique in the strength of its panchayats, a legacy of the Left. In our travels, we uncover an under-appreciated aspect of TMC's strategy. In virtually every panchayat that was ruled by the Left Front or Congress after the last panchayat election in 2014, the TMC has aggressively made a play for opposition panchayat members to get them to switch to the TMC. In a number of places, this strategy has worked, and the panchayat has shifted to TMC control. It's a recognition of the fact that a party cannot control distribution and delivery in West Bengal unless it controls the panchayats.



In West Bengal, the challenge for the political party is how to manufacture attribution to the state unit when work is being done at such a local level. This is where a charismatic leader, like Mamata Banerjee, is extremely important. The disparate elements of development, be it a bicycle from the local school or a village road, can always be identified with Mamata. Most importantly, it gives a focal point to those otherwise disinterested in the intricacies of politics. A Congress worker we meet in Pashchim Magrahat laments the difficulties in developing a political base against what he calls the “Mamata magic.” Bengal's localized political system demands a charismatic leader to garner attribution to the state party. For all of the talk of the Left's highly organized party structure, Jyoti Basu's importance to the Left Front's run of 34 years in West Bengal cannot be underestimated, especially in light of the decline of the coalition under a subsequent political leader.

The Numbers Game in West Bengal

It is now clear that TMC will win the 2016 election in a landslide. As of noon, the provisional results indicated that TMC is leading in 216 of 294 assembly constituencies (ACs) in West Bengal, and the Alliance had dropped to 71 ACs.

In the 2011 state election, the TMC, in a pre-electoral coalition with the Congress, formed the government of West Bengal. In that election, the TMC won 184 seats out of the 226 it contested, with the Congress winning 42 out of the 66 it contested.

The 2014 election data is useful to understand the provisional results in this state election. In the 2014 national election, after parting ways with the Congress, the TMC emerged as the dominant party in West Bengal's electoral landscape, leading in 214 out of 294 ACs. Using 2014 data, we assess how the alliance between Congress and the Left Front would have performed by adding their vote shares and comparing them to the other parties. We find that, even in this scenario, the TMC would have been leading in 179 ACs, compared to 97 ACs for the Alliance.

Yet these numbers mask a considerable amount of regional variation. A driver in Siliguri, in the northern part of the state, told us, “Before (Left politician) Asok Bhattacharya, this was all just a jungle. He made this city.” Bhattacharya also brokered the so-called “Siliguri model” in which the Congress and Left Front reached a tacit understanding to cooperate against the TMC; this model was the progenitor of the current alliance between the parties. The strength of the alliance between Congress and the Left Front was evident all around Siliguri. But, if one looks at the 2014 election numbers, the success of the Siliguri model isn't all that surprising.



When considering combined vote shares of the Congress and the Left Front, it is clear that the alliance had a discernible electoral advantage in the northern part of the state. The 8 districts beginning with Murshidabad and moving north will collectively form what we call “North Bengal”. It is useful to characterize the success of a party/coalition by its *strike rate*, the ratio of seats won to the number contested. North Bengal is comprised of 77 ACs, of which the Alliance was leading in 54, which projects to a strike rate of 70%. By contrast, the Alliance was only leading in 43 of the remaining 217 ACs in 2014, projecting to a strike rate of 20%. In short, a good performance in North Bengal for the alliance is quite expected, even according to 2014 electoral data.

The 2014 data suggests that the Alliance would have had to perform much better outside of North Bengal to be competitive in this election. According to provisional election results in West Bengal, the Alliance was leading in 43 ACs in North Bengal, suggesting the Alliance performed somewhat worse than what would be projected from 2014 data. However, it still performed much better in North Bengal than the TMC, which was leading in 27 ACs. Outside of North Bengal, the Alliance did not increase its tally; in fact it fared much worse, leading in only 28 ACs.

In 2014, as in many other parts of India, the vote share of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rapidly increased, from 4% vote share in the 2011 state election, while winning no ACs, to a 17% vote share in the 2014 national election, while leading in 24 ACs. However, BJP's vote share has dropped to about 10% in the 2016 state election due to a drop in popularity in the state and some strategic voting towards TMC or the Alliance. In order to simulate how BJP's declining vote share is likely to have impacted the election, we model the partisan preferences of those switching away from the BJP. Our simulation finds that, based on 2014 election numbers, if only 16% of those switching from the BJP decided to vote for TMC, then it would have had enough seats to form the government. Based on these results, it's clear that a much higher percentage of those switching away from BJP voted for TMC in this election.

Concluding Thoughts

Given the scale of this victory for the TMC, the Congress and the Left Front will have to go back to the drawing board. The Congress and Left Front, more worried about whether their party cadres could work together, never developed a consistent message during the campaign, nor were they able to take advantage of TMC's weakness, like a deteriorating law and order situation or financial scandals involving party leaders. Unlike TMC, the Alliance was unable to project a true state-level leader, and it could not demonstrate that it had any new ideas for the electorate. The Congress and the Left Front need a wholesale change in their approaches to political organization and campaigning if they are to become competitive again in West Bengal.

TMC, on the other hand, continues its consolidation in Bengal. Mamata has demonstrated *poriborton* took place after the removal of the Left Front. Yet, she has shown increasing intolerance with those who do not bow to her demands, including admonishing local police for conducting the election polls in a fair manner. This inability to accept dissent can unravel the most entrenched political actors, as the Left Front found out just a few years ago.