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Understanding the unique nature of political violence in Bengal

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Understanding the Unique Nature of Political Violence in Bengal

**Ambar Kumar Ghosh
and Niranjan Sahoo**

Abstract

In many countries across the world, democracy and political violence can be inseparable. Even the most advanced western democracies have not escaped this pitfall. For the young republic that is India, political violence is commonly linked to electoral politics and in many instances, is episodic. States such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Kerala, for example, have had a long history of violent incidents erupting during elections. West Bengal presents altogether a different picture. In this eastern state—beset for long by insurgency, social upheaval, mass migration, and violent mobilisation for political control—the culture of political violence seems more endemic than in other Indian states. This paper seeks to understand the unique nature of political violence in Bengal and why it persists, and explores the far-reaching implications for the quality of democracy in the state.

Introduction

India's political landscape is regularly marked by various kinds of conflicts, which at times culminate into incidents of violence. West Bengal, in the east of the country and home to a population of some 101 million people,¹ has a long history of political violence which has persisted over many decades and has deeply impacted its body politic in complex ways. The state has seen governments led by different political parties since Independence, including the Indian National Congress (INC) that ruled for more than two decades, the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front for over three decades, and the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC or TMC) that heads the incumbent government. Across these regimes, the culture of violent clashes between workers of political parties, especially in the rural areas, has only thrived over the years. This has made the phenomenon of political violence in West Bengal a widely discussed public policy theme in India.

This paper is an attempt to understand the history and nature of political violence in West Bengal and why the state witnesses a singular kind of political violence that is different from that seen in other Indian states. The paper is structured as follows: (i) it provides a brief description of democratic politics and violence; (ii) it then outlines a historical analysis of political violence in West Bengal across various political regimes; (iii) it proceeds to examine the key drivers of this culture of violence; and (iv) it analyses the exceptional nature of the violence in West Bengal compared to that in other states and how it impacts democratic governance in the state.

Political Violence and Democracy

Democracy and violence have a symbiotic relationship, and even the most mature democracies in the world have been unable to eliminate such a deep nexus. For instance, between the late 1980s and the 2000s, countries in Western Europe such as Britain, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Italy, and Germany witnessed the eruption of political violence from both left-wing and right-wing extremist groups.² In more recent years, the world witnessed episodes of political violence over the Brexit issue in the United Kingdom (UK),³ the Black Lives Matter⁴ movement in the United States (US), and the US elections of 2020.⁵

One might say, however, that political violence is more endemic in the developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.⁶ Many such developing and transition democracies experience intense and recurring violence, largely linked to political party rivalry, weak institutions, selective enforcement of the rule of law, and other structural factors.⁷ Violence has been used to obtain electoral bounty, maintain political dominance, capture scarce state resources, and monopolise the democratic space. In many democracies, violence seems to have become an accepted means of engaging in politics.⁸

In a normative sense, democracy ought to act as a limiting force on violence. As political scientist Neera Chandhoke has observed: “Why should groups pick up weapons, or support those who do so, when they have the democratic right to question injustice and renegotiate justice, in and through campaigns in civil society and through their representatives in Parliament?”⁹ Democracy provides multiple channels through which individuals and groups can voice their grievances and concerns.¹⁰ Democracy is opposed to rule by violence, as Hannah Arendt in her seminal work, “*On Violence*” theorises.¹¹ For Arendt, democracy ought to be about power being exercised through people coming together and assessing their issues and collective goals, and persuading each other to adopt rules and procedures to realise these goals. In short, democratic politics aims at “exclusion of violence” by substituting it with associative and cooperative ways of public action.

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However, in reality, violence can often be inseparable from democratic politics. As political theorist John Schwarzmantel has noted, “If violence can be defined as the employment or threat of physical coercion to achieve political ends, then it seems as if the sphere of the political is inseparable from the use (actual or threatened) of violent means. States and agents impose physical coercion on those who break the law; non-state groups resort to violence if there seems no way in which they can achieve their ends through peaceful means of debate and discussion”.¹² The moot question is whether it is possible to achieve a scenario in which physical violence is not a factor in political life.

It seems a difficult task. For one, the state, whether democratic or otherwise, tends to monopolise violence in multiple ways and often through ‘legitimate’ means. The state as an entity seeks to achieve monopoly on the use of violence so as to ensure a degree of security to its members (preserve life and private property, as characterised in the Hobbesian ‘state of nature’). In the process, the state itself becomes an agent of violence. Seventeenth-century political philosopher John Locke frames it thus: that agents of the state assigned to minimise and contain violence often perpetrate acts of violence against those they see as opposing the existing order. There are many examples of state-led violence in Latin America, Africa, and Asia where popular/revolutionary movements demanding democratic and social change have been ruthlessly suppressed by agents of the state, often with full sanction from the prevailing law. Also, to quell violent activities, the state uses violence. Even in democratic societies, those in power sometimes use violence against those who aim to widen inclusion in the power structure. This has been widely observed after military coups or by authoritarians/fascist forces controlling power in democratic states.¹³

What is political violence, though, and how is it different from other forms of violence? Political scientists have defined political violence by looking at motives, timing, actors, and activities,¹⁴ differentiating them from those of other forms (such as criminal violence). Further, they differentiate among types of political violence, such as election-

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related violence or post-election violence.¹⁵ Political theorist John Schwarzmantel defines political violence in the following words:

“...the use or threatened use of physical coercion to achieve political ends. Such actual or threatened acts of coercion are carried out by identifiable persons, whether they are acting as agents of the state or as members of non-state bodies opposing the state. Political violence is here understood as the use (actual or threatened) of physical coercion to achieve a change in the nature of the political order, or (when carried out by agents of the state) to defend that order in its existing form. Political violence is thus defined as distinct from criminal violence, since that is carried out for personal gain. Political violence is here understood as challenging or defending particular policies or more generally the nature of the political regime in question, through the use by identifiable agents of the specific means of physical coercion, or the threat of such coercion”.¹⁶

This explanation is rather narrow, however, as it excludes other forms of political violence, particularly the systemic kind (i.e., violence inherent in the working of a particular social and political system). What this definition shows is that states (acting through particular agents) can also be violent actors; violence is not the preserve of anti-state or non-state actors and movements. Therefore, political violence presents a challenge not only to the institutions and procedures of liberal democracies but also to the processes of democratisation themselves.¹⁷

Locating Political Violence in the Indian Context

While there is a rich body of literature and scholarly work on political violence in the developing democracies of Africa and Latin America,¹⁸ this is not the case in India. Much of the politics-related scholarship in India in recent times has been on communal riots, ethnic conflicts, and insurgencies.¹⁹ This is despite the fact that election-related clashes and other forms of conflicts have a long history in India. Notable episodes of such violence have occurred in the states of Bihar, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Jharkhand, and West Bengal.

Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are known for the criminal mafias that control certain districts, and which are used by politicians to eliminate rivals from other parties or even competitors from their own ranks. Gujarat, UP, and Maharashtra, among other states, have also witnessed communal flare-ups that were widely perceived as politically instigated.²⁰ Caste violence has also been prevalent in many states, especially in Rajasthan, UP, and Bihar. India has also witnessed violent ethnic, religious and ideological insurgent movements in the north-eastern region, in the states of Jammu and Kashmir and Punjab, and Maoist insurgency in some states of eastern and central India.²¹

It is important to define the term ‘political violence’ in the context of this paper, given India’s diversity—where overlapping socio-cultural, economic and political factors often create conditions for violent conflicts, which in turn are facilitated by the state and its institutions. As discussed in the earlier section, political violence is a fluid concept that has to be gauged through motives, timing, actors, and activities. It is also difficult to strictly confine the nature and dimensions of political violence in India. In varying degrees, all forms of violence – extremist, caste-based, communal, as well as the violence inflicted through smuggling, trafficking, or various economic offences – are often triggered by political factors. Political violence is inextricably linked with other forms of violence,²² which is the case in West Bengal as well.

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Nonetheless, violence in the context of West Bengal is also linked to the state's political history and political culture. This study argues that the existing variant of violence in the state can be termed as entirely 'political' in nature,²³ as violence has been predominantly used to capture political power and maintain an iron grip on the key levers of state power. It is different from violence in the other states of India, with socio-cultural, ideological or economic factors largely made subservient to the cause of political domination and rampant polarising partisanship.^a This form of violence clearly distinguishes West Bengal from the country's other states. To substantiate further, this paper will not only take into consideration the incidents which resulted in deaths or injuries to people and damage to property, but also threats of violence and intimidation by political agents of the state. Political violence here involves tactics of intimidation of voters and election officials to manipulate elections, as well as deploying other means such as booth capturing by muscle power, or not allowing voters supporting rival parties to cast their votes, or forcibly casting proxy votes in favour of specific party symbols to influence electoral outcomes.²⁴ The paper will attempt to cover both visible political violence and invisible, structural violence, as propounded by Johan Galtung.^b

Given that motive and timing matter in political violence, this paper will further categorise violence – or violent activity – based on its frequency and quantum. Large-scale orchestrated violence, with high casualties – such as rioting – is referred to as 'episodic' violence. This kind of violence attracts considerable attention. In contrast, small-scale localised violence, with limited number of targeted casualties

a This is not to argue that other socio-economic factors are not present in the dynamics of political violence in Bengal. Rather those factors have supported and augmented the overarching political motive behind the violence.

b Structural violence is a form of violence where social structures or state institutions cause harm by preventing people from meeting/accessing their basic needs or rights. While structural violence may be invisible, it is perhaps the most serious form of violence. Not only is it the deadliest violence, greater in scope and in implication than any other type of violence, it grows exponentially as unequal power differentials are used to create more unequal structures. See Johan Galtung, 'Violence, Peace and Peace Research', *Journal of Peace Research*, Vol.6, 1969.

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and instances of injury, is perceived as ‘everyday’ violence.²⁵ Political violence in Bengal, perpetrated by cadres and workers of rival parties, is mainly of the second kind, consisting of targeted clashes, murders, harassment, and threats of violence at the local level in rural areas, that have existed for the last five decades and have been normalised as ‘everyday violence’.

Understanding the Scale of Violence

It is a difficult challenge to find an accurate recording and enumeration of all cases of political violence in India. Often, violent incidents are under-reported by the police, given common reluctance to register First Information Reports (FIRs).²⁶ Political influence further inhibits the police from registering such cases. The National Crime Records Bureau’s (NCRB) data collection also has serious shortcomings.²⁷ It is often found that the numbers cited by both ruling and opposition parties relating to incidents of violence vary widely. Even so, the NCRB does record what it categorises as “murders due to political reasons”—these numbers can give an estimate of the scale of political violence across the states.

According to the latest NCRB report of 2021, West Bengal has recorded the highest number of political murders in the country, and the rates are also notable in states like Kerala, Jharkhand, and West Bengal.²⁸ The highest numbers of overall murders are in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. A recent report in *The Times of India* on political violence listed more than 200 political murders in Kerala in the last three decades emanating largely out of the rivalry between the Left parties and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), with its parent organisation, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS).^{29,30}

West Bengal, for a long time now, has been witnessing a high degree of violence based on party lines. The NCRB has recorded 20 political killings on average every year in West Bengal, from 1999 to 2016.

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Table 1:
States with the highest numbers of political murders (2010-2019)

State	Murders Attributed to Political Motives										Total
	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	
West Bengal	38	38	22	26	10	1	1	1	12	12	161
Bihar	24	32	32	12	3	0	26	12	9	6	156
Madhya Pradesh	19	13	28	22	1	10	8	1	3	2	107
Jharkhand	9	8	4	0	0	15	2	42	1	6	87
Andhra Pradesh	5	33	2	12	11	4	0	2	0	5	74
Uttar Pradesh	1	2	2	2	2	28	29	3	0	3	72
Kerala	6	4	5	7	6	12	15	5	4	4	68
Karnataka	8	5	4	5	2	s	10	9	6	4	61

Source: NCRB Crime in India Report – 2010 to 2019: Motives of Murder – Political

The latest round of violence has been mainly between party workers of the state's current ruling party, the TMC, and the biggest opposition force, the BJP.³¹ NCRB data also suggests that there have been as many as 47 political killings involving TMC and BJP workers since the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, of which 38 occurred in South Bengal.³² Many analysts argue that the current surge in political violence is largely due to the aggressive push by the BJP to unseat the ruling TMC.³³

Violence even touched the top leaders of both parties during the high-pitched 2021 assembly elections in the state.^c Each party blamed the other for the alleged attacks on its leaders, and in both cases, the

^c During the 2021 assembly election campaign in West Bengal, there were alleged attacks on the convoy of J.P. Nadda, BJP President, and Mamata Banerjee, Chief Minister of West Bengal, during her Nandigram visit.

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allegations were dismissed as political gimmickry by the other party. A renewed spate of violence was reported from the state after the results of the Assembly elections were declared on 2 May 2021. Again, the TMC and the BJP blamed each other. The TMC won the elections for the third consecutive time, while the BJP, though it increased its seat share in the state Assembly manifold, failed to dislodge the TMC from power.

However, political violence in West Bengal is not restricted to pre-election or post-election time violence. It is everyday violence or threat of violence with, in many instances, the tacit complicity of state institutions. This violence is of a distinct political nature.

“In varying degrees, all forms of violence—extremist, caste-based, communal, as well as the violence inflicted through smuggling, trafficking, or various economic offences—are often triggered by political factors.”

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Bengal has a historical legacy of political violence. Analysts trace the genesis of violence to the pre-Independence nationalist movement, particularly the response to the Partition of Bengal in 1905 by the British.³⁴ This partition sparked the rise of a revolutionary protest movement in the state in the early 20th century. Secret societies such as *Anushilan Samiti* and *Jugantar* were formed to mount an armed revolt against the colonial rulers. There were also communal conflagrations in the state, such as the Great Calcutta Killings of 1946, and the Tebhaga Movement of 1946-1947 which was a violent peasant uprising.^d Post-Independence, there was the Naxalbari rebellion of 1967^e which was an effort by radical communist forces to overthrow the state administration, and which saw both mindless killings by insurgents and brutal police repression.³⁵

Congress vs. the Left: Institutionalising ‘Everyday Violence’

The rise of the Left Front – an alliance of parties led by the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI (M)) – in the late 1960s as a dominant force in West Bengal politics, reinforced the culture of political violence in the state. As the Left Front began challenging the long-held dominance of the Congress, violent clashes between the workers of the two parties became a routine affair. Still remembered are the gruesome Sainbari murders of Congress workers in Purba Bardhaman district on 17 March 1970 and the killing of All India Forward Bloc Chairman Hemanta Basu in Kolkata on 27 February 1971.³⁶ These incidents laid the foundation of the ‘gun culture’ that followed.^f

d During the Tebhaga Movement, sharecroppers refused to pay half their harvest as tax to the landlord, as they used to before, and insisted instead on paying only one third.

e It is here where the contemporary term ‘Naxalite’ is rooted.

f Bangla Congress was a party formed by Ajoy Mukherjee who broke away from the Indian National Congress and floated his own party in the state in 1966.

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In the 1972 assembly elections, Congress returned to power after brief spells of rule by two opposition-led coalition governments which included the Left Front parties.^g Congress has since been widely accused of winning that election through sheer muscle power, ousting thousands of opposition party workers from the areas in which they worked, creating a reign of terror using both the police and mercenaries and, finally, by widespread rigging of the elections.³⁷ Between 1972 and 1977, the state remained free of political violence but under the complete domination of Congress, which did not allow any political opposition to function freely.³⁸

The Rise of the CPI (M) and the Instrumentalisation of Political Violence

When the CPI (M)-led government captured power after the Assembly elections of 1977, it largely followed in the footsteps of Congress as far as violence was concerned. In fact, alongside notable ‘emancipatory’ reform measures in the rural areas, it was more organised than Congress was in its repression of the opposition.³⁹ It ushered in a series of rural reforms, particularly empowering the rural local self-governing bodies, the panchayats, and devolving sizeable resources to them.⁴⁰ Soon the panchayats emerged as a key area of competition among the principal parties,⁴¹ panchayats’ administrative and economic power making them a source of political influence. The CPI (M), whose party machinery was well-structured and organised, used this machinery to ‘capture’ panchayats. It entrenched its hold over the rural electorate.⁴² This eventually made panchayats the most crucial instruments for any political party to establish and preserve its dominance in the state.

The Left government also initiated a land reform drive called “*Operation Barga*” which involved officially registering sharecroppers in land records (only landowners were registered earlier) and

g They were short-lived coalition governments consisting of CPI(M) and the Bangla Congress.

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distributing some vested lands among the landless.⁴³ This helped the Left government consolidate its support among the rural poor (who comprised more than 67 percent of the state's population in the 1980s).⁴⁴

Further, as economic and land resources became scarce with the rapid population growth, the changing agrarian structure, as well as the influx of refugees from East Pakistan,^h rural dependence on public goods and services delivery by the government increased. Under the Left Front government, the delivery mechanism became increasingly party-controlled. Villages dominated by CPI (M) supporters received preferential treatment when doles and other kinds of government largesse were handed out. Political scientist Partha Sarathi Banerjee has observed that “government reform programmes were posed as programmes of the party, in which only those associated with the party were to be benefited. Panchayat funds were also utilised to strengthen the party organisation.”⁴⁵

Political scientist Partha Chatterjee has noted that the CPI (M) (or any of its allies) became the all-pervasive instrument of rural society in West Bengal. “One knows that despite some general characteristics of democracy in India, each region and state has its own peculiar practices and idioms of democratic politics,” observes Chatterjee. “In West Bengal, the key term is ‘party’. It is indeed the elementary institution of rural life in the state – not family, not kinship, not caste, not religion, not market, but ‘party’. It is the institution that mediates every single sphere of social activity, with few exceptions, if any. This is the true significance of the shift from the old days. Every other social institution, such as the landlord's house, the caste council, the religious assembly, sectarian foundations, schools, sporting clubs, traders' associations, and so on, have been eliminated, marginalised or

^h What was then East Pakistan is modern-day Bangladesh.

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subordinated to the ‘party’. Rural life is literally inconceivable without the party.” Such a centrality of the political party in rural Bengal led another notable political scientist Dwaipayan Bhattacharya to coin the term “party society”⁴⁶ to describe the process of complete politicisation of society in the state.⁴⁷

As the CPI (M) established its grip over West Bengal politics and the party literally became the state, it began stifling voices of opposition or dissent by unleashing everyday forms of violence, or threats of violence, upon them. Workers and supporters of opposition parties were routinely harassed, had their houses burnt down, or else were killed, by the ruling party cadres. There were even clashes between workers of partners in the ruling coalition, as the CPI (M) sought to establish supremacy not only over opposition parties but also over junior coalition partners like the Revolutionary Socialist Party (RSP).⁴⁸

Given the absolute power the CPI (M) enjoyed, corruption gradually became entrenched in the party’s echelons, and thereby in panchayat leadership, leading to sections of the rural poor becoming disenchanted. While the beneficiaries of government schemes turned into a staunch base for the party and were even used to suppress opposition, the ones left out became disgruntled and sought the help of other parties to get their share too.⁴⁹ The pursuit of this policy for the three long decades that the Left Front ruled deeply polarised West Bengal’s rural society on party lines. Even marriage alliances between politically opposed families became rare.⁵⁰

The state police, too, were often complicit in suppressing opposition parties and permitting the excesses of the ruling Left Front. The police firing on a protest march of members of the Congress’s youth wing – called Youth Congress – at Esplanade, in the heart of Kolkata, on 21 July 1993, is only one such example; 13 people were killed in that incident. Other instances of violence during Left Front rule include the Marichjhapi massacre of end-January 1979,ⁱ when refugees from

i In January 1979, the Bengal Police wrote a dark chapter in history by open-firing on Bengali Dalit refugees at Marichjhapi in the Sunderbans, killing, according to unofficial accounts, more than a hundred men, women and children. It was not the age of live television but the world still got wind of it. Media teams and parliamentary delegations were stopped from entering the region after the massacre. The refugees were brought to India from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) in the 1950s and given shelter at Dankaranya, a forest land with no civic amenities spread across four states in central India. They migrated to West Bengal at the behest of some Marxist leaders who were apparently eyeing the vote bank.

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East Bengal who had camped in a forest reserve were forcibly evicted by the police, killing many;^{51,52} the murder of 17 monks belonging to the Hindu religious cult Ananda Marg, on 30 April 1982, again in Kolkata, allegedly by CPI(M) workers;^j and the lynching of 11 landless Muslim labourers at Suchpur village in Birbhum district on 27 July 2000, once again by CPI (M) activists.

The highest point of political violence unleashed by the Left Front government was in Nandigram village of Purba Medinipur district. Following a tussle over land acquisition by the government for industrial purposes, more than 50 people were killed over 2007-08, both due to police firing as well as clashes between CPI(M) cadres and the Bhumi Uchched Protirodh Committee, which was opposing the acquisition and was backed by the TMC.^{k,53} This also proved to be a turning point in the state's politics, as thereafter the Left Front's popularity rapidly declined, and it was defeated by the TMC in the Assembly polls of 2011.

The Trinamool Congress and the Continuation of Political Violence

The TMC, led by the state's current Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee, dislodged the three-decade long Left Front government in 2011. In its election campaign, the TMC had emphasised it would not continue the "politics of retribution" practised by the Left. However, once the TMC won power, its cadres pursued the same violent methods of its predecessor government, attacking and killing opposition party workers.^l In just nine months after the 2011 Assembly polls, 56 CPI (M) members were killed, allegedly in attacks committed by TMC workers.⁵⁴

j The monks were burned alive due to a rumour that they were child lifters.

k As many as 14 residents of Nandigram in East Midnapore were shot dead by police when they set up a blockade against land acquisition.

l In February 2012, former CPI(M) MLA Pradip Tah and Burdwan district leader Kamal Gayen were bludgeoned to death allegedly by TMC workers.

Jayatri Nag, "Ex-MLA clobbered to death in Bengal", Mumbai Mirror. February 23, 2012, <https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/news/india/ex-mla-clobbered-to-death-in-bengal/articleshow/16208676.cms>

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In the 2018 panchayat election too, this time conducted under TMC rule, polling day witnessed widespread violence in which 10 people were killed. The local media reported unprecedented fraud, booth capturing, and burning of ballot papers in the presence of police officials who simply stood by. The TMC won 34 percent of the seats uncontested, allegedly because opposition party candidates were coerced to not file their nominations. Even after the elections, the BJP has charged, a number of its workers have been killed by TMC activists.⁵⁵

There was violence once again during the Lok Sabha elections in the state the following year.⁵⁶ The most widely reported incident during the electoral campaign was the vandalising of a statue of the 19th Bengal social reformer, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, in a Kolkata college, allegedly by BJP workers. This triggered clashes between the TMC and the BJP.⁵⁷

The 2019 Lok Sabha election results showed that while the Left Front had continued to decline, the BJP had risen as the main opposition party to the TMC government in the state. The BJP won as many as 18 of the 42 Lok Sabha seats in West Bengal, against the TMC's 22. This rise, however, also escalated the level of violence in state politics.⁵⁸ In 2019 alone, there were 12 incidents of political killings involving TMC and BJP workers.⁵⁹ In February 2021, Union Home Minister Amit Shah claimed that 130 people associated with the BJP had been killed in TMC attacks.⁶⁰

The Assembly elections of March-April 2021 were held in eight phases, which saw the TMC winning decisively again, despite the strong challenge put up by the BJP. Not unexpectedly, as soon as its results became known, violence flared up again in the state. While BJP claimed 14 of its party workers were killed in TMC attacks, the TMC maintained that three of its cadres were killed by the BJP.⁶¹ Since then the state has become even more politically polarised, with communication between the TMC and the BJP – which is in power at the Centre – collapsing almost completely. The BJP has filed a criminal case against the TMC in the Calcutta High Court following the post-poll attacks.⁶²

Drivers of Political Violence in Bengal

The more obvious reasons for continuing everyday political violence in Bengal include cutthroat political competition and tussles over control of resources and crucial democratic institutions. There are also deeper causes.

The Legacy of Agrarian Conflicts in Rural West Bengal

Historically, land relations in West Bengal have been feudal and exploitative, based on the *zamindari* system. Agrarian distress, and peasant assertion in response, has a long legacy dating back to the Mughal period.⁶³ The state has witnessed many violent peasant uprisings.⁶⁴ There is thus a deep fault-line running between the landlords and the poor peasants. After India won Independence and the Congress Party came to power in the state, it was largely supported by the landlords, and hence paid little attention to the interests of the poor.⁶⁵ The rise of the Left in Bengal was based on political mobilisation of the middle and lower rungs of the peasantry, belonging primarily to the lower castes and minority communities.⁶⁶

Therefore, political partisanship acquired a class dimension as the Congress party was identified with the landlords while the peasant communities supported the Left.^m After the CPI (M) came to power in 1977, the middle peasantry, who were its supporters, replaced the landlords as the ruling class of rural Bengal. However, the lowest rungs of the peasantry, the landless agricultural labourers, who had also supported the CPI (M) while receiving some token benefits, remained largely out of the power structure.

Throughout the 1980s, the landlords who had lost clout following the advent of Left rule, took a reconciliatory approach towards the Left Front, and in turn were co-opted into the echelons of power

^m The violent 'Naxalite' movement led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) that began in late 1960s, and which saw armed attacks on landlords and sought to bring about a violent revolution, also drew its support from the poorer peasantry.

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alongside the rich middle peasantry. The plight of the lowest rungs remained acute, barring occasional minor relief measures. Towards the end of Left Front rule,⁶⁷ the land acquisition policies of the government aggravated their disillusionment and their loyalties switched to the emerging political force, the TMC. As a breakaway section of the Congress, the TMC had been initially identified as a party of the landed gentry like the Congress, but its support base gradually changed.⁶⁸

However, the 2019 Lok Sabha elections revealed that the lower rungs of the Hindu peasantry – the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe groups – had again drifted away, this time from the ruling TMC to the BJP.⁶⁹ Thus the class interests and associated grievances within West Bengal's agrarian economy have also aggravated party-based violence in the hinterland.

The Expediency of Electoral Dominance: Power through Panchayats

The imperatives of competing for power in a democratic system – strengthening the party organisation, winning elections, and maintaining control at the grassroots level – often leads political parties to resort to violence. With more power and resources devolving to panchayats in the 1980-1990s, they have become battlegrounds for political parties. In West Bengal, panchayats provide critical openings for parties to strengthen their hold over nearly every aspect of rural society.⁷⁰ Dominance at the panchayat level enables parties to take their political influence to the grassroots. It helps them strengthen their organisational machinery to compete for political power.⁷¹

For a ruling party, be it the CPI (M) or the TMC, which has the state machinery, especially the police at its disposal, it becomes easier to exert dominance over panchayats through violence or the threat of violence. Table 2 shows the number of seats that were won uncontested in the panchayat elections of West Bengal over the years. These are seats the ruling party successfully deterred the opposition

from contesting, either through violence or the threat of violence, thus ensuring its own victory. In the last two elections, the number of such seats has spiked dramatically. As many as 34 percent of the seats remained uncontested in the 2018 panchayat election, which in addition saw widespread violence, and which was won by the TMC ⁷²

Table 2:
Uncontested Seats, Panchayat Elections (1978-2018)

Year	Uncontested Seats	Percentage
1978	338	0.73
1983	332	0.74
1988	4200	8.9
1993	1,716	2.81
1998	680	1.36
2003	6,800	11
2008	2,845	5.57
2013	6,274	10.66
2018	20,076	34.2

Source: Times of India^{73,74}

Control over Resources and Rent-Seeking

As noted earlier, during the Left Front's rule, the benefits of governmental welfare schemes were made available largely to families affiliated to the ruling party.⁷⁵ The rural poor are extremely dependent on these schemes for their survival and livelihood opportunities;⁷⁶ access to these ensures social and economic security.⁷⁷ Village-level party workers keep a firm grip on these resources, the competition for which also ensures the continuance of violence in a region marked by poverty and unemployment.⁷⁸

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‘Rent-seeking’ (in the economic sense) by ruling party activists, both to generate funds for party activities and also enrich themselves personally, is also rampant in rural Bengal. It can take multiple forms. It is quite difficult, for example, to take possession of any property purchased without the *dada*’s (local Big Brother) blessings. Construction material to build a house has to be compulsorily bought through the local ‘syndicate’. (This is true of many other states as well, especially Kerala, but has stronger roots in West Bengal.) Such rent-seeking flourished during the Left Front’s rule and has been perfected under the TMC government.⁷⁹ This invariably leads to violence amongst rival groups.

‘Politics of Fear’ as a Function of Violence

In a polity as deeply polarised on party lines as West Bengal, cadres of each party perceive their counterparts in rival parties as the ‘other’. There is palpable fear⁸⁰ in each party’s ranks that if the rival party comes to power, its workers will wreak violence on them, while also snatching the rent-seeking benefits they enjoyed. Moreover, unemployed young men are mostly used as foot soldiers by the political parties,⁸¹ to attack and intimidate rival party workers. For their own security and material advancement, rural party workers need to put down rival party workers, often violently. Since party loyalty remains the most dominant fault-line, all other social divisions such as caste prejudice, class conflict and communal bigotry are also articulated in the idiom of inter-party conflicts.⁸²

Thus, in earlier years, the rivalry between the Congress and CPI (M) also encompassed the existing class conflict between landlords and the peasantry. Today the clashes between the TMC and the BJP include Hindu-Muslim hostility as a component. This is why the charge of Muslim ‘appeasement’ levelled by the BJP against the TMC helped the former to consolidate the support of Hindus in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections to a considerable extent.⁸³

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Lastly, seeking retribution or ‘revenge’, plays an important role in the ‘politics of fear and anger’⁸⁴ in the state. Targeted murders, especially after each poll, are intended to teach the vanquished party’s workers ‘a lesson’. Sometimes, even family rivalry and associated violence is expressed in terms of political affiliation and polarisation.⁸⁵ The ubiquitous presence of the party, especially at the lower rungs of rural Bengal, makes the issue of political dominance extremely important not only for the political parties but also for ordinary party supporters, whose physical security and livelihood opportunities are inseparably linked to the dominance of the party they support.

The Rise of the BJP and the Aggravation of Reciprocal Violence

After the TMC replaced the CPI (M) as the ruling party in 2011, its workers also followed the Left Front’s blueprint of assaulting and intimidating CPI (M) workers.⁸⁶ Thereafter, although the TMC won the panchayat elections of 2018 with an overwhelming majority, the violence it allegedly unleashed on opposition party cadres, especially the CPI (M) during the campaign,⁸⁷ also increased anti-TMC sentiment in many parts of the state.⁸⁸ Further, as CPI (M) supporters realised that their party had been politically weakened to an extent that it was not able to give them the physical protection they needed against the TMC cadres,⁸⁹ a large part of the CPI (M)’s support base shifted loyalties to the BJP in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. CPI (M) workers realised that the BJP was better equipped to challenge the TMC’s dominance and protect them.⁹⁰

The BJP, as a powerful political force, ruling at the Centre and supported by other right-wing affiliates in the state, was adequately equipped to counter the TMC’s violence. This also led to more violent attacks by both sides. The rise of the BJP, and its constant harping on the TMC’s purported Muslim appeasement,⁹¹ gave many of the clashes a strong communal colour, especially those which occurred during the Hindu festival of Ram Navami and Moharram, which is observed by Muslims.^{92,93} Even as the TMC won the 2021 Assembly polls convincingly, the atmosphere of fear and loathing grew,

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reinforced by the post-poll incidents of violence, allegedly perpetrated by TMC workers on their rivals.⁹⁴

Apart from the ruling TMC, as the main opposition in Bengal, the BJP has also been found fomenting violence, especially in areas where the party is politically strong.⁹⁵ Reports of intimidation and assault of TMC workers have been rampant from the time the 2019 Lok Sabha elections were held to the run-up to the 2021 elections. During the polls, TMC and BJP workers routinely clashed and murders were also reported. The BJP, despite being a relatively new force in Bengal politics, has been found to be capable of counter-violence against the TMC.

This is largely due to two reasons: first, the foot soldiers as well as many notable leaders of the current state unit of the BJP are defectors from the TMC and the CPI (M), and thus well-versed in the culture of violence of the state. They are eager to hit back at the ruling TMC, with which they have become disillusioned, and which in turn led them to join the BJP. Second, as the BJP is the hegemonic political force in the country and the ruling party at the national level, it has the resources to counter the violence of the TMC with similar tactics. The firing by Central forces at Sitalkuchiⁿ in Cooch Behar district in April 2021 during the run-up to the 2021 Assembly elections, without the state government's consent, revealed the direct involvement⁹⁶ of Centre-controlled institutions in the discourse of violence in West Bengal.^{97,98}

n Four people were killed in firing by CISF personnel after mob allegedly stormed the polling station in the Cooch Behar district where polling was taking place in the fourth phase of the Vidhan Sabha election 2021.


The Unique Nature of Political Violence in West Bengal

An examination of the nature and dynamics of political violence in West Bengal shows that it is in a different league from that seen in other states. Bengal's 'exceptionalism' is based on the following reasons:

- Violent incidents in Bengal are largely driven by partisan interests aimed at capturing political power, and establishing complete political hegemony over opponents. The length for which this trend has persisted has no parallel elsewhere in India. It began in the pre-independence period and has continued over more than seven decades.
- There is a marked departure from other states in the ideological orientation of the violence. In Kerala, the high-octane political violence between the RSS/BJP and the Left is based on ideological differences. It has continued for several decades despite the BJP's influence in the state being fairly limited. It is different in West Bengal.⁹⁹ In this state, there seems to be ideological fluidity, as seen from the move of a significant proportion of CPI (M) cadres to the TMC, and certain sections among them eventually to the BJP. The exodus even of state leaders of the TMC to the BJP, and lately of BJP leaders to the TMC, reveals the ideological fluidity of Bengal's politics.
- The violence in states such as UP, Bihar, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra stems mostly from conflicts rooted in local socio-cultural prejudices and communal sentiments.¹⁰⁰ In West Bengal, socio-cultural, ideological and economic factors have largely been subservient to the overriding cause of political domination in the exercise of violence. Political violence is driven by the party loyalty-enmity discourse. This form of violence clearly distinguishes Bengal from other states.

The Unique Nature of Political Violence in West Bengal

- The phenomenon of political violence has taken deep roots in the state's political culture. It is no longer confined to the pulls and pressures of elections. While other states witness episodic or sporadic violence; in West Bengal the violence is of an 'everyday' nature. The party-society matrix creates enabling conditions for such violence; the sheer number of incidents in the state is testimony to it. Everyday violence or threat of violence is often perpetrated systematically, with the tacit complicity of state institutions, and the active involvement of party organisations. The daily threats of violence and systemic exclusion of people opposed to the party in power makes West Bengal a fitting example of the 'structural violence' discussed by Johan Galtung.¹⁰¹

Political violence in Bengal, therefore, can be said to be exceptional. In its intensity and form, it has no parallel elsewhere in India. Such endemic violence takes a heavy toll on the state's economy, its policies of inclusion and redistribution of resources, its governance systems, and the rule of law.¹⁰² Entrenched and widespread political violence acts as a barrier to political participation and political equality. There is need for debate on what kind of institutional safeguards, legal protection, electoral behaviour changes, and changes in political culture are required to reduce the current level and form of violence in Bengal. 

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