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## The rise of the BJP in West Bengal: A study of Lok Shaba and assembly election

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### Abstract

This paper discusses the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in West Bengal politics. The BJP traces its origins to the Bharatiya Jana Sangh, which Shyama Prasad Mukherjee founded in 1951. The Bharatiya Janata Party finally came into existence on April 6, 1980. In the 1980s, the BJP made its political debut in the West Bengal assembly and panchayat polls. Local elections were more successful for the party than assembly elections. Over time, BJP began to perform well, increasing its vote share at a steady pace. In the 2014 and 2019 Lok Sabha elections in West Bengal, the BJP performed well and increased its vote share by fending off Communists and Congress. This article also examines several other factors responsible for the emergence of the BJP in West Bengal, such as the Ram Janmabhoomi movement in the 1990s and its alliance with the TMC in 1998. The BJP has been trying to mobilize the Hindu voters in Bengal by popularising Hindu slogans and festivals. This article concludes that the BJP will attempt to increase its vote share in the next assembly and Lok Sabha elections by consolidating its support across all the regions of West Bengal.

**Keywords:** BJP, TMC, Lok Sabah elections, assembly elections, West Bengal

### Introduction

Bharatiya Janata Party is one of the national political parties in India ("In Numbers: The Rise of BJP and Decline of Congress," 2016) [9]. Since 2014 BJP has been the ruling party at the centre under the leadership of Narendra Modi (Zee Media Bureau, 2019) [31]. The BJP is a right-wing political party whose policies have traditionally mirrored a traditional Hindu nationalist ideology (Quist, M. L. (2014) [18]. The BJP is ideologically and organizationally connected with Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh (RSS) (Men, Machinery, and Mind of RSS behind BJP's Poll Power Punch, 2019) [14]. The party claims to be the world's largest political party in terms of its members. The party has the largest representation in parliament and in several state legislatures. The party traces its origin to Bharatiya Jana Sangh, which came into being in 1951 and was founded by Shyama Prasad Mukherjee (Swain, P. C. (2001) [22]. The BJP is committed to building India as a strong and prosperous nation, which is modern, progressive, and enlightened and which is proudly inspired by India's ancient culture and values and thus a great global player and is able to emerge as a force that is playing an effective role (Guha, 2019) [33]. The party strives for the establishment of world peace and just international order. The party aims to establish a democratic state that guarantees political, social and economic justice, equality of opportunity and freedom of belief and expression to all citizens without distinction of caste, creed or sex (Mehra, 2013) [34]. The party shall have true faith and loyalty to the laws of the Constitution of India and the principles of socialism, secularism and democracy and shall uphold the sovereignty, unity and integrity of India. The BJP advocates a strong national defence, a minimal government, and economic policies based on the free market. Since its foundation, Integral Humanism has been its central ideology and defining characteristic (Express News Service, 2020) [26].

### Party's Philosophy

The official website of BJP states its philosophy [1]

"We draw out strength from 'Bharat Mata ki Jai'. This is our central theme.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bjp.org/philosophy>

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'Bharat' (our land), 'Mata' (our heritage and culture) and 'Jai' (people's aspirations) are the expression of our deep commitment to the nation. Nation emerges from the union of land, people and culture. We have faith in cultural nationalism <sup>[2]</sup>.

'Pancha Nishthas' or five guiding principles, that guide the BJP in the political journey are:

- A devotion to nationalism and national unity
- Dedicated to Democratic Processes
- Belief and commitment to Gandhian socialism, which provides the way for an exploitation-free society
- Adherence to positive secularism
- Belief and commitment to value-based politics

BJP entered Bengal politics for the first time in the 1982 assembly elections. The party's main goal was to provide the groundwork for a new political movement in West Bengal (Swain, P. C. 2001) <sup>[22]</sup>.

#### Research Objectives

- To study the BJP's electoral performance in West Bengal elections (Both Lok Sabha and Assembly elections)
- To study the factors which contributed to the rise of the BJP in West Bengal politics

#### Research Methodology

This study is based on both primary and secondary data. The primary data includes the data taken from the Election Commission of India website, and secondary data has been taken from books, research articles, and online newspaper articles.

#### Hindutva Connection in Bengal Politics

In 1939, the RSS formally started its journey in West Bengal. Bengal was central in creating personalities like K.B. Hedgewar, the founder of RSS and his successor, M.S. Gowalkar. Hindu Mahasabha was also proactive in Bengal, the organization was committed to protecting the interests of Hindus and to resisting Muslim League in Bengal. In 1947 Hindu Mahasabha was at the forefront of campaigning for the partition of Bengal and demanding a separate province in the Indian Union. Shyama Prasad Mukherjee was another significant Hindu personality in Indian politics. He disagreed with Nehru on several issues. Mukherjee finally left Hindu Mahasabha and Nehru's cabinet in the view to creating his party. The RSS, which was founded in 1925, also wanted a political front to remain connected with politics. Finally, Bharatiya Jana Sangh was formed in 1951 with S.P. Mukherjee, its president.

Kanungo (2014) <sup>[11]</sup> mentions in the 1952 Lok Sabha elections, BJS contested on six seats out of 36 seats in West Bengal. The BJS won two seats and secured a 5.59% vote share in its debut. The BJS also contested in assembly elections and won 9 seats by securing a 5.58% vote share. The BJS performed well in elections under the leadership of Shyama Prasad Mukherjee. Both BJS and Hindu Mahasabha worked together to protect the interests of Hindus in Bengal. The party's performance in elections started declining after the death of Shyama Prasad Mukherjee.

#### Creeping Rise of BJP in West Bengal

Kanungo (2014) <sup>[11]</sup> states that when the emergency was introduced by Indira Gandhi across the country in 1975 to 1977, it also affected Bengal politics. At that moment, BJS joined Jaya Prakash Narayan movement to oppose Indira's decision. In the 1977 elections, BJS joined Janata Party and secured 29 seats in the West Bengal assembly elections. In 1980 Jana Sangh faction split from Janata Party over the issue of double membership. BJP's state leadership in West Bengal was particularly in the hands of two prominent leaders, Vishnu Kant Shashti and Haripada Bharati, and both had won assembly seats in the 1977 elections. After their deaths, there was a vacuum in the state leadership of the BJP in West Bengal. It took a long time for BJP to have the leaders like Satyabrata Mukherjee and Tathgata Roy, who filled the vacuum of leadership in West Bengal. In the early 1980s, BJP started its operations in West Bengal by getting involved in Panchayat politics. BJP's aim was to enter rural Bengal which was becoming a battle ground for politics. The BJP used prominent icons like Bankim and Vivekananda in several election campaigns to build its roots at the regional level. The Ram Janmabhoomi agitation also proved effective for BJP in Bengal. The BJP mobilized the Hindus of West Bengal over the Ayodhya movement and also raised concerns of Bangladeshi infiltration. Therefore, the political campaigning of the BJP at local, regional, and national levels impacted the 1991 Lok Sabha elections, in which BJP, despite having little organizational structure, secured 11.7% of the votes without winning any seats. However, this made the BJP a credible political party in West Bengal. The BJP won the panchayat elections in West Bengal and the party gradually increased its presence in local politics. The BJP's vote share improved from 0.08% in 1983 to 3.89% in 1993 and 7.78% in 1998 at the Panchayat level.

#### 1991 Assembly elections served as the landmark year for BJP

Despite the fact that the BJP could not win a single seat in the 1991 elections, the party secured 11.34% of the vote share in assembly elections and 11.6% in the Lok Sabha elections (Election Commission of India, 1991). During the 1991 assembly elections in West Bengal the BJP's base in rural Bengal had been further augmented by its engagement in local politics following the Ayodhya mobilization (Jaffrelot, C.1999) <sup>[10]</sup>. The party also secured a hundred thousand votes in several parliamentary constituencies. This development indicated that bipolarity was eroding in state politics (Zaidi, A. M. (1980) <sup>[28]</sup>. The Left Front, the dominant Party in West Bengal, saw a gradual decline in its vote share in the 1989 and 1991 elections. The gradual rise of the BJP in rural Bengal was a threat to Left Front (Jaffrelot, C. 1999) <sup>[10]</sup>. The BJP was successful in mobilizing rural voters who were not benefitted from Left government's land reforms (Lieten, 1996) <sup>[31]</sup>.

#### What United BJP and TMC in 1998

In 1977, Mamata Banerjee left Congress and formed her new Party Trinamool Congress Party (Subramonian, 2014) <sup>[32]</sup>. At that moment BJP found it a good opportunity to an alliance with Mamata's new party. Mamata welcomed BJP's coalition as the party was firmly anti-Congress and anti-Left; this would allow her to confront them decisively (ITGD Bureau, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bjp.org/philosophy>

In the 1998 Lok Sabha elections, TMC contested 29 seats and BJP on 14 seats. BJP had increased its vote share from 6.9% in 1996 to 9.76% in 1998 (Election Commission of India, 1996) [8]. The BJP won its first-ever Lok Sabha seat in West Bengal, and Tapan Sikdar was made its state unit president (Express News Service, 2020) [26]. In assembly elections, TMC and BJP collectively secured 100 seats out of 294 seats. The BJP's alliance with TMC proved effective as the BJP was successful in increasing its vote share across all the constituencies in West Bengal ("The Fall and Rise of Trinamool Congress," 2019). The BJP also won a bypoll state assembly seat in West Bengal first time with the support of TMC. In the 1998 panchayat elections, both BJP and TMC contested separately (ITGD Bureau, 2011). The TMC accused BJP for its poor turnout in panchayat elections. Despite the disagreements between BJP and TMC, both collectively contested the 1999 Lok Sabha elections. The vote share of the BJP increased to 11.4%, Tapan Sikdar and Satyabrata Mukherjee won the seats from DUM DUM and Krishnanagar. The Mamata entered into an alliance with Vajpayee's government at the center and joined the cabinet. But there were disagreements between BJP and TMC over several issues. The tension between TMC and BJP started growing considerably, and finally, Mamata broke her alliance with the BJP just before the 2001 assembly elections. In the 2001 assembly elections in West Bengal, BJP fought alone, and the party did not win a single seat ("Why Did the NDA Lose West Bengal?," n.d.). Thus, the vote share of BJP decreased from 6.45% in 1996 to 5.19% in 2001 (Bhandari, 2020a) [2].

In 2004 BJP fought parliamentary elections on its own, and the party did not win a single seat. The party's vote share fell to 8.06 percent. In the 2006 West Bengal assembly elections, the performance of the BJP was dismal, as the party could secure only 1.93% of the vote share. However, in the 2009 parliamentary elections, the BJP's vote share increased to 6.14% as prominent BJP leaders like Jaswant Singh won the Darjeeling Lok Sabha seat.

### 2014 Lok Sabha election and BJP

In the 2014 Indian General Election, the BJP performed well by winning two seats in West Bengal. The winning Lok Sabha seats were from Darjeeling and Asanol. The BJP secured a 17.02% vote share in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. The party's vote share raised from 6.14 percent in 2009 to 17.02 percent in 2014 (Kanungo, 2014) [11]. On the other hand, the vote share of the Left and Congress decreased considerably. The BJP could not win a single seat in the 2011 assembly elections<sup>3</sup> However, the party was runner-up in 24 assembly seats and second in 26 seats. The dismal result of the BJP in the 2011 assembly elections was largely attributable to their divide and polarisation with Mamata.

### 2014 Lok Sabha Elections and Performance of Political Parties in West Bengal

Political Party	Votes secured percentage	Seats Secured
AITC	39.05%	34
CPI	29.71%	2
BJP	17.02%	2
INC	9.58%	4

Source: (News OneIndia, 2014) [15]

Since the Left lost in the 2011 assembly elections, the Sangh Parivar has gradually gained ground in rural regions. This has been one reason for the BJP's rise in vote share both in bye-elections and Municipal polls. Modi factor has also raised the strength and pride of the workers in West Bengal. Modi has been seen continuously cruising Mamata Banerjee over several issues, which has allowed BJP to solidify the votes in its favor. The decline of the Left in West Bengal opened the way for BJP to fill this gap. The BJP's strong showing in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections in West Bengal has established the party as the state's principal opposition, driving out the Left.

The rise of RSS in West Bengal in recent years has also been associated with the rise of the BJP in West Bengal. A number of 'Shakhas' have been created in West Bengal, and weekly 'Sammerlans' are also being organized. It has been reported that around 1,010 'Shakhas' have been made to educate people about RSS activities (Bhattacharya, 2014) [35]. The RSS members have been heavily campaigning in ST, SC and OBC areas against TMC and the Left. The Sangh Parivar has also been accusing the TMC of appeasing Muslims at the cost of Hindus. Besides, RSS, VHP have been also steadily growing in West Bengal. The BJP asserts that it has not neglected Muslims, who account for 30 percent of the vote in West Bengal. The BJP asserts that it welcomes Muslims into its ranks, but it will not engage in "minority appeasement."

### 2019 Lok Sabha elections and BJP

BJP's unprecedented performance in West Bengal by winning 18 Lok Sabha seats. The BJP's unprecedented gain may have surprised Mamata since the party won 18 seats in 2019 compared to just two in 2014. The BJP received 40.25% of the vote share, while TMC received 43.3% of the vote share in the state (TNN, 2019). The Congress could bag only two Lok Sabha seats, and the CPM-lead Front could not win a single seat in the state. The BJP's surge was particularly seen in North Bengal and the Jangal Mahal area. The BJP performed impressively in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections in West Bengal. The party has increased its vote share from 16.8 percent in 2014 to 40.25 percent in 2019. Primarily, three reasons contributed to the BJP's success in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections. In the first place, a clear electoral surge favored the BJP. Secondly, BJP was able to solidify some of its gains in North Bengal. Thirdly and importantly BJP was able to the major support in the Western part of Bengal, namely Jangal Mahal area (Das & Basu, 2019) [4]. To win over Hindu immigrants from Bangladesh, the Indian government enacted the Citizenship Amendment Act 2019 (CAA) in parliament after the 2019 election. This would provide a more expedited path to citizenship for non-Muslim immigrants from neighboring countries. If the citizenship amendment act was effectively implemented, the BJP anticipated that it would be able to establish a strong foothold in West Bengal.

### 2021 West Bengal Assembly Elections

The 2021 assembly elections in West Bengal witnessed a huge victory for the TMC. The TMC won 213 seats, the most in the house, and its vote share rose to 47.9 percent from 44.9 percent in 2016. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), on the other side, also demonstrated some good performance; the party won 77 seats and registered 38.1 percent of the vote share. Both the BJP and the TMC used social media extensively in an effort to reach as many potential voters as possible, although the TMC's efforts have

<sup>3</sup> <http://eciresults.nic.in/>

been more successful (Mir & Rao 2022) [14]. The Congress and the Left showed poor performance by not winning even a single seat (The Hindu, 2021a) [24].

The BJP secured only three seats in the 2016 assembly elections with 10% of the vote share. In the 2019 general election, the party won 18 seats, and its vote share increased by over 40% 2019. The BJP's gradual increase in vote share has been ascribed to the 'Modi effect' in West Bengal. The active involvement of the BJP in Bengali politics has resulted in a drop in vote share for Congress and the Left. Lokniti CSDS revealed that around 2/5<sup>th</sup> of traditional Left voters. Voted for BJP, and 3<sup>rd</sup> of them voted for TMC [4].

There are several factors that have contributed to the emergence of the BJP in West Bengal. Some of these factors include religious polarization, anti-incumbency, and the active engagement of Hindutva organizations like the RSS and VHP. The BJP has been accusing Mamata Banerjee for appeasing Muslims, who constitute over 27% of the total population as per the 2011 census. Since 2014 BJP has been trying to mobilize the Hindu voters in West Bengal by popularising Hindu slogans and festivals. However, Mamata has successfully countered it by granting allowances to Hindu priests and money for arranging Durga Pujas.

Although BJP lost the 2021 assembly elections, but the party managed to emerge as a principal power in West Bengal by throwing back Congress and Communists. However, regarding voting percentage, the BJP's vote share in West Bengal has begun to decline. In 2019, the BJP performed quite well, gaining 18 seats and garnering over 40% of the vote share, but their vote share in the 2021 assembly elections was not outstanding. In order to expand its vote share in assembly and Lok Sabha elections, the BJP will attempt to bolster its support base in West Bengal.

### The overall performance of the BJP from 1982 to 2021 is shown in Tables 1.1 and 1.2

**Table 1:** Performance of the BJP in West Bengal Legislative Assembly, 1982-2011.

Year	Seats Contested	Seats Won	Percentage of votes polled
1982	52	0	0.58
1987	57	0	0.51
1991	291	0	11.34
1996	292	0	6.45
2001	266	0	5.19
2006	29	0	1.93
2011	289	0	4.06
2016	294	3	10.16
2021	294	77	38.14

Source: (Election Commission of India, 2021)

**Table 2:** Performance of the BJP in Lok Sabha Elections in West Bengal-1984-2019.

Year	Seats Contested	Seats Won	Percentage of votes polled
1984	9	00	0.40
1989	19	00	1.67
1991	42	00	11.66
1996	42	00	6.88
1998	14	1	10.20
1999	13	2	11.13
2004	13	00	8.06
2009	42	1	6.14
2014	42	2	17.02
2019	42	18	40.22

Source: (Election Commission of India, 2019)

## Conclusion

The emergence of the BJP in West Bengal has been attributed to several factors. These contributing factors include the emergence of the Ayodhya agitation of the Raj Janmabhoomi movement in the 1990s and its alliance with the Trinamool Congress party (TMC) in 1998. Furthermore, the increasing vote share for the BJP in the West Bengal elections and the decreasing vote for the Congress and the Left Front can be traced back to the BJP's extensive campaigning on a local, regional, and national level. Moreover, the election of 2019 has also proved to be a landmark year for BJP in West Bengal. Although widely supported in India, BJP's performance in the 2021 West Bengal assembly election somehow damaged the party's standing in the state. The BJP will work to maintain its vote share in West Bengal. Furthermore, the party would not spare any effort in the next West Bengal assembly elections in an effort to increase its support among voters. The BJP plans to work to increase its credibility in West Bengal.

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