

India: Survival, livelihood and political domination: Why violence is intertwined with Bengal's local polls

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Panchayat-level dominance helps a party strengthen its organisational machinery to maintain a firm grip over electoral prospects.

The ruling Trinamool Congress government in West Bengal once again ensured a thumping victory for itself in the panchayat elections held in July that were marked by widespread violence. At least 20 people from the [Trinamool Congress as well as opposition parties](#) were killed on polling day itself.

Since the elections were announced, the prospect of political violence and related arrangements took centre stage rather than the key campaign issues. The Calcutta High Court and the Supreme Court had to step in to ensure the deployment of adequate central forces to ensure [peaceful elections](#).

Despite the heavy deployment of central forces and the active monitoring of the election process by the state governor and the media, there was an unprecedented level of violence. The sheer number of violent incidents and deaths on polling day suggests that the measures fell far short of ensuring peaceful elections.

West Bengal has a [history of violence in local elections](#), mostly initiated by the party in power. But the issue has become politically intense due to growing politicisation and contestation. This is partly due to [the increasing media coverage](#) and [social media outreach](#).

The prospect of protracted violence has, over the decades, dwindled trust in the key political actors in the state. Opposition parties have been suspicious of the [conduct of the police machinery](#) and the State Election Commission, both accused of being hand in gloves with the ruling dispensation. [West Bengal Governor CV Ananda Bose](#) has also raised the issue of political violence, creating new flashpoints for rifts between Raj Bhavan and state government.

Increasing political implications

In the [panchayat elections in 2018](#), excessive violence and intimidation unfolded largely alongside accusations against the ruling Trinamool Congress of using force to ensure its political dominance. The Trinamool Congress won a thumping victory, holding onto [34% of total seats uncontested](#), allegedly due to the ruling party intimidating opposition candidates.

Several analyses have reflected that such [violent tactics boomeranged against the Trinamool Congress](#) in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections as a large section of aggrieved voters (major sections of Left supporters), who bore the brunt of the panchayat election violence, voted for the emergent political challenger in the state, the Bharatiya Janata Party. This resulted in a surge of [support for the BJP in West Bengal](#), as the saffron party, for the first time, bagged 18 Lok Sabha seats.

However, the Trinamool Congress was able to hold its fort successfully in the 2021 state assembly elections despite a major political challenge from the emergent BJP. Electoral violence was witnessed during the 2019 elections but became a [widespread political flashpoint](#) after the declaration of the results of 2021 assembly elections.

The BJP's continued [campaign against the alleged political violence](#), perpetrated largely by cadres of the ruling Trinamool Congress, and the High Court's [indictment of the state government](#) for the violence is [believed](#) to [affect](#) the ruling party's image. Learning its lessons from the 2019 political setback and apprehending reputational damage nationally, the top leadership of the Trinamool Congress, including party chief Mamata Banerjee and [Abhishek Banerjee](#), had many times [cautioned party workers against resorting to violence](#) in the local polls this time.

Abhishek Banerjee also urged cadres to facilitate [opposition candidates filing nominations](#). In comparison to 2018, the Trinamool Congress won [10%-12%](#) seats uncontested, indicating that the ruling party's cadres may have been more cautious due to pressure from judicial interventions, the governor and widespread media coverage.

However, as the elections approached, violence unfolded. This brings to the fore the question why violence persists unabated despite central forces being deployed in the state, unlike in 2018, and when it has proven to be counterproductive sometimes for the ruling party in West Bengal in recent years.

Why panchayat polls are violent

The state has a long [history of political violence](#) during panchayat elections that has continued across different political regimes, at least in the past five decades. Politically-driven violence at the grassroots level is not limited to Bengal and has been witnessed in many parts of the country. But the violence in the politics of Bengal's hinterlands is touted as exceptional. Usually, political violence is inextricably [linked with other forms of violence](#).

The violence that is reported in Bengal during elections, mostly at the local level, can be termed as entirely "political" in nature. This is because violence or threats of violence are used to [capture political power](#) and maintain an iron grip on the key local levers of state power – the panchayats.

Socio-cultural, ideological or economic factors have been largely made subservient to the cause of political domination and polarising political partisanship in the exercise of violence in the state, making it different from other forms of violence.

Logic of political domination

It is imperative for all major political actors in the state to ensure political domination over the panchayats, which remain the institutional lynchpin of political patronage and electoral mobilisation in the hinterland. Under the Left rule since 1977, [West Bengal's panchayats were strengthened](#) with the devolution of resources to these self-governing grassroot institutions.

Soon, these institutions emerged as a key source of competition among principal parties. Administrative and economic power made the panchayats crucial sites of political influence at the grassroot levels of rural West Bengal. The Communist Party of India (Marxist) used its well-structured and powerful party machinery to capture the panchayats and perpetuate the party's hold over rural Bengal, which constitutes a majority population in the state.

Panchayats, thus, became vital instruments for any political party to establish, maintain and preserve its dominance in the state. Further, with pressure on material resources, the welfare goods

delivery mechanism of the government became increasingly selective, based on party lines. There have been apprehensions that ruling party supporters and its dominated villages [received preferential treatment](#) in the distribution of government handouts, while villages dominated by the opposition were kept deprived of such state resources.

Scholar Partha Sarathi Banerjee observes that [during the rule of the Left](#), “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 party organisation”. Political scientist Partha Chatterjee states that the “party” was the all-pervasive instrument of Bengal’s rural society. Chatterjee notes that the party is “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...Rural life is literally inconceivable without the party”.

This indispensable dominance of the political party in rural Bengal led scholar Dwaipayan Bhattacharya to coin the term “[party society](#)” to explain the process of the complete politicisation of society in the state. This political culture that was nurtured for three decades [transformed the rural society](#) in Bengal into one deeply polarised along party lines.

With the village panchayats taking centre-stage in the 1990s and state resources flowing into these rural institutions, they became important theatres of conflict between political parties. Apart from controlling state resources, panchayats [provided](#) a crucial avenue for parties to expand their hold over nearly every aspect of the private and public spheres of the rural society of Bengal, [perpetuating social control](#).

Panchayat-level dominance enables a party to deepen its political influence locally at the grassroots and helps [strengthen its organisational machinery](#) to maintain a firm grip over the electoral politics in the state. The ruling party of the state, first the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and now the Trinamool Congress, has the state machineries at its disposal, especially the police, making it easier to assert dominance over the panchayats by stifling the rise of any political alternative at the local level.

The need to strengthen the party organisation, winning of elections, and importantly, the constant attempts to maintain complete political control at the grassroots level to stay in power, involves all parties in the viciousness of structural violence and intimidation. Not only the ruling party, but the cadres of opposition parties have also resorted to reciprocal violence in their bastions to [retain or capture panchayats](#). This is inextricably linked to their survival and ascendancy in state politics.

They possibly indulge in [reciprocal violence](#) to guard their front with the ruling party cadre also bearing the brunt of such violence, as is evident in the killing of a sizeable number of Trinamool Congress workers along with opposition party cadres in this election.

The logic of resource mobilisation

Major sections of the rural population continue to be dependent upon panchayats for their livelihood. The politics of “dole giving”, based on party affiliation, has been [embedded in the political culture of India](#) and is more so in rural areas. The rural poor in Bengal are [dependent](#) on government resources for survival and livelihood opportunities. Thus, their loyalty and support has always been [drawn on party lines](#) to access these state resources.

Access to these resources provides [social and economic security](#) to the vulnerable sections. This has also led to the local-level party workers to act as [foot soldiers of political parties](#) to ensure their

party's firm control on these resources. [Competition between party rivals](#) for basic resources and employment opportunities has also led to the continuance of [violence](#) in rural districts marked by [high rates of poverty and unemployment](#).

The centralisation of the [delivery of welfare schemes](#), made directly by the state government in the name of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee, have in recent times decreased the patronage bandwidth of the panchayats at local level. However, the panchayat's capacity of "getting things done" in everyday rural lives keeps its social control relevant.

Also, there is the practice of [rent-seeking in most routine works](#) over which the ruling party largely maintains its monopoly, partly to generate funds for political activities and partly to fill its coffers. Such rent-seeking takes place in multiple forms. For instance, it is quite difficult to take possession of legally purchased real estate without the blessings of local leaders or dadas. Construction work is also carried out through the local business "syndicate" that shares a nexus with the ruling party.

Such rent seeking, which also [exists](#) in other states, [flourished in West Bengal during the Left rule](#) and the Trinamool Congress has [nurtured it in different ways](#). To monopolise such rent-seeking activities through grassroot-level positions of power, violence against rival groups has been a recurring feature of rural politics in the last four decades in the state.

West Bengal has also witnessed gruesome intra-party [rivalry](#) between factions of the ruling party or coalition during the rule of the [Left Front and Trinamool Congress](#) due to [conflict](#) among local leadership over political domination and control of resources.

Synergy of political domination, economic interests

This creates a twin structural logic for political violence in the local-level electoral contests in rural Bengal. On one hand, political parties, especially the one in power, want to ensure control over panchayats to strengthen their local grassroots organisation, manifest its pre-eminence in state politics and to create an effective vehicle for political mobilisation that is essential for reaping electoral benefits at various levels.

On the other hand, for the local level leaders, party cadres, and large sections of population linked to the "party-society" model, the continuation of the dominance of their party is an assurance of their livelihood, income and job opportunities that constitute their economic security and guarantee for survival.

Even if the furore over violence deters the higher leadership from encouraging it in some instances, the structural imperatives at the local level still reinforce the conditions for violence. Hence, the need for political domination for parties symbiotically matches the need of the rural local political workers and the larger network to access economic resources and social control, making control over panchayats an imperative, by all means.

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