

From Congress to BJP: The Transformation of Opposition Politics in West Bengal

Sunil Mahato

Junior Research Fellow in Political Science, Atal Bihari Vajpayee Vishwavidyalaya, Bilaspur (C.G)

Abstract—This paper examines the long-term evolution of opposition politics in West Bengal, concentrating on the transition from the Indian National Congress's historical significance to the current ascendance of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) as the main competitor to the ruling All India Trinamool Congress (AITC). Throughout the extended period of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front's dominance (1977–2011), Congress held the primary position in the opposition landscape, depending on its historical authority, secular-nationalist narrative, and fragmented yet persistent organizational networks. Nevertheless, the emergence and growth of the AITC in the late 1990s reshaped the competitive dynamics of state politics, gradually diminishing Congress's electoral support and supplanting the Left from power in 2011. The period following 2014 marked a significant realignment, as the BJP grew swiftly by mobilizing religious identity, consolidating anti-incumbency feelings, capitalizing on central leadership appeal, and combining welfare narratives with nationalist messages. Electoral data from 2001 to 2021 reveals a distinct shift from fragmented multi-party competition to an increasingly bipolar clash between the AITC and the BJP, especially evident in the 2019 parliamentary and 2021 assembly elections. This change signifies not just a shift in opposition leadership but a more profound reconfiguration of political dialogue, social coalitions, and the relationship between the central and state governments. By placing West Bengal within wider discussions about the nationalization of party systems, polarization, and democratic competitiveness in India, the paper contends that the decline of Congress and the emergence of the BJP reflect structural changes in voter alignment and societal dynamics.

Index Terms—Opposition Politics, Electoral Polarization, Nationalization, Voter Realignment, Democratic Competitiveness.

I. INTRODUCTION

Opposition politics in a parliamentary system, where institutional checks and balances mostly depend on the power and validity of other political forces, is an essential building block to democratic development. Responsibility is thus guaranteed, law-making processes are thus influenced, policy options are expressed, and electoral choice is provided to the voters with a functional opposition. A good example of long-term party-system change in federal Indian democratic system is a history of opposition politics in West Bengal. The opposition politics in the state have experienced a set of structural changes over the last five decades starting with the initial control of the Democratic front by the Indian national congress and moving up to the rule of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) led left front. All India Trinamool Congress then rose to the top and most recently Bharatiya Janata Party has become the opposition party to reckon with.

The Left Front period (1977 to 2011) has introduced a system of predominance of the dominant party, which was based on the organizing of the cadres, decentralized government, and agricultural reformation. The major opposition of this time was the Congress, but its influence was limited because of the flaws in its institutions. It was undermined by factionalism, leadership disunity and organisational disintegration which reduced its ability to maintain a consistent intellectual opposition. With a steady support of some elections, Congress struggled to break the firmly developed rural connections and the class-based political mobilisation of the Left. By 1990s, socio-economic changes in the form of industrial decline, urban resentment and agrarian stagnation created new political openings, but Congress failed to tap into them. A significant

realignment occurred in 1998 when AITC was set up. The AITC presented itself as the real anti-Left movement through the establishment of populist rhetoric and mobilization of the subaltern community, especially the mass movements in Singur and Nandigram. The 2011 electoral victory of the Left ended the 34-year rule of the Left, which, at the same time, transformed the political landscape of the state.

However, there was no immediate stabilization of the opposition politics after the government was taken over. As the Left tried to recover by organizational losses, the Congress party which had traditionally been indispensable was demoted to an electoral fringe position. Since 2014, a new phase of transition started. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) expanded very fast in West Bengal with its national and religious identity based narratives, systematic organization penetration at the grassroots in the state. A two party contest between the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) and the BJP was a direct result of the success in electoral performance in the 2019 parliamentary elections, and the consolidation in the 2021 Assembly elections which replaced the Indian National Congress and the Left in the central opposition sphere. A change of focus to the central Congress-based opposition into the BJP-based opposition is the main point of analysis in this paper, which examines the structural, ideological, and electoral aspects underlining this change. It contends that this change represents more general trends of identity polarization, nationalization of parties, and re-formation of social alliance.

The study challenges the electoral statistics, political accounts and institutional processes by placing West Bengal in broad arguments about the democratic competition and federal politics in India. It further explains the way in which subnational party systems respond to the changing national political currents.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To analyze the historical decline of the Indian National Congress as the principal opposition force in West Bengal during and after the Left Front era.
2. To examine the structural, ideological, and electoral factors that contributed to the rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party as the dominant opposition party in the post-2014 period.

3. To assess how the transformation from Congress-centered to BJP-centered opposition reshaped party competition, social coalitions, and democratic dynamics in West Bengal.

III. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-method approach to analyze the transformation of opposition politics in West Bengal. It combines quantitative analysis of Assembly and Lok Sabha election data (2001–2021), including vote share, seat distribution, and electoral margins, with qualitative content analysis of party manifestos, campaign speeches, and political discourse. Particular focus is given to the changing trajectories of the Indian National Congress and the Bharatiya Janata Party. The study also draws on secondary literature to situate findings within broader debates on party system change, polarization, and democratic competition in India.

Congress and the Crisis of Opposition (1977–1998): Similar to most regions in India, the political arena in West Bengal was controlled by the Indian National Congress in the decades after independence. However, the social foundation of Congress was gradually destroyed in the stormy late 1960s, a stage of agitation of food movements, labor dissatisfaction and the emergence of radical left movements. The crucial turning point was in 1977 when the Left Front which was headed by the Communist Party of India (Marxist) took the reign of power and created one of the longest-serving elected communist governments in the world. This moved Congress to the position of the main opposition, which radically transformed the party system of rivalry in the state.

The Congress strived to transform their political features in the years between 1977 and the late 1990s at the time when the Left Front managed to establish a strong support base with land reforms, especially Operation Barga, rural decentralization and organizational penetration by cadres. The Left managed to enter the politics in the rural society by predicting class contradiction, peasant empowerment and anti-Congress secularism. By contrast, congress depended more on district level personalities, such as urban elites, heritage networks, and not on long-term grassroots mobilization. Devoid of a strong developmental alternative it was largely reactive in

its opposition campaign based on the anti-incumbency rhetoric.

Factionalism also weakened the performance of the congress. The party discipline became loose and the election rhetoric was watered down by the leadership squabbles, defections and internal division. The lack of a coherent state-level leadership that would be able to spell out a convincing counter-narrative to the hegemonic talk of the Left undermined the electoral strength of the party. It did not extend its appeal in strongholds other than the conventional ones, but still had areas of support, especially in districts and constituencies with majority minorities.

Besides, the ideological hegemony of the Left could not be successfully opposed by Congress. The politics of the Left Front based on the class appeals were echoed in an agrarian state of inequality and labor activism. Congress fought to rebrand itself in this new political context since the congress was still linked to centralized power and was often seen as out of touch with the struggles on the ground. A general structural decay was in the form of diminishing vote levels, organizational decay, and leaders unable to solve their leadership issues, was evident by the 1990s. These gaps enabled the process of political repositioning and eventually resulted in the development of new opposition groups and the collapse of the anti- Left movement in West Bengal.

Emergence of the All India Trinamool Congress and the Reconfiguration of Anti-Left Politics (1998–2011):

It took a momentous turn in the opposition politics in West Bengal when in the year 1998 the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) was formed under the guidance of Mamata Banerjee. It arose out of a division inside the Indian national congress and formed itself as a more militant, street-based and uncompromising anti-Left outfit. In contrast to Congress, which had gradually lost its organizational dynamism and ideological clarity, the AITC used a populist idiom based on regional pride, mobilization of the subaltern masses, and head-on collision with the CPI(M)-dominated Left Front government. This rearrangement restructured the anti-Left space by centralizing fragmented anti-Right forces of action around a more charismatic and centralized leadership. The AITC combined the traditional

agitation on the grassroots with electoral politics in the early 2000s.

The party also capitalized on the fact that there were growing discontents with the regime of the Left created by allegation of cadres-based authoritarianism, unemployment and stagnation of industries. Great protests in Singur and Nandigram between 2006 and 2008 were turning points to this change. The Agrarian legitimacy of the Left government that had been created due to Operation Barga and decentralization reforms was compromised because of the opposition to land acquisition policies, which made it appear as anti-peasant and not caring about the rural livelihoods. Practically, this adaptability was demonstrated by the fact that the AITC, despite remaining at the grassroots, was able to politically partner with national forces to change the conventional political discourse to regional identity, land rights and dignity.

Due to this strategy, it was able to penetrate the rural constituencies that had long been Left fortresses and expand beyond its home urban base. The fact that the AITC triumphantly defeated the Left Front in the 2011 Assembly elections proved to be the ultimate breakthrough of this realignment and ended its 34-year rule. This shift had a radical transformation of the West Bengal system of political competition, and it was not merely replacing the ruling party. The Left experienced an organizational crisis and falling electoral ratings, whereas the Congress was such a junior partner. The anti-Left movement that was once distributed and Congress-based was successfully reorganized into a local-based and populist-led organization by the AITC.

Consequently, the opposition politics of West Bengal has undergone a dramatic change between the years 1998 and 2011 what used to be a weakening congress-based opposition, has transformed into a livelier movement based opposition, which finally toppled the ruling-party system established in 1977.

Rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Bipolarization of Party Competition (2014–2021):

The post-2014 West Bengal opposition politics began to take a new and revolutionary form of history. The old opposition group, the Indian National Congress and the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left, entered the phase of sharp electoral and organizational decline when the All India Trinamool

Congress (AITC) established the power after it was elected in 2011. Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rapidly gained prominence in this vacuum and ultimately became the prime competitor to the AITC.

The rise of the BJP, which was led by Narendra Modi, has to be considered in terms of bigger national political transformations that followed its triumphant performance in the 2014 Lok Sabha elections. The BJP has been able to diffuse out of its traditional strongholds in northern and western India due to the creation of an influential central leadership and aggressive nationalist message. The party strategically utilized the identity of religion to mobilize the people of West Bengal and mainly the Hindu people who were split on both caste and geographical lines. It had especially emphasized on such areas as national integration, citizenship and border security particularly in regions near Bangladesh, BJP had taken considerable organizational investment in expanding its base. It intensified mobilization through cadres, strengthened booth organizations and absorbed defectors of both the AITC and the Left.

The BJP had shown constant electoral desire, which included central resources and high profile campaigns, as opposed to the congress during the Left era. This was clear in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections, where the BJP effectively replaced the Left as the primary opposition party having won a significant number of parliamentary seats in the state and reclaimed its vote share by a significant margin. In the 2021 West Bengal Assembly elections, the trend continued. The election was largely a two-way tussle with the AITC pitting BJP in the middle despite the fact that the AITC could cling to power with an emphatic majority. The inability of Congress and the Left Front to get one seat signaled a paradigm difference in the party arrangement. A two-bloc struggle has become more divisive at the expense of the fragmented multiparty system as the election battle.

This bipolarization is seen as deeper sociopolitical changes. To begin with, West Bengal traditionally held politics based on classes, which began to be complemented (and replaced in certain areas) by identity-based mobilization. Second, with the national media narratives, central leadership and Union-state relations becoming central to the state-level electoral discourse, party competition became

nationalized to an even greater extent. Third, the nature of democratic competition has been more confrontational, characterized by high stakes campaigns, face-polarization of rhetoric, and realignment of organizations. The emergence of BJP as the principal opposition party since 2014 is therefore more than an ordinary party switch. It represents the most radical change in West Bengal politics: since the years have been dominated by Congress-Left politics, now the politics becomes polarized as a regional-versus-national fight between the BJP and the AITC. This change emphasizes the fact that in the federal system of India, the regional identity and national political currents, as well as the competitiveness between democracies, are all changing.

Rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party as Opposition After 2021:

For the first time in the history of the state, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) officially became the main opposition party following the 2021 West Bengal Assembly elections. A bipolar political system was established when the BJP won 77 seats and consolidated approximately 38 percent of the vote share, despite the All India Trinamool Congress (AITC) securing a clear majority. This was a significant change from the previous period, when the Left Front, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or the Indian National Congress, controlled the opposition. Following 2021, the BJP increased its legislative presence, brought up concerns pertaining to political violence, corruption, irregular recruitment practices, and transparency in governance, and worked to establish itself as a legitimate alternative government rather than a minor rival.

Through booth-level committees, outreach to Scheduled Caste communities (especially Matua voters), and mobilization in the state's northern and western districts, the BJP continued to grow its grassroots network outside of the Assembly. It centered its resistance on Narendra Modi's "double-engine" development, contending that cooperation between the federal and state governments would speed up welfare and economic expansion. The party retained a sizable vote base in local body and parliamentary politics despite internal factional issues and leadership changes, maintaining West Bengal at

the center of its national expansion strategy. As a result, the BJP's role changed after 2021 from a quick electoral ascent to institutionalized opposition, solidifying a steady but divisive two-party contest with the AITC.

IV. CONCLUSION

Rather than being a straightforward electoral change, the growth of the Bharatiya Janata Party and the decline of Congress in West Bengal's opposition politics reflect a significant structural realignment. The first void in the opposition space was caused by the fall of the Indian National Congress during the lengthy administration of the Left Front, led by the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Left hegemony was finally overthrown in 2011 when the All India Trinamool Congress emerged in 1998 and reorganized anti-Left politics. But in 2014, the BJP quickly grew by combining organizational penetration, identity-based mobilization, and national leadership appeal under Narendra Modi, creating a new axis of rivalry. By 2021, it was evident that the state's party structure had changed from a disjointed multiparty battle to an official bipolar fight.

This development is a reflection of larger shifts in Indian federal dynamics, political discourse, and voter orientation. West Bengal's class-based ideology politics have steadily been replaced by leader-centric campaigns, welfare populism, and identity narratives. In addition to organizational decline, the Left's and Congress's marginalization represents a shift in the social alliances that support political struggle. Thus, West Bengal today serves as an example of how subnational party systems adjust to national political trends, creating a more competitive yet polarized democratic environment. An important chapter in the state's political history within India's developing federal democracy is marked by the BJP's ascent to prominence as the main opposition, which solidifies a new stage of two-party struggle.

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