

# Bengal's endemic electoral violence

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Inevitable: Bengal has a long history of political violence, predictably during elections. PTI

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A fact-finding team, headed by former minister Rajiv Pratap Rudy, was despatched by the BJP's top brass to Kolkata last week to report on the violence that claimed precious lives during the gram panchayat elections in West Bengal. As expected, the Trinamool Congress (TMC), led by that feisty lady, Mamata Banerjee, swept the three-tier polls covering zila parishads, panchayat samitis and gram panchayats. The BJP, the main Opposition party in the state, was a distant second.

Mamata will stop at nothing to ensure that the BJP is not allowed to gain a firm foothold in her state.

The panchayat election results are a barometer of the rural population's preferences, with the 2024 Lok Sabha elections less than nine months away. The BJP had captured 18 of the 42 Lok Sabha seats in West Bengal in the 2019 General Election. With the villagers voting overwhelmingly in favour of the TMC, the BJP's chances of doing better in 2024

appear bleak. It may not reach the previous figure if the Left and the Congress arrive at an understanding with Mamata to put up common candidates, especially in constituencies where the BJP has established a distinct presence.

It is with the Lok Sabha elections in mind that the BJP concentrated its forces in certain districts during the recent local polls. Violent clashes and attacks on opponents occurred mostly in those districts despite the induction of massive paramilitary forces deployed by the Union Home Ministry on the Calcutta High Court's orders. The party in power, the TMC, emerged victorious also in the strong-arm skirmishes because of sheer numbers and the support it received from government agencies, such as the police.

Bengal has a long history of political violence, predictably at election time. The systematic weakening of institutions of governance and the selective enforcement of laws, which is becoming more apparent in states ruled by autocratic leaders, has ensured that true democracy is only a distant dream. True democracy is opposed to violence in any form. The State itself has a monopoly on violence, which in a developed democracy it very rarely needs to use.

In India, the 'Mother of Democracy', the main instrument of State power — the police — is routinely called upon to suppress violence by the State's opponents. Rudy's team, which is going into the details of what occurred in Bengal, should in its report caution its own party leaders against encouraging divisions in society for immediate electoral gains.

The TMC had wrested power from the CPM over a decade ago. It used the same muscle power that the Communists had used to oust the Congress, which ruled Bengal for four decades after Independence. If the trend of the principal Opposition party ousting the ruling dispensation when the electorate tires of those in charge continues, the BJP should hope to occupy the Writers' Building in a decade or two. Suwendu Adhikari was Mamata's right-hand man before he crossed over to the BJP. He is aware of what is needed to be done.

Those with nothing to lose, termed 'the lumpen proletariat' by the Marxists, are employed to prevent voters from proceeding to the booths. They are also employed to ensure that eligible voters who are not going to vote for them are not registered. Sometimes, booths are captured by these musclemen or polling boxes are stuffed with voting slips marked by the thugs themselves. Such practices have been curbed, but intimidation of voters and beating up of core workers continue. The average number of political murders per year from 1999 to 2016 was 20 in Bengal; the state accounted for the majority of such crimes in India.

Since 1905, political violence in Bengal has been termed 'endemic'. During the Congress' rule, especially when Siddhartha Shankar Ray was the Chief Minister, mindless killings by the extreme Left and brutal reprisals by the police were almost a daily occurrence. When Mamata took on the Communists, she used the same violent methods to overcome her rivals. In fact, many of the CPM's musclemen crossed over to her party, in trickles at first and then in droves.

The BJP has been similarly aggressive in taking on Mamata's men. This was evident in the Assembly elections in the constituencies where Adhikari wielded influence. A plan to spread this influence to other districts is presently underway. It is gradually succeeding because the BJP has become the Trinamool's principal rival in the state, displacing the Communists and the Congress in the process.

Mamata is a one-woman army. Just like the Congress did not allow the Opposition to function between 1972 and 1977 when Ray was the CM, she will stop at nothing to ensure that the BJP is not allowed to gain a firm foothold in her state. When she captured power in 2011, it was alleged that as many as 56 CPM workers were killed in a span of nine months.

In 1970, many Congress workers were killed in Sainbari; the murder of Forward Bloc Chairman Hemanta Basu took place in early 1971. That murder became a landmark in Bengal's history of political violence. Will this cycle of mindless violence ever stop? It is difficult to say. Mumbai City had a yearly riot between the Shias and the Sunnis during the Muharram procession. An ICS officer, SM Edwardes (1873-1927), had been appointed Commissioner of Police after his term as Municipal Commissioner was successfully completed. Edwardes is credited with effectively dealing with the riots in his very first year as police chief of the city. What is even more gratifying is that the Shia-Sunni riots during Muharram became a thing of the past after Edwardes demitted office. Incidentally, he went home to England on furlough and never returned. He said the police job had affected his health!

Perhaps Rudy may like to learn more about how Edwardes was able to tackle the then yearly rioting. He has a former Mumbai Police Commissioner, Satya Pal Singh, in his team. He could ask Singh to peruse old Mumbai police records and suggest ways to end the menace of electoral violence in Bengal. That would be a positive contribution to governance, but only if Mamata pays heed to his team's suggestions.

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