

Election Campaigns as Performance: How importantly the issues of migrants, refugees and displaced were addressed in three assembly elections in West Bengal (1977, 2011 and 2021)

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Research Statement

The proposed study will analyse how the issues of migration, displacement and citizenship were addressed in the political campaigns in three legislative assembly elections in West Bengal- 1977, 2011 and 2021. Here, I will take three crucial assembly elections where these issues became prominent one or two years before the elections and were used differently by the political parties with different ideologies.

Background

The long procession of the migrant labourers through the highway towards their home states was a painful but common scene all over India. West Bengal was not the exception. The Trinamool Congress (TMC)-led state government blamed their colleagues at the centre for announcing a sudden lockdown. Mamata Banerjee, the chief minister of West Bengal, blamed the centre for not arranging the return of the migrant workers before the lockdown.¹ On the other hand, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the ruling party at the centre, blamed the state government for not taking care of the migrants. They said that they would start preparing a database of the migrant workers to prove how these migrants had been mishandled by the TMC-led state government. They also claimed that they will use the database in the 2021 assembly elections to attract the migrant workers and their families towards BJP.² The Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led left front criticised both the central and state governments for not working in favour of the migrant workers and other marginal communities during the lockdown and began cheap canteens in several parts of the state. They also provided cheap rations and health services to the migrant labourers and other marginal communities. As per the latest news the party has mentioned issues of the migrant labourers and proposed to create a separate department for the migrant workers if they come to power.³

While the migrant labourers and their crisis during the lockdown became one of the major issues in the West Bengal assembly elections in 2021, the NRC-CAA issue is not far behind. BJP, one of the three major contestants, directly accused the TMC-led state government for praising Muslims which caused illegal infiltration that affected the local demographic character of the border districts. The Indian home minister assured one of the marginal Hindu communities that they would implement

¹ "C M Mamata Banerjee claims people called trains carrying migrant workers as corona express" in Scroll.in, June 10, 2020. For details please go to the link: <https://scroll.in/latest/964352/cm-mamata-banerjee-claims-people-called-trains-carrying-migrant-workers-corona-express>. Accessed on 11.03.2021 at 7.00pm.

² "BJP to prepare a database of migrant labourers in West Bengal". Times of India, June 15, 2020. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/bjp-to-prepare-database-of-migrant-labourers-in-west-bengal/article76393978.cms> accessed on 11.03.2021 at 8.00 pm.

³ *Ananda Bazar Patrika* (e-edition), March 11, 2021 at 16.49 pm. <https://www.anandabazar.com/elections/west-bengal-assembly-election/bengal-polls-2021-left-front-published-the-election-manifesto-dgtl/cid/1270521>. accessed on 11.03.2021 at 17.30 pm.

CAA-NRC to give them proper citizenship. The process will start especially with the Namashudra refugees in West Bengal who belonged to the Matua sect, as soon as the COVID-19 vaccination ends.⁴ The BJP also campaigned among the Hindus in the border districts that the state government was not careful about the Hindu migrants who came from the other side of the border due to brutal attacks from the Muslim fundamentalists. On the other hand, both the TMC and the left parties and the Congress accused that the BJP would try to use the issue of citizenship to communalise the electorate. Mamata Banerjee said that she would not let the CAA-NRC happen till the end. She would be the protector of rights of citizenship of the migrants who were forced to come to take shelter in West Bengal.⁵

The politics on these above-mentioned issues are not a new phenomenon in this year's election or pre-election campaigns. The politics of citizenship, migration and displacement became the major issues since the partition. The emergence of left politics gave it a new phenomenon in the legislative politics in West Bengal. Jyoti Basu, once the leader of the opposition and then the five times chief minister of the left-front government claimed himself to be a refugee in one of the election campaigns during the assembly election in 1977.⁶ He said that although the Indira Gandhi-led Indian National Congress (INC) government played a crucial role during the Bangladesh liberation war in 1971, it was not concerned about the problems faced by the huge number of refugees living in the camps.⁷ The Congress on the other hand tried to use their contributions in the Bangladesh liberation war to get benefit in the elections.

Basic Questions

The study will also locate the transformation of the nature of the political campaigns in these three elections and how the attitudes towards the important questions have transformed with time. For example, the attitude of the CPI (M)-led left front government towards the displaced and landless farmers for their rights had changed in 2011 when the same CPI (M)-led left front pitched for industrialisation in Bengal. Therefore the issue of displacement had been treated differently during the election in 2011 by two struggling parties. The transformation of the left political culture in the campaigns is noticeable in this election.

The study will also explore the questions of ethics and politics of social hierarchy in the political campaigns, especially in terms of migration and citizenship. How the political parties transformed their style of campaigning, and the role of using mobile messages and other social media accounts in the election campaigns, will also be explored. Apart from these two aspects, this study will also explore how the campaigns as performance changed its character through the years and how globalisation played a role in it.

⁴ "Citizenship law implementation once COVID vaccination ends: Amit Shah", NDTV, February 11, 2021. <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/caa-will-be-implemented-after-covid-vaccination-ends-amit-shah-in-bengal-2368516> accessed on 12.03.2021 at 10.01 am.

⁵ "Mamata Banerjee on CAA-NRC: I am your 'pehredar', will not let anyone to snatch your rights" in The Indian Express, January 7, 2020. <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/mamata-banerjee-on-cao-nrc-they-will-have-to-do-it-over-my-dead-body-6204474/>. Accessed on 12.03.2021 at 10.46 am.

⁶ *Jugantar*, March 12, 1977, p. 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Research Methodology

This study is divided into two parts. The first part will be an intensive reading of newspapers (*Anandabazar Patrika*, *Jugantar* and *Ganashakti* for 1977; *Anandabazar Patrika*, *Bartaman* and *Ganashakti* for 2011; and almost all vernacular newspapers published from Kolkata and some from the districts for 2021), election manifestos of the political parties, little magazines, monthly periodicals (especially for 2011 and 2021), election reports or statistics published by the Election Commission, and performances in television, radio, theatre, etc. in an attempt to analyse how the trends have changed.

The second part will be conducting interviews with the local political leaders, some sitting MLAs, journalists and common people who were involved in the campaigns.

Selected Bibliography (Tentative)

● **Newspapers & Magazines**

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2. *Bartaman* (March-May, 2011 & 2021)
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4. *Jugantar* (March-May, 1977)
5. *Kalam* (March-May 2021)
6. *Yugasankha* (March-May 2021)
7. *Saptahik Bartaman* (March-May, 2011 & 2021)
8. *Swastika* (January-May, 2021)

● **E-magazines:**

1. *Kamal Sandesh* (January-May 2011)
2. Newsclick.in
3. Scroll.in
4. The Wire

● **Books**

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