## For the Bengal Electorate, Tangible Benefits trump Promises

*Souhardya De*
*fr23780@bristol.ac.uk*

Despite securing a 38% vote share in Bengal this general election - two down from the 40.6% received in 2019, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has fallen notoriously short of its previous seat share, retaining only twelve of its eighteen constituencies this year. Whilst this obviously presents challenges in relation to establishing a firm correlation concerning how the actual vote share translates into constituency figures - especially given the under-50,000 margins observed in several notable seats across the state, something is crystal clear – the electorate has, by and large, chosen to vote in favour of the AITC's pro-poor and pro-welfare narrative.

Four major factors have broadly favoured the AITC – the lack of an effective organisational framework within Bengal BJP and consequently limited outreach at grassroots, misplacement of notable candidates such as Dilip Ghosh essentially leading to a twofold loss in both the base and target constituencies, the lack of a region-specific approach for Bengal with a majority of the welfare promises concerned with integration with existing nation-wide schemes, and most importantly, the failure to effectively publicise well-structured alternatives such as the 2021 manifesto to counter the existing welfare policies in place under Mamata's regime.

To a very great extent, the onus of the disappointment is as much on the state-leadership as it is on the BJP's top leadership that campaigned in Bengal prior to the elections. Prioritising communally coloured issues, such as the jibe at 'infiltration', the attack levelled at the TMC for purportedly championing the cause of Bengal's 30% strong Muslim community and the disturbing yet later-disputed incidents from Sandeshkhali, over pragmatic considerations like actionable steps towards the resolution of non-repayment of workers under the MGNREGS, uniform and effective promotions for the BJP's legal support offered to candidates affected by the state-government led school-services scam and welfare schemes and numbers promised in BJP's 2021 manifesto, did not help build the case as well as the party would have liked.

In contrast, the AITC's 2024 manifesto was really about numbers. Leveraging the MGNREGS issue, for instance, one of the party's primary promises was to reinstate guaranteed work and incentivise it with the promise of an increased nationwide minimum wage for card holders. In Bengal alone, as India Today had investigated, over 1,36,58,542 legitimate card holders came under the purview of the scheme. This allowed the party to both offer a substantial promise to the voter-base identifying themselves as MGNREGS beneficiaries as also add a more populist '*bohiragoto'* (outsider*)* label for the BJP, scrupulously claiming that *jomidars* (landlords) from Delhi had wilfully withheld funds owed to Bengal's MGNREGS beneficiaries. A closer look at the records indicates, for instance, that in many of the districts with the most workers enrolled under MGNREGS, the BJP lost significant ground to the state incumbency. This is observed primarily in South Bengal – especially in places like South 24 Parganas, but even in Jalpaiguri, that the BJP managed to retain, the victory margin came down by around a lakh votes. This

issue becomes especially important if looked at in light of the multitude of schemes such as the PMAY and the Gramin Sadak Yojana highlighted by Abhishek prior to elections in May, and the downward share of rural votes for the BJP speaks volumes about the adverse impact.

For a start, in the constituency of Midnapore, where AITC candidate and incumbent MLA June Maliah trumped BJP's face Agnimitra Paul by 27,000+ votes, a substantial lead for the former came from the rural regions as opposed to the more urban areas of the constituency. Figures have variously demonstrated that the AITC's ~25,000 lead over the BJP in the municipality has come down to a mere 2,170 votes in this general election. Further analysis has even revealed that the BJP secured a lead of over 5,000 votes in the more developed areas of the constituency. In addition, as observed by the Economic Times, this was a nation-wide trend and the BJP's vote share amongst the semi-urban and rural areas has generally gone down. For Bengal, what this means is significant – the pro-poor pro-welfare outlook has seemingly worked well in the AITC's favour, particularly amongst rural voters. In the 2023 violence-ridden gram panchayat elections, the near-domination of the AITC in the seat-share further corroborates this.

Withholding the dues might not have worked well for the BJP. A more constructive resolution-oriented outlook, with due disbursements directly credited through the AePS (Aadhar Enabled Payment System), thereby fostering a stakeholder relationship between the government and the beneficiaries, could have fared much better, perhaps. From a very preliminary understanding, it would have offered the Bengal BJP a much-needed opportunity to counter populist narratives presented almost unchallenged by the AITC. But in the long run, with effective promotions of such central government-facilitated disbursements made doable, this could have potentially also helped inspire the confidence voters lack in the BJP's welfare promises at this stage.

Analysing the bearing of welfare schemes is equally crucial for an informed understanding of Bengal's electoral outcome. Attempting to counter the range of welfare schemes and guarantees institutionally offered by the present regime, the BJP's 2021 manifesto had promised monetary increments and several new initiatives and integrations with existing government schemes such as the PM-KISAN and Ayushman Bharat. Indeed, the range of options offered far surpass those presently in place in the state and offers, at-least on paper, a much more effective and action-oriented pro-welfare outline for the beneficiaries. Promises such as the increased pension for widows (*bidhobar bhata)* and the *Balika Alo* – something that resembles Mamata's *Kanyashri*, even offer a continuation and enhancement of the existing schemes in the state. And yet, both in the legislative assembly elections in 2021 and this general election, people have elected to support the retention of the AITC's policies than opt for such well-structured alternatives.

What, then, is the reason behind the electorate's rejection of the BJP model? For a starter, it should suffice to say that AITC presents a more visible and secure subscription for the average voter, with the observable monetary benefits of these welfare schemes credited into their bank accounts at regular intervals. This has certainly contributed to an increased trustworthiness for the party's promises in the voter's eyes and further enhancements promised in the manifesto this year – that notably includes a promise for free ration (*duare ration)* and the doubling of the existing healthcare coverage under *Swastha Sathi* to equate to twice the amount covered

under the union government's Ayushman Bharat, have seemingly gone down well with them. The same cannot be said for the BJP's promises, especially as funds owed under the schemes highlighted by the opposition are yet to be disbursed to the beneficiaries. Voters, thus, broadly speaking, are not willing to risk tangible benefits for what comes across as mere promises.

The appeal of existing schemes such as *Laxmir Bhandar* amongst women voters from Basirhat, for instance, was recently observed, as they chose to subvert sexual assault complaints levelled against AITC functionaries from Sandeshkhali, by re-electing AITC to parliament. Especially given the manner in which the disbursements had been stopped arbitrarily by the state after the mass-allegations by women in the region and the way the electorate reacted by voting in favour of AITC – and implicitly pleading for retention of *Laxmir Bhandar*, a lot could be inferred about the importance of already-existing welfare schemes in the eyes of the average voter.

The second-most important factor is arguably Bengal's thirty-percent Muslim community. In the recent past, mainstream misinterpretations of the BJP's increased focus on the Ram Mandir narrative and the immigration issue of which the CAA, NRC, and the *infiltrator* narratives are very much a part, has increasingly tended to portray the party as against minority interests. Rallies, in several cases, have moreover helped build onto this allegation and as several analysts have observed, the poll-going party increasingly drifted away from Bengal-specific issues that appeal to a diverse electorate, taking a more aggressive Hindutva-oriented approach instead.

Consequences have been twofold. Firstly, the alienation of minorities, further achieved by the polarising narratives peddled by the opposition leaders aiming to counter the all-encompassing representation the BJP claims for itself, led to a growing lack of confidence amongst these communities concerning minority representation in the BJP's welfare schemes and promises. This essentially means that minorities did not see themselves as well placed or represented in these alternatives as they find themselves to be in schemes introduced under Mamata. Secondly, and quite consequently in fact, this has led to a firm consolidation of the votes of the minority communities against the BJP party, weakening its prospects in most regions with a significant minority population. This, as observed by several analysts, has been a defining aspect of this year's general election, with a strong minority electorate uniformly favouring the AITC.

In conclusion, as has been demonstrated above, there are lessons for the BJP to learn, especially ahead of preparations for the 2026 assembly elections in Bengal. Whilst working on fronts such as framing a strong leadership structure and organisation and grassroots outreach are important, it is equally important to secure the confidence of the diverse electorate Bengal has to offer. Professing a more action-oriented pro-people approach and dealing more emphatically with region-specific issues that matter might be a good way forward. For a start, the resolution of due disbursements is a much-needed step to forge a stakeholder relationship with beneficiaries of the schemes funded by the union government, thereby leading to enhanced confidence in the poll-going promises and welfare-oriented alternatives presented by the party in 2026. At the same time, it is also more important for the now fragmented state-leadership to play a more vocal role in countering welfare-specific allegations and narratives peddled by the incumbency. For the BJP, both in its 2021 campaign and the most recent one, two major aspects have been

observed as lacking – the *duare* (door-to-door) outreach in rural areas that has helped the AITC effectively promote its welfare model – the schemes and associated tangible monetary benefits, and the publicising of the notion of inclusive development in line with the Prime Minister's vision of *Sabka Saath, Sabka Vikas, and Sabka Vishwas.* In campaigns going forward, the BJP must remember to stress on the '*sabka' (all-encompassing)* aspect of its envisaged development and promote its policies and manifesto-specific welfare schemes and frameworks in a way that caters to a diverse electorate and talks about issues most relevant to them.

*Souhardya De is a legislative researcher and geopolitical analyst. He has assisted MPs in the Lok Sabha and the UK's House of Commons and has been a Prime Minister's YUVA Fellow under the Ministry of Education, Government of India. He is presently a Think Big scholar at the University of Bristol and has a UGCert from the University of Cambridge.*