



## Identity, welfare, and resistance: The Evolution of Mamata Banerjee's leadership and regional politics in West Bengal

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### Abstract

This study examines the political transformation of West Bengal under Mamata Banerjee's leadership, tracing the evolution from the collapse of the 34-year Left Front rule to the establishment of Trinamool Congress (TMC) as the dominant regional force. Through an analysis of electoral patterns, policy initiatives, and political strategies from 1998 to 2024, this research demonstrates how Banerjee has successfully consolidated power through a combination of Bengali cultural nationalism, welfare-oriented governance, and strategic resistance to both Left and Right-wing opposition. The study reveals TMC's transformation from an anti-establishment movement to a hegemonic regional party that has reshaped West Bengal's political landscape while positioning itself as a significant player in national politics.

**Keywords:** West Bengal politics, Mamata Banerjee, Trinamool Congress, regional dominance, Bengali identity politics, Indian federalism.

### Introduction

West Bengal's political landscape underwent a seismic transformation in 2011<sup>[10]</sup> when Mamata Banerjee's All India Trinamool Congress (TMC) ended the 34-year uninterrupted rule of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)-led Left Front government. This political upheaval marked not merely a change of government but a fundamental reorientation of the state's ideological moorings, from class-based Left politics to a populist-regionalist model centered on Bengali cultural identity and welfare delivery (Biswas, 2023)<sup>[4]</sup>. The rise of TMC under Banerjee's leadership represents one of the most significant political transformations in post-independence India, demonstrating how regional parties can successfully challenge both established Left and emergent Right-wing narratives.

Banerjee's journey from a Congress rebel to becoming one of India's most powerful regional leaders illustrates the complex dynamics of contemporary Indian federalism. Her political evolution—from street protests in the 1980s to leading mass movements against land acquisition, and finally to governing West Bengal for over a decade—provides crucial insights into the changing nature of democratic politics in India (Roy, 2011)<sup>[10]</sup>. This study examines how TMC has not only consolidated its dominance in West Bengal but also emerged as a significant force in national opposition politics, challenging the binary of Left versus Right through its unique blend of cultural nationalism, welfare populism, and federal assertions.

### Historical Context and the Collapse of Left Front Hegemony

The Left Front's 34-year rule (1977-2011)<sup>[12]</sup> in West Bengal represented one of the world's longest uninterrupted democratic tenure by a communist-led government. Under Chief Ministers Jyoti Basu (1977-2000) and Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee (2000-2011), the Left Front implemented comprehensive land reforms through initiatives like Operation Barga, which recorded over 1.6 million

sharecroppers and redistributed land to 2.745 million pattadars (Bandyopadhyay, 1986)<sup>[1]</sup>. However, by the 2000s, the Left government faced mounting challenges from agricultural stagnation, industrial decline, and growing discontent with its authoritarian governance style.

The Nandigram and Singur movements (2006-2008) proved to be the Left Front's undoing. The Nandigram violence in March 2007<sup>[2]</sup>, where police fired on villagers protesting against forced land acquisition for a Special Economic Zone, killed 14 people and exposed the government's authoritarian tendencies (Banerjee, 2007)<sup>[2]</sup>. Similarly, the Singur protest against Tata Motors' Nano car factory became a symbol of resistance against industrial development at the cost of agricultural livelihood. Banerjee's leadership of these movements transformed her from a marginal opposition figure to the voice of rural Bengal, effectively mobilizing farmers, sharecroppers, and the urban middle class against the Left's pro-industrialization policies. The Tata Motors' eventual exit from Singur in 2008 marked a symbolic victory that prefigured the Left Front's electoral defeat three years later.

### Mamata Banerjee's Political Evolution and the Formation of TMC

Mamata Banerjee's political journey began in the 1970s as a young Congress activist who quickly rose through party ranks to become one of India's youngest parliamentarians in 1984, defeating veteran communist leader Somnath Chatterjee from Jadavpur constituency. Her early political career was marked by fierce opposition to Left Front rule and a series of confrontational protests that established her reputation as an uncompromising fighter. The July 21, 1993 protest march to Writers' Building, where 13 people were killed by police, became a defining moment that solidified her image as a martyr for democratic rights against communist authoritarianism.

Banerjee's break from Congress in 1997 and the formation of TMC on January 1, 1998, represented a strategic political calculation aimed at creating an independent platform for

anti-Left politics in Bengal. The party's founding symbol two green shoots emerging from grass embodied her vision of Hindu-Muslim unity and secular politics. Her collaborations with both BJP (1999-2001, 2003-2004) and Congress (2001-2003, 2009-2011) demonstrated remarkable political pragmatism while maintaining consistent opposition to the Left Front. Her tenures as Railway Minister (1999-2000, 2009-2011) <sup>[12]</sup> provided crucial administrative experience and helped establish her credentials as a capable administrator beyond street politics. The 26-day hunger strike in Kolkata during December 2006, protesting land acquisition in Singur, marked her transformation from a political outsider to a mass leader capable of mobilizing popular sentiment against the state government.

Mamata Banerjee's personal trajectory is central to this narrative. Her journey—from a rebellious figure within the Congress party in the 1970s and 80s to one of the most influential regional leaders in modern India—mirrors the complexities of Indian federalism. Her political identity was forged on the streets through decades of intense protest and opposition to the Left Front's authoritarian style. Crucial to her rise were the mass movements she led against forced land acquisition in the mid-2000s, specifically in Nandigram and Singur. These protests transformed her from a marginal opposition figure into the "voice of rural Bengal," championing the rights of farmers and sharecroppers. This evolution from a "street fighter" to a seasoned administrator governing the state for over a decade provides essential insights into how democratic politics in India have shifted toward more personalized and localized forms of leadership.

### **Electoral Consolidation and Democratic Triumph (2011-2024)**

TMC's electoral journey from formation to dominance reveals a remarkable trajectory of democratic consolidation. The 2011 <sup>[12]</sup> Assembly elections marked a historic watershed, with TMC winning 184 seats and securing 38.93% vote share, ending the Left Front's 34-year rule. Banerjee's victory was particularly significant as she became West Bengal's first woman Chief Minister, symbolizing a break from the male-dominated political establishment. The election results demonstrated TMC's ability to forge a broad-based coalition encompassing rural farmers, urban middle classes, minorities, and women voters.

Subsequent electoral performances showcased TMC's growing hegemony. In 2016, the party increased its tally to 211 seats with 44.91% vote share, demonstrating successful governance delivery and political consolidation. The 2019 Lok Sabha elections, where TMC won 22 of 42 seats despite BJP's surge to 18 seats, revealed the bipolar nature of West Bengal politics with Congress and Left parties marginalized. The 2021 Assembly elections proved to be TMC's most decisive victory, winning 215 seats with 48.02% vote share against a formidable BJP challenge that secured 77 seats. This landslide victory, achieved despite opinion polls predicting a close contest, demonstrated Banerjee's ability to mobilize Bengali identity against perceived external threats. The 2024 Lok Sabha elections, where TMC won 29 seats, further consolidated its position as Bengal's undisputed political force and a significant player in national opposition politics.

### **Strategic Deployment of Bengali Identity and Cultural Politics**

TMC's political strategy has been fundamentally anchored in the strategic deployment of Bengali cultural identity as a counter-narrative to both Left class politics and BJP's Hindutva ideology. Banerjee has skillfully positioned herself as the protector of Bengali cultural heritage, using slogans like "Jai Bangla" to counter BJP's "Jai Shri Ram" and emphasizing Bengal's distinct spiritual traditions over pan-Indian Hindu nationalism. Her development of religious projects like Jagannath Dham, Durga Angan, and various temple complexes represents a soft Hindutva approach that celebrates Bengali Hindu traditions while maintaining secular credentials.

The party's cultural politics extends beyond religion to encompass linguistic and regional pride. Banerjee has consistently highlighted alleged harassment of Bengali-speaking migrant workers in BJP-ruled states, creating an "us versus them" narrative that portrays BJP as anti-Bengali. Her criticism of Hindi belt hegemony and emphasis on federal autonomy resonates with Bengali pride in their language and cultural achievements. The TMC's adoption of "Bangla Nijer Meyeke Chai" (Bengal wants its own daughter) as an electoral slogan effectively feminized regional identity while positioning Banerjee as Bengal's protective mother figure.

This strategy has been particularly effective in consolidating minority support, with Bengali Muslims comprising 27-30% of the state's population viewing TMC as their protector against BJP's exclusionary politics. Banerjee's balanced approach maintaining secular credentials while respecting Hindu sentiments has allowed her to build a broad-based coalition that transcends traditional communal divides through shared Bengali cultural identity.

### **Governance Model and Welfare-Oriented Policy Framework**

TMC's governance model represents a paradigmatic shift from the Left Front's ideology-driven approach to a pragmatic, welfare-oriented framework focused on direct benefit delivery and responsive administration. The party's flagship schemes demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of electoral demographics and social needs. Kanyashree Prakalpa, launched in 2013 <sup>[3]</sup>, provides financial incentives for girls' education and has been internationally recognized for its impact on reducing child marriage and improving female literacy rates.

Lakshmi Bhandar, introduced before the 2021 elections, provides direct cash transfers to women heads of households, benefiting over 1.6 crore families. This scheme exemplifies TMC's women-centric approach to welfare delivery, recognizing women as key electoral constituencies and primary household decision-makers. Sabuj Sathi (free bicycles for students) and various housing schemes like Bangla Awas Yojana have similarly targeted specific demographic groups while building broader electoral support.

The government's religious inclusivity is demonstrated through monthly stipends for both Hindu priests and Muslim imams, recently increased to Rs 2,000 per month. This policy reflects TMC's commitment to secular governance while acknowledging religious diversity. The party's focus on infrastructure development—including metro rail expansion, flyover construction, and rural

connectivity projects—has modernized the state while creating visible symbols of governmental efficacy.

TMC's governance approach emphasizes direct democracy and accessibility, with Banerjee's regular Duare Sarkar (government at doorstep) programs bringing administrative services to citizens' homes. This model has enhanced governmental responsiveness while reinforcing Banerjee's image as an accessible leader concerned with ordinary people's welfare.

### **Resistance to BJP's National Political Project**

The emergence of BJP as TMC's principal opposition has fundamentally altered West Bengal's political dynamics, transforming the contest from Left versus anti-Left to a civilizational battle between Bengali cultural identity and Hindutva nationalism. BJP's rise from 3 seats (10.16% vote share) in 2016 to 77 seats (37.97% vote share) in 2021 represents the party's most significant expansion in any non-Hindi state, challenging TMC's regional hegemony.

Banerjee's resistance strategy has been multifaceted and sophisticated. Her opposition to Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and National Register of Citizens (NRC) positioned her as a defender of democratic rights and minority interests against perceived central government overreach. The "Khela Hobey" (game is on) slogan during 2021 elections effectively mobilized Bengali pride against external intervention, framing the election as a battle for Bengal's autonomous character. TMC's counter-mobilization against BJP has involved strategic use of federal institutions and legal challenges to central policies. Banerjee's refusal to implement central schemes like Ayushman Bharat and PM-Kisan in favor of state alternatives demonstrates her commitment to federal autonomy. Her public confrontations with central agencies like CBI and ED, often termed "political vendetta," have been successfully portrayed as attacks on elected democratic institutions. The party's organizational strengthening in response to BJP's challenge includes recruitment of political defectors, expansion into tribal areas, and sophisticated use of social media. Prashant Kishor's involvement as electoral strategist helped professionalize TMC's campaign machinery and develop data-driven voter outreach programs. This institutional modernization has enabled TMC to match BJP's organizational capabilities while maintaining its grassroots character.

### **National Impact and Federalism**

To understand the national impact of the Trinamool Congress (TMC), we must look at how it has fundamentally redefined the "regional party" archetype in modern India. No longer is the TMC just a provincial player confined to the borders of West Bengal; it has evolved into a formidable pillar of the national opposition that challenges the traditional dominance of national parties. This evolution is built on a very deliberate and sophisticated strategy that balances intense local pride with a wide-reaching welfare net, creating a political identity that is both impenetrable at home and influential in the halls of power in New Delhi.

At the heart of this strategy is the concept of "Cultural Nationalism," which the party has used to transform West Bengal's political discourse. For decades, the state was defined by the class-based politics of the Left, but the TMC replaced this with a populist model centered on Bengali identity. By popularizing slogans like "Jai Bangla," the

party emphasizes a regional pride that acts as a powerful shield against "external" political ideologies. This isn't just about language; it is a strategic deployment of heritage and spiritual traditions to create an "us versus them" narrative. By positioning herself as the protector of these values, Mamata Banerjee has essentially feminized regional identity—becoming the "daughter of Bengal"—which makes any political attack from the central government feel like an attack on the culture of the state itself. This cultural armor is reinforced by a massive, results-oriented "Welfare Populism". The TMC's governance model has shifted away from the ideology-heavy approach of the past toward a pragmatic, direct-benefit system that treats citizens as primary stakeholders. The government removes the traditional barriers of bureaucracy, making the state feel responsive and accessible. This creates a sense of "responsive governance" that is very difficult for opposition parties to dismantle, as it provides tangible, daily benefits to millions of families.

On the national stage, these local successes translate into powerful "Federal Assertions". The TMC has become one of the loudest voices advocating for the rights of states within the Indian union, consistently resisting what it perceives as the overreach of the central government. Whether it is refusing to implement central schemes in favor of state-run alternatives or publicly confronting central investigative agencies, the party uses every opportunity to assert state autonomy. This commitment to "cooperative federalism" has allowed the TMC to emerge as a key architect of national opposition alliances, such as the INDIA alliance, where it often challenges the leadership of the Congress party to ensure that regional voices remain at the forefront. The "TMC model" is, in essence, a transformative experiment in how a regional force can navigate a diverse and complex democracy. It demonstrates that regionalist politics can be incredibly durable when they are grounded in a deep sense of local identity and a commitment to direct welfare delivery. By blending these elements, the party has not only consolidated its hegemony in West Bengal but has also positioned itself as a significant player in shaping the future of Indian federalism. It offers a blueprint for how other regional parties might resist homogenizing national projects by focusing on the unique cultural and social needs of their specific populations. As the party continues to expand its footprint and influence, its blend of cultural assertion and welfare delivery will likely remain a defining feature of the national political landscape for years to come.

### **National Ambitions and Opposition Leadership**

TMC's evolution from a regional protest party to a significant national political force reflects Banerjee's growing ambitions beyond West Bengal. Her role in forming the INDIA alliance against BJP and subsequent assertion of leadership ambitions demonstrates her positioning as a prime ministerial aspirant and key opposition figure. Banerjee's criticism of Congress's leadership of the opposition alliance and her claim that she "had formed the INDIA alliance" reveals tensions over opposition unity and her desire for a more prominent national role. The party's expansion beyond West Bengal into states like Meghalaya, Goa, and Assam, while achieving limited success, signals TMC's national aspirations. In Meghalaya, TMC became the principal opposition with 5 MLAs under former Chief Minister

Mukul Sangma, demonstrating its potential appeal in other Bengali-speaking and tribal regions. The party's youth-focused campaigns in Goa and minority outreach efforts reflect a template for national expansion based on local issue articulation and anti-BJP positioning.

Banerjee's frequent criticism of central government policies on issues ranging from GST to demonetization has established her as a prominent voice of cooperative federalism and state rights. Her hosting of opposition conclaves in Kolkata and active participation in federal forums like NITI Aayog meetings (often marked by walkouts) have enhanced her national political profile. The TMC's current status as the third-largest party in Parliament (after BJP and Congress) provides institutional basis for Banerjee's national leadership claims and her role in shaping post-2024 political alignments.

### Conclusion

The evolution of West Bengal politics under Mamata Banerjee represents a transformative experiment in democratic governance that has redefined the contours of regional politics in contemporary India. TMC's journey from an anti-establishment movement to a hegemonic regional force demonstrates the complex interplay between cultural identity, welfare delivery, and federal assertions in modern Indian democracy. Banerjee's success in consolidating power through a unique synthesis of Bengali nationalism, inclusive welfare policies, and strategic resistance to both Left and Right-wing ideologies offers crucial insights into the dynamics of regionalism in India's federal structure.

The TMC model's significance extends beyond electoral success to encompass broader questions about democratic governance, federal autonomy, and cultural politics in diverse societies. Banerjee's ability to maintain power across multiple electoral cycles while facing challenges from both established Left forces and the ascendant BJP demonstrates the durability of regionalist politics when effectively grounded in cultural identity and responsive governance. Her strategic use of Bengali identity as a counter-narrative to both class-based Left politics and religious nationalism provides a template for regional resistance to homogenizing national projects.

Looking ahead, TMC's direction will likely influence broader patterns of Indian federalism and opposition politics. Banerjee's national ambitions and role in opposition unity efforts position her as a key figure in post-Modi political realignments. The party's ability to maintain its regional dominance while expanding its national footprint will test the scalability of identity-based regional politics in India's diverse democratic landscape. As West Bengal continues to evolve under TMC rule, the party's model of combining cultural assertion with welfare delivery may offer insights for other regional forces seeking to navigate the complex terrain of contemporary Indian politics while maintaining their distinct identity and autonomous character.

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