

India: How Bengali Civil Society Stood up Against the BJP

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From a people's campaign on 'No Vote To BJP' to a music video by a galaxy of artists against the party's 'ideology of hatred', the civil society in Bengal had a powerful impact in the recent polls.

In the keenly watched assembly election of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee brought the Modi-Shah politicking to a grinding halt. Banerjee secured a landslide victory for Trinamool Congress (TMC) as it swept the state by winning 213 of the 292 seats in the state. But keeping aside all the politics and statistics, there are voices of many Bengalis, some extremely popular, some completely unknown, who raised to the occasion and took a stand against voting for the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) ahead of the polls.

In November 2020, a group of people connected to various social and mass movements came together to create a forum called 'Bengal against Fascist RSS-BJP'. The forum started a people's campaign – 'No Vote To BJP', which went to the farthest corners of the state. Students, youngsters, teachers, doctors and social activists joined the forum voluntarily and campaigned for the cause.

Kushal Debnath, one of the convenors of the forum, had then told *The Wire* that through this campaign, they are not asking people to vote for TMC or any other political party, but requesting people to not vote for the BJP. "Stopping the BJP from coming to power in Bengal is extremely crucial today, otherwise their fascist aggression will gain steam across India," Debnath said.

Dwaipayan Banerjee, a member associated with the forum, said, "We got support from people cutting across various socio-economic strata. People associated with cinema, music, theatre, academia, all joined the movement as they believed this was essential. People joined from different political backgrounds, but they did not represent their party ideology. They joined as individuals who genuinely believe that BJP must not come to power in Bengal,"

Another convenor of the forum, who played an active role throughout the campaign, Kasturi Basu said, "Our campaign minced no words in its attack on the BJP-RSS, exposing their every move as inimical to the interests of our people. It made no irresponsible comparisons of the fascist party BJP with other parties in the fray. It aimed to convince people, particularly those who have swung towards the BJP in the recent past, that this time they should not make a mistake again. It was imperative to stop the BJP from coming to power in Bengal to avoid centralised authoritarianism, to establish a firm mandate against NRC-CAA-NPR (National Register of Citizens-Citizenship Amendment Act-National Population Register), to uphold the sanctity of federalism, to say no more riots and religious majoritarian bigotry."

The members organised street corner meetings, street plays, put up posters and distributed pamphlets in various towns and villages. They also set up a social media team which ran an intense online campaign parallel to the street campaign. The 'No Vote To BJP' campaign released a series of

videos, each addressing various issues related to Bengal. The video series went viral and garnered millions of views.

The [Joint Forum against NRC](#), a non-political civil society group, ran a campaign in various districts of West Bengal to educate people on CAA and NRC. The forum attacked the BJP and their leadership, alleging that the Union home minister Amit Shah was 'bluffing and misleading' the Matua community on citizenship issues.

"The Modi government at the Centre is deliberately issuing these rules now so that they can garner the support of Dalit refugees like Matua, Namasudras, Rajbangshis by hanging on to the roots of 'unconditional citizenship' before the assembly elections," the forum had said on February.

The forum had also organised a 'Citizenship Protection Yatra', which started on February 26 from the border village of Betai and ran for a week in the refugee-concentrated areas of Nadia and North 24 Parganas, and ended on March 5. The main aim of the yatra was to raise awareness against the false promise of giving citizenship to the refugees and to demand repeal of the two laws, CAA 2003 and CAA 2019.

On asking what compelled the forum to organise this campaign amid a pandemic, Prasenjit Bose, a convenor of the forum, said, "First, we were fighting against the NRC-NPR-CAA 2003 and 2019, and the BJP, in its Bengal manifesto, mentioned that they will implement CAA after coming to power in Bengal. So, we were duty bound to fight this and make the Bengal electorate aware of the possible danger. Second, the Bengal election this time was not just another state election, it had national context. This election was fought against the backdrop of the pandemic, catastrophic farm laws, NRC, CAA and a whole lot of wrong policies. BJP's win in Bengal would have bolstered their agenda of opposition-less India and weakened our democracy. So, with all means we had to fight to stop them."

Taking a stand

Theatre group 'Jana Gana Mana' performed a play called Indurer Kol (Mouse Trap) in various rural villages in Bengal. The play fundamentally premised against the fascist forces dealing with issues like NRC, CAA, inflation, LPG price hike with a pinch of sarcasm. While performing at the Mangrove Theatre Centre in the Sundarbans region on the occasion of World Theatre Day, [the cast and crew were attacked by the local BJP leaders](#).

Playwright Shubhankar Das Sharma had told *The Wire*, "We have seen in BJP-ruled states that freedom of speech and expression was suppressed. Here also, they are trying to silence people's voices. They can try as much as they want to scare us, but we are not going anywhere, we are not scared. We will continue to enact the play at various places."

The group enacted the play in more than 84 locations starting from August 2020.

Just three days ahead of the first phase of the assembly election, a galaxy of artists from cinema, theatre and music fields came together in a music video, highlighting the need to stamp out 'fascist forces'. In a song titled '[Nijeder Mote, Nieder Gaan](#)' (Our song about our views), without explicitly naming the BJP, the artists had taken a stand against its "ideology of hatred". The music video features artists such as Parambrata Chatterjee, Anirban Bhattacharya, Sabyasachi Chakraborty, Rudraprasad Sengupta, Anupam Roy, Rupankar Bagchi, Riddhi Sen and Suman Mukhopadhyay.

The song, penned by one of the top film and theatre actors from West Bengal, Anirban Bhattacharya, touches upon issues like communal violence, love-jihad and forced nationalism, while promoting pluralism, fake news and propaganda. The video is directed by actors Riddhi Sen and Rwitobroto

Mukherjee.

The Wire asked Parambrata Chatterjee if he ever feared backlash for taking a stand against the central government, to which he said, "Definitely. We have been seeing the BJP in power since 2014. We witnessed many wrongs by this dispensation. But [we] haven't spoken enough about it because of some kind of fear. Now that it came to us, to capture our state, steamroll politics of hate and divide, which defies all democratic norms, we can't stay quiet. We have to speak against a fascist, autocratic dispensation."

Chatterjee opined that civil society has an important role to play in society and therefore, it should speak about the pressing issues. "History shows how artists in India and across the globe played a crucial role in various socio-economic and socio-cultural issues." "India's foundation is unity in diversity. Now if some party or government tries to appropriate culture with an aim to create a homogenised society, it goes against the very idea of India. That must be resisted. People must speak up," he further said.

The video not only received appreciation from people across the country, but also created a controversy as the makers were verbally attacked by several BJP leaders. BJP state president [Dilip Ghosh](#) even issued a warning and said, "Artists should restrict themselves to singing and dancing. Don't try to do politics. Leave that to us. Or else we will take care of them."

Speaking to *The Wire*, singer Pia Chakraborty said, "Since January, with the increasing polarisation regarding Bengal elections and the overall religious fascism, crushing of dissent and economic decline in the entire country.. We felt like we had to express our thoughts. Art was the best way to resist."

When asked about why she felt resisting the BJP was so central to this election and the political future of Bengal, Chakraborty said, "The politics of the BJP centres around religious polarisation and Hindu majoritarianism. Not only does that go against the secular ethos of Bengal but also dangerous for its minority population and overall maintenance of peace and coexistence."

During the election, a band from Kolkata, Fiddler's Green, released a song urging voters of Bengal to be 'hushiyar'(beware). The song is a part of the video series produced and directed by senior journalist Paranjoy Guha Thakurta. The basic theme of the song was to urge people to be aware of the seeds of hatred that are being sown and how it could have serious consequences in the future.

Songwriter Swadesh Misra said that since the BJP came to power at the Centre, he was closely following deep distress in the society, from demonetisation to farm laws to divisive policies like CAA, NRC, attacks on dissenters, oppression of communities, aggressive push of North India culture etc. "I felt the urge to take a stand against the fascist regime which has captured all institutions and bulldozed India's federal structure through its one language, one nation, one government policy. When I got the chance to be a part of this project, I jumped immediately."

Misra further said that the BJP's win in Bengal would have helped the saffron party in taking forward their agenda of establishing a Hindu Rashtra. "They [BJP] are doing social engineering to change this country, destroy India's secular values and end the idea of co-existence. BJP's Bengal win would have boosted their agenda."

Last but not the least, the [visit of farm leaders from Delhi border to Bengal](#). Although it can be debated if it had any electoral impact, but, their visit and doing *mahapanchayat* in places like Nandigram, Singur and Asansol created a talking point both in rural and urban Bengal.

Leader of the Bharatiya Kisan Union (BKU) Rakesh Tikait got a huge response when he reached

Nandigram for the *mahapanchayat*. In a scathing attack on the BJP, Tikait said in Nandigram, “BJP is planning to ruin the lives of farmers by supporting big corporations. They don’t care about you and me. They are here to sell this country’s asset and hand it over to companies. This government is not run by a party, it is run by companies. So, to teach a lesson, BJP must be defeated. You will have to defeat them in Bengal.”

Himadri Ghosh

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