

# Trinamool, Politics and Poribarton: Comprehending the Ideological Connection

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## Abstract

*The electoral victory of the Trinamool Congress in the 2011 Assembly election (followed by the 2016 election) in West Bengal defeating the 'once undefeatable' Left Front is surely a landmark political development. But in the entire gamete of affairs, one issue which demands serious introspection is the issue of ideology. This paper examines the peculiar silence of 'ideology' in Trinamool Congress' politics and connects it to the idea of 'Poribarton'. It highlights the features of Trinamool's ideology and grounds it in the present political scenario of the state to derive a clear picture of the ideological currents currently in vogue.*

**Keywords:** Trinamool, Ideology, Populist, Mamata, Honour

## 1. Introduction

The 2011 Assembly elections in West Bengal witnessed the longest-serving democratically elected Left government in the world collapse. West Bengal which was the bastion of the Left for thirty-four years finally bid it adieu. From a mind-boggling 233 seats which the Left Front secured in the 2006 elections, the numbers came down to 62, while the opposition which mainly comprised of the Trinamool Congress (hereafter TMC) saw a phenomenal increase from 50 to 227. The electoral victory of the TMC under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee is surely a landmark political development. The change which came in 2011 in West Bengal is not a simple case of democratic transition; instead, it was a reflection of various fundamental changes which have come about in the societal and political fabric of the state. One concept which has been central in the political lexicon of the state has been ideology. Throughout the entire Left regime, the concept of ideology invariably occupied a central position in any political discussion or debate at least (if not at the level of execution). The Assembly election results in the state in 2011 (2016 election as well) clearly points towards the fundamental ideological crisis of the Left as a whole and also the foundational gaps in its vision.

But interestingly in the awe-inspiring environment surrounding the phenomenal rise of Mamata Banerjee to prominence and power one issue which seems to have taken a back foot and has not been brought under the scanner strongly is the very same issue of ideology. There seems to be a peculiar silence as far as the act of defining the ideological base of the TMC is concerned. Much of the derivations till date have been primarily based on the act of juxtaposing its activities with the other political formations in the state and not on studying its ideology in particular. This paper examines in depth this particular aspect of the ideology of the TMC and connects it to the much talked about 'Poribarton' in West Bengal. The apparent absence of a well-defined ideology itself hints at the interesting developments in the politics of the state in recent times. The paper highlights the interesting features and aspects of the ideology of TMC and grounds it in the present political scenario of the state to derive a clear picture of the ideological currents currently in vogue.

## **2. Absence of a Formal Discourse**

The absence of a formal ideological discourse in the TMC has been a marked feature of its political functioning and has till date proved beneficial for it. High level of ideological ambiguity has expanded its catchment area thereby including people from various stratus and sections of society. The political space offered by TMC is undetermined and fresh where interested individuals and parties can come and carve out new tactical and political framings and roles, albeit in accordance with the larger module of conduct dictated by Mamata Banerjee (the centripetal force of the party). But the flip side to this story is that this ideological ambiguity has led to several unwanted and corrupt elements creeping into the political space thereby leading to political and physical skirmishes at regular intervals. In the absence of a codified ideological framework, the mammoth task of disciplining and unifying its cadres/members is even more challenging for the TMC as the entire onus is on the shoulders of Mamata Banerjee.

Interestingly in the prelude to the historic 2011 Assembly election, the TMC primarily exhibited ideology as a concept which is almost defunct and is unnecessarily acting as a barrier to the economic development of the state. But after its historic win in that election the same TMC till date has been using this very concept of ideology (though in a refashioned manner) to justify its stand regarding various reform measures and development initiatives (especially industrial development). TMC's fluid ideological discourse has provided it with a high degree of adaptability thereby helping it to justify its dichotomous moves on various

occasions. It has constantly relied on the ambiguity of its ideological strand to repeatedly strengthen its legitimacy. The famous slogan of ‘Ma, Mati, Manush’ is a prominent example of this. The nature of the slogan is such that it encompasses anything and everything under the sun.

TMC’s conspicuous silence on the adoption of a formal set of ideology is in semblance with its populist political culture and policy of pragmatic politics. The important achievement of the TMC government has been the very fact that they have succeeded in dominating the political language of the state. By keeping the process of constitution of the ideological framework a highly fluid one, Mamata Banerjee has amalgamated an array of ideological tenants from diverse fields (including the Marxist and Socialist) and formulated a hybrid ideology of her own. This was clearly visible in the Parliament on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July, 2014 when the TMC made a sudden U-turn and decided not to oppose the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (Amendment) Bill. The primary question involved in this entire debate was regarding the maintenance of the independence of TRAI. A week before this decision TMC MP Saugata Roy had categorically opposed the Bill and expressed concern about the independence of Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (TRAI) being compromised. But a week later the TMC in order to corner the Congress in the House decided to support the amendment proposed by the BJP led NDA government. This ultimately helped in the appointment of former TRAI chief Nripendra Misra as principal secretary to the Prime Minister.

But this in no way should impress upon us that there is a great amount of internal democracy in the party whereby the members have the freedom to have a threadbare discussion on critical issues at hand and can strongly put forward their opinion. During my series of fieldwork I had informal discussions with a number of local level workers of TMC. The common thread which I could identify in all the discussions is that the broad outline of any ideological stand is given beforehand by the party supremo both in terms of content and implementation modules. This is then trickled down to the various ranks of the party. What the lower rung leaders are free to do is to add some sensational adjectives at best. The ideological innovations take place at the highest level and the duty of the various party cells is to abide by them unquestionably. But this lack of internal openness and discourse pluralism has already started to show some of its ill-effects. The Tapas Pal incident in the month of June 2014 is a grim reminder of this. Without a free and democratic environment within the

party where ‘would be’ approach to things are discussed and the correct language to express them is chalked out, incidents of this sort are bound to be a common occurrence in the execution of politics in the state.

Keeping the political history of the state in mind though it can be said that many of the political terms frequently used in the diction of the political parties have become an empty signifier, but the TMC needs to pay special attention to the use of language because this has been one of the important components of its claim to legitimacy. If the TMC wishes to maintain and further expand its control over the social forces and its dominance over the ideological sphere then it needs to incorporate the element of internal pluralism within its mode of functioning which will also have a direct impact on the use of political vocabulary. It bemuses one to see the enormous level of acceptance of a political party whose ideological front represents such high level of fluidity, in a state where the ideological understanding and approach (at least at a superficial level) adheres so much importance. One possible explanation of this is the sordid performance of the earlier Left Front regime on the ideological front coupled with widespread corruption and the resultant cynicism and disgust towards the very concept of ideological discourse, if not ideology as such.

### **3. An Offshoot of Congress Ideology**

Since the TMC is an offshoot of the Congress party hence naturally its ideology is to a large extent influenced by the ideological framework of the Congress. Like the Congress, the target group of the TMC is wide enough to cover various sections of the agricultural class, working class, religious minorities, etc. The TMC exhibits similarities with the Congress in its advocacy of certain neo-liberal policies like Public-Private Partnership (PPP) schemes, social liberalism, free-market policy, etc. while at the same time being watchful that in the process of liberalization the weaker sections do not get hit very hard. This is reflective of their awareness of the need to maintain a pro-poor image. The political rhetoric of both the parties is indicative of this fact whereby both talk about the upliftment of all the sections of the society. Though at times (or rather most of the times) their opposition to neo-liberal agendas and policies has been restricted to rhetorical gestures and utterances (especially in the case of Congress) this has helped in maintaining their authenticity to a certain extent. In case of both the Congress and the TMC, the ideological mooring has a populist flavour to it. But the primary difference between the two parties lies in the fact that as far as the TMC is concerned because of its political compulsions and structural constraints (both in terms of organisational

strength and area of influence) it cannot take an out and out stand in favour of neo-liberalism especially pertaining to the issue of land.

#### **4. Conspicuous Silence at the Practical Level**

While the political rhetoric of the Left Front repeatedly emphasized upon the concept of ideology but interestingly at the pragmatic level there is hardly any difference between them and other political parties. There has been a conspicuous absence of political education in the state and what was there was only a tactical cum opportunistic use of the concept of ideology by the Left. Then how does one situate the concept of ideology within the complex political matrix in Bengal? Ideology in Bengal in today's time is no more about a belief system but rather is a mechanism deployed for the safeguard and growth of the political formation in power. What the TMC is trying to do in the state is neither surprising nor new. Like the earlier regime, for the TMC also ideology acts as a tool for legitimising its rule through the structuring of the official language and the creation of a defined set of social reality. This idea of legitimation moreover acquires an additional importance keeping in view the autocratic and dictatorial style of governance. Thus what is at stake for the TMC as far as ideology is concerned is not much about its content, rather the performance which emanates from it. For the TMC as a political party, ideology is not an issue of having faith in a sanctified doctrine rather it is more about a discourse which feeds and strengthens its position in the political battlefield. With such underlining thought process working in the party, the amount and level of modifications and modulations are boundless and highly fluid. The only static interest is the betterment of the party's electoral prospects and the tightening of its grip on the political and societal fabric. In such an environment the natural response of its members is bound to be the toeing of the official line in order to remain in the good books of the party supremo and this is what has taken place. Unprincipled commitment to the official line has brought substantial perks for many within the party, while the minor glitches in this mode of functioning in the form of a few members taking ideologically sound principled stands have been dealt with strongly in the form of expulsions, suspensions, etc.

#### **5. A Pinch of Regional Nationalism**

The very inception of TMC as a political party has been the resultant outcome of a series of events where the quotient of the 'regional' has been heavily loaded. In the due process of time, Mamata has been able to improvise upon this very element with the skillful addition of the concept of nationalism and putting it to good use in her scheme of politics. Invocation of

this sentiment is not a new phenomenon in the state's politics as the Left had occasionally indulged in such practices. But in the case of Mamata Banerjee, the element of 'regional nationalism' has a much more fundamental role to play in her scheme of politics which lacks the backing of a formal set of ideology and understanding as it is there in the case of the Left. The syntax of her political language has a core message embedded within it that it is only the TMC that can provide quality leadership and governance to the state which will enable the state to ultimately get back its privileged status which it used to enjoy in the past. Her invocation of Subhas Chandra Bose and his contributions has been a core ingredient in this endeavour. By invoking Subhas Bose, Mamata Banerjee has successfully reconfigured and re-established the idea of 'victimhood' in the political parlance of the state. She has put into effective use this sense of victimisation by repeatedly talking about the discrimination of the Centre towards West Bengal. The process of victimisation to which she has been subjected to in her political career has given added authenticity to her endeavour. She has successfully brought the entire issue under the larger ambit of Bengali nationalism where she has been able to expand her range of support. She has at the same time been using this issue as a gelling factor between the aspirations and outlook of the Bengali community and that of the people from the Hill region. With the help of the concept of nationalism which was an important ingredient of Subhas Chandra Bose's political philosophy coupled with his grandeur, Mamata Banerjee has tried in a way to subsume the contradictions and defects surrounding the Hill issue under the larger rubric of Bengali nationalism. Her credit lies in the fact that while showcasing this concept of discrimination she has been able to expand its ambit by moving beyond the rigid and complex economic argument which had been the major plank of the Left parties. In this way, she has in a way hijacked from the Left this entire issue of discrimination and has been able to label it with a mark of exclusivity. Through this sort of invocations, she has successfully hit at the collective memory of the Bengali population and activated the deep sense of longing within them. This has paid huge dividends for her both in the form of electoral success and also emotional support in general.

## **6. Discourse on Bengal's Cultural Capital**

In the ideological framework of Mamata Banerjee's politics, the discourse on Bengal's cultural capital holds a very important place. Emphasising that Bengal has an enormous deposit of cultural capital from time immemorial, she has repeatedly invoked the names of the cultural icons of the state like Rabindranath Tagore, Nazrul, Ramakrishna, Vivekananda,

Uttam Kumar, etc. She has displayed immense political maturity by expanding the area of this invocation by covering personalities from diverse backgrounds in order to successfully address the various components which make up the sense of cultural belonging and pride. She has very well grasped the basic fact that culture is primarily the nerve centre of any community and a major driving force behind their progress. She has mastered the skilful use of the element of pride which is deeply embedded in the Bengali psyche especially in relation to its glorious past and this has proved a tremendous booster to her politics. Moreover, this sort of an exercise is in complete tandem with her populist scheme of politics as it negates any new investment, instead, encourages a vigorous push to certain dormant and subdued sentiments and longings.

## **7. Reformulating the Left Discourse**

As far as Mamata Banerjee's appropriation of the Left discourse is concerned the question of women presents in front of us a very intriguing dimension of this exercise. As far as the question of women's liberation and empowerment is concerned, while the Left discourse seems to be very specific and clear, the political line pursued by Mamata Banerjee seems to be quite ambiguous. In tune with her populist style, her tone is more holistic and superficial thereby leaving open a wide murky area where it is possible for her to include divergent and antithetical formations simultaneously. The enormous ambiguous space is in itself is a negative development. Carving out a distinct space for herself along with a specific agenda, in an otherwise male-dominated political universe, makes Mamata Banerjee a special entity. But it is the strategy which she has deployed is of special interest. Instead of outright rejection of male-centric values, she has opted for their tactical use to garner support and legitimacy. In her scheme of affairs the creation of an autonomous subject position is conspicuously absent.

Her political biography includes innumerable instances where she has violated quite a number of codes of conduct set for women, for example, her appetite for histrionics, her unmarried status, her diction, body language, etc. There has been a profound element of rebellion in her and yet terminologies like 'Biplabi Nari' (Revolutionary women) and 'Bidrohi Nari' (Rebellious Women) are missing from her party's political terminology. Her infamous statement at the Kolkata Book Fair where she invoked the concept of 'Gharer Bou' is a sordid reminder of the fact that in her body of politics she deliberately invokes the male-dominated idea of the 'home' where the patriarchal authority is still in vogue. Though there



has been the absence of a male patron in the development of her political career, surely there has not been the total absence of the patronage of the male-defined notions and values. The tactical appropriation of these values in her political schema is by no means accidental instead they are a deliberate effort on her part.

## **8. Open to Caste and Religious Mobilization**

As far as the mobilization on the basis of caste and religion is concerned, the Mamata Banerjee led TMC government has definitely been more open and proactive. While the mode of mobilization of the Left Front government has been on the basis of class but this very classes whom they had mobilized and succeeded in garnering their support comprised of mainly the religious minority and the Dalit population. The Left through the various land reform movements including Tebhaga movement and Operation Barga had succeeded in getting and further consolidating their support. A large section of the beneficiary of these movements and land redistribution programmes had been the religious minorities. Interestingly the Left was not very clear in its approach and instead suffered from a similar level of ambiguity as that of the politics of Mamata Banerjee as mentioned earlier. The primary difference between the two being that while in the case of the Left there was an outright rejection of the importance of these societal categories coupled with a universal idea of the class, in the case of TMC there is a broad acceptance of all these categories resulting in the absence of proper concentration on the distinctiveness of each one of them. But from the point of view of political culture, the politics of the TMC is definitely a new development in the state. This sort of explicit practice of identity politics has been an unseen and unheard phenomenon in the state. In the prelude to the 2011 Assembly elections in the state, the country witnessed an entirely new development in the state whereby there was the participation of the caste and religious groups in an overt manner. The TMC in its electoral campaign categorically took the support and help of the various caste groups in the state. The most prominent among them has been the Matua sect which mainly comprises of the Namasudra community. Mamata Banerjee sought the support of the head of the sect Binapani Devi (popularly known as Baro Ma). Never before had any political force in the state gone all this way out to seek the help of the leader of a religious sect. The absence of desirable marks of the 'bhadralok' class has paradoxically helped her in relating with the 'chotolok' (underclass). It is this projection of a subaltern image (in spite of her high caste background) that is crucial to understanding her appeal. Mamata Banerjee once commented,



I shall work for the Matuas as long as I am alive. I was moved when baro ma told me how her people were being looked down upon as most of them belonged to lower castes. I do not believe in casteism and have no problem if people call me low caste (Mamata Banerjee, 2009).

She seems to have changed the way politics is being viewed and conducted in the state. The so-called effort of the Left to secularise the arena of politics has been done away with. Though till date she seems to be unable to provide any concrete solution for the specific problems of the caste and religious groups, thus resorting to certain token gestures, but at least her recognising the persistence of caste and religion based discrimination has been positively viewed by many who consider it as a better approach than that of the Left Front which largely denied even the persistence of any such problems. Although the entire process can be viewed as the harbinger of the process of (de)secularising politics in the state (which the higher caste bhadralok class Left intelligentsia claimed was a unique feature of the state) and the start of petty identity politics, but the fact remains that Mamata Banerjee has articulated the wishes of a large section of the populace and defined politics in a completely different way.

Interestingly Left's denial of these caste and religious discrimination were only in those frontiers where there was serious need of corrective measures and not in cases where political benefits could be extracted. For years the pattern of fielding candidates by CPI(M) and the composition of their Polit Bureau and Central Committee are good examples of this. What the Left offered to the people was a social understanding based on a cherished though utopian belief of class equality. In contrast, Mamata Banerjee's body of politics offers a political alternative which is much more grounded in reality and with which the people can identify with. Even from a technical point of view, her methodological approach is much simpler for the people to comprehend as compared to that of the Left where there is the requirement of a theoretical knowledge which again the Left was never in a position or mood to impart.

As of now, the primary concern is not as to what will be the future direction of this newly evolved trend of identity politics in the state and whether Mamata Banerjee will be able to handle it properly. This newly found avenue of conducting and articulating politics by a large section of the population which has been facilitated by Mamata Banerjee by falsifying the chest-thumping claims by the dhoti-clad bhadraloks, of Bengal being a caste and religious discrimination free region, is enough to garner a huge support base for her. This has been

clearly evident in the 2013 panchayat election and 2016 Assembly election where the TMC enjoyed victory by huge margins in areas where these groups are dominant.

But as of now her populist way of functioning seem to be restricting her from adopting a framework for the substantial development of the marginalized groups. But this sort of attitude is not going to be beneficial in the long run. The increasing gap between the rhetorical content and actual development on the ground is bound to prove disastrous for the Mamata Banerjee led TMC government. Moreover, the results of the 2014 general elections have also affected (if not changed) to a large extent the entire political equation and priorities in the state. With the upsurge of BJP nationally there is now an additional cause of concern for Mamata Banerjee. Moreover, BJP has skilfully appropriated the larger Left rhetoric in the state coupled with deploying the developmental logic in a big way. The 2014 election results definitely show that they have not been totally unsuccessful in this endeavor. This is surely a major challenge for the Mamata Banerjee led TMC government. Rhetorical assurances and token representations are not going to work for a long time. She will have to connect this process of empowerment of the caste and religious groups with the developmental paradigm. One of the major problems besetting the approach of the TMC government towards these marginalised sections of the society has been that instead of treating the members of these caste and religious groups as equal members of the civil society they have been treated as components of the political society where the logic of their existence is always messed up with the rigours of electoral politics and its associated demands. The need is to change the approach while dealing with these groups and overhaul the contours of the developmental paradigm designed for them. Only then will it be possible for Mamata Banerjee to develop a new approach free from the problems of the earlier regime. This will help her in successfully mobilizing this humongous societal block and rally them behind her party.

## **9. Conclusion**

It seems the ideological position of the Mamata Banerjee led TMC government is interestingly in a permanent state of inconclusiveness, flux, and ferment. In the developmental trajectory of the TMC government what seems missing is the intention to develop homogenously by taking along the people and making them a part of the developmental journey. There is more of political patronage whereby the people are being treated as mere recipients and not as active agents of development. This is totally in opposition to the declared ideological position of the TMC government which claims to be

the government of 'Ma, Mati, Manush'. In the name of development what actually is being done is building up a network of mutual understanding and give-and-take, where in lieu of certain benefits what is expected from the populace is uncritical and unflinching support. Beatrice Webb once said that democracy is not the multiplication of ignorant opinions. The undeniable fact is that there is a need to draw a distinction between opinion and knowledge.

...even 'democracy' needs some qualification or limitation, especially at a time when political leaders tend to speak in emotive 'sound bites' or slogans on a level seemingly set by the great dis-educator of our times...the populist tabloid press (Crick, 2005).

Whether there will be the ushering of a process of certain self-imposed qualifications and limitations within the larger ambit of the populist style of functioning by Mamata Banerjee is surely a question of grave importance for the prevalence of democratic atmosphere in the state. Populism disrupts democracy by mounting its challenge on the redemptive face of democracy, often to the detriment of law and order. The cult of personality can transform leaders into quasi-messianic figures for whom accountability is not a relevant issue, and the populist disregard for institutional checks and balances can encourage rule by decree and all sorts of authoritarian behavior while maintaining a democratic facade.

The presence of a populist mode of representation in liberal democracies is not just an arithmetic addition to that setting; it also brings about a geometric dislocation insofar as it permeates the practice of democratic politics itself. Populism can remain within the bounds of democracy but can also reach the point where they enter into conflict and perhaps even go their own separate ways (Arditi, 2003).

Whether Mamata Banerjee has been able to maintain the professed aim of restoring some dignity to politics is something which is highly debatable. As of now, there is a clear emphasis on the process of ingratiation by the Mamata Banerjee led TMC government which is bound to compromise the process of democratic governance in the long run. This is going to lead to a tacit continuance of the past practices; the only difference being that here the pretension is not under the garb of any puritanical codified ideological standpoint as was the case under the Left regime, but rather under the pseudonym of a rectification or correctional campaign. Surely the over-charged political environment in the state often have discouraged the practical assessment of the various claims made by different and opposing quarters and in this regard, the present situation is not very different.

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