

7 Party System in West Bengal—An Overview

In the contemporary Indian politics West Bengal political parties occupy an important position. Being a constituent part of the ruling UPA Government, the leftist parties of West Bengal are now deeply involved in national politics. Though as a unit of Indian Federation, West Bengal party system is not very much different from the party system of India, yet there are some unique features :

In spite of being different from the nature of multi-party system of the European countries, the party system in India is characterised by the existence of many parties. The national parties functioning in West Bengal are Congress (I), CPI, CPI (M) and BJP. The examples of state parties in West Bengal are Forward Bloc, Forward Bloc (Marxist), Revolutionary Socialist Party, Socialist Unity Centre, Trinamul Congress etc. Thus, party system in West Bengal shows presence of both national and regional parties.

Like the Indian Party system, West Bengal party system has demonstrated the paradox of multi-partism with dominance of one party or a coalition of parties. This feature characterised the Indian

party system from 1947 to 1967. In West Bengal this feature became evident after the Assembly elections of 1977. First, there is the dominance of Left Front coalition since 1977 and second there is the dominance of CPI (M) over the other coalition partners of the Left Front.

Again, West Bengal Party system shows the existence of coalition ministry like the coalition politics at the national level. The last few elections of the Lok Sabha resulted in hung parliaments and coalitions have been formed for running the government. In West Bengal, the ruling Left Front is a coalition of some leftist parties like CPI, CPI (M), Forward Bloc, RSP and SUCI. But, while the national coalitions lack ideological polarity (Congress (I) and left parties are coalition partners in the UPA), West Bengal coalition is dominated by ideological affinity among the coalition partners. It is mainly due to this that West Bengal coalition has a strong base in the state and is characterised by the socialist principles of unity and discipline. This has a reflection on the stability of coalition politics. While in West Bengal Left coalition is ruling seventh time in succession since 1977, national coalitions have been weak and unstable. So far, the exception has been the NDA coalition which has been able to complete its full term of five years. The present UPA coalition is running third year. The history of coalition ministry in West Bengal, however, can be traced to 1967 when United Front was formed with CPI (M), Forward Bloc, Bangla Congress etc. It did not last long and it was soon replaced by the Progressive Democratic Front with Congress as coalition partner. This ministry also continued for a brief period.

A typological analysis of West Bengal political parties can be made on the basis of political ideology. On the whole, there are three types of such parties—leftist, rightist and centrist. Ideology here stands for commitment to some specific socio-economic philosophy and collective action for the sake of its realisation. The CPI, CPI (M), RSP, SUC are some examples of leftist parties. Though the ideology of Marxism-Leninism dominates over such parties yet there are variations in their political programmes. While the CPI at one time showed pro-Soviet Union tendency, the CPI (M) revealed pro-China attitude. The Revolutionary Socialist Party, however, did not reveal any such tendency. Again, there are extreme leftists like CPI (ML) which believe in violence as a political technique. The BJP can be regarded as representing the rightist trend. Parties like Congress and Janata can be considered as example of centrist ideology. Historically, the Congress is ideologically neutral as it acted

as a platform for people of different socio-economic philosophies. Similarly, the Janata party has no clear ideology as it is a party of mainly anti-Congressists.

Political polarisation was a feature of West Bengal political parties in the 1980s. For example, the 1982 and 1987 Assembly and Panchayat elections showed that the main contest was between the Congress and the Left Front. However, the emergence of the Trinamul Congress and its alliance with the BJP has made elections a triangular contest between the Left Front, the Congress and the Trinamul Congress.

In West Bengal communal, caste-based and religious political parties have not been able to play effective role. Though they exist in the form of Amra Bangali, Muslim League, Hindu Mahasabha and Gorkha League (formed on the basis of tribal affiliation), yet they have not been able to create much impact on West Bengal politics.

West Bengal party system has experienced splits and factionalism particularly after the 1967 elections. Splits in the Congress party resulted in the birth of Bangla Congress, Trinamul Congress, Congress (S) etc. Similarly CPI (M) experienced a split and saw the emergence of CPI (M-L).

The consecutive seventh victory of the Left Front with comfortable majority since 1977 has gradually made the opposition parties ineffective. The Assembly elections results in 2001 showed that the Left Front secured 199 seats out of 294. The recent 2006 elections have further dealt a blow to the opposition as the Front has secured 235 seats. The main opposition parties, Trinamul Congress, has secured only 29 seats as against 60 in 2001 elections. So has been the case with Congress which secured 26 seats in 2001 but in 2006 only 21 seats were secured by it. Thus, the strength of the opposition parties is gradually going down in West Bengal.

A unique feature of West Bengal party system is that the major parties have their mass organisations at the levels of students, women, peasants and trade unions. For example the CPI (M) has Students' Federation of India, Democratic Women's Association, Krishak Sabha, the Centre of Indian Trade Union etc. Similarly, the corresponding frontal organisations of the Congress are Chhatra Parishad, All India Women's Conference, Kishan Congress and Indian National Trade Union Congress. All these are primarily mobilizational organisations and the parties implement its programmes and policies through these frontal bodies.