

A 'Professor of Electoral Engineering': An election campaign in West Bengal

A new British Academy publication looks at 'Diversity and Change in Modern India', drawing on economic, social and political approaches. In her contribution to the volume, Dr Mukulika Banerjee provides an ethnography of an election campaign in West Bengal, based on a study of the elections won by the Left Front alliance of parties – including the Communist Party of India (Marxist) – between 1996 and 2005. The following extract describes her encounter with a particularly calculating electoral animal.

A more promising volubility was to be found in a well-known politician whom people had nicknamed the 'Professor of Electoral Engineering'. Curious about the mixed metaphors of erudition and pragmatism, I sought him out in Writers Building, where all ministerial government offices were to be found, just before the May 2001 elections. He was a cabinet minister and the party sergeant-major par excellence. He enjoyed the reputation of one who could be relied on to ensure that thousands showed up

at campaign rallies in Kolkata, and for facilitating voters to show up at the polls; rickshaw pullers for instance were known to vote out of sheer loyalty to this man. A large rough man, he spoke his mind loudly and clearly. The secrets of his popularity, he said, were basically two things: his extraordinary memory (exemplified in his ability to remember nearly 10,000 phone numbers off the top of his head) and his attention to maintaining relations with everyone 'from a cobbler to a Russi Mody'.¹

Describing the forthcoming campaign, the numbers flowed easily from his memory. He explained the party's general strategy with the help of the example of West Bengal's largest parliamentary constituency, whose electoral size was nearly 1.6 million. His assessment of this constituency went thus: he figured that the voter turnout would be about 75 per cent, i.e. 1.2 million voters would cast their votes. This meant they had to figure out how many of these 1.2 million votes would go to the LF [Left Front]. The largest number

of votes the LF had ever won in this constituency was 580,000 i.e. just under 50 per cent of the vote, and in the elections of the previous year, the LF had managed only 490,000. Thus, assuming that everyone who had voted for the LF at the last election would vote for them again, there was still a shortage of 90,000 votes from their previous best.

The strategy this time was therefore triangular, he explained. Though the Congress had won 120,000 votes the last time, he reckoned this time it would manage only 80,000. This time there was another candidate, an erstwhile independent but now the leader of the BJP in West Bengal. It was reckoned that he would win over 50,000 votes owing to his personal and social ties in the area. Another 20,000 votes would be spoilt votes. This took the number of votes the LF would not win to about 150,000. This left the LF with about 1,000,000 votes to play with, of which they required only 550,000. He concluded his assessment with an enigmatic smile and said, 'I have to ensure that we win those.'



Figure 1. A woman is helped to a polling station to cast her general election ballot in Nandigram, about 150 km southwest of Kolkata, 7 May 2009. Photo: Reuters/Jayanta Shaw.



Figure 2. Supporters attend an election rally by Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, chief minister of the Communist-ruled West Bengal, in Kolkata, 24 April 2006. Photo: Reuters/Jayanta Shaw.

Of course the main issue was precisely how he would 'ensure', especially given his party's reputation for 'scientific rigging'. He explained further. Of the required 550,000, he could safely assume that a large part of the 490,000 votes that had gone in their favour would do so again. For, he explained, in the industrial belt of the state, voting was a tradition; 'almost like a superstition and party loyalties are like football loyalties, there is no

logic behind this', he added. And he knew, like everyone else, that the most important part of the electorate for the Communists were the most disadvantaged sections of society, who had been the main beneficiaries during their regime.

The fight for the rights of the disadvantaged, for humanity, had been the *raison d'être* of their ideology and this was what socialism

did best – to serve basic needs, he argued. 'We show our support for the weaker sections and this is what makes them stronger.' But he also added to this lofty observation the rather patronising and widely used phrase among Communist leaders and cadres alike: *bostey diley chutey chai* i.e. if you invite them to sit down, they want to lie down. The implication of this remark was mainly that growing prosperity also changed needs and that people always want more, and that no amount of reforms were ever enough for an ever-demanding and needy population. Given that the Communists in West Bengal are among the very few Communists in the world who have (had to) survived in a robust democratic set-up, their characterisation of the fickle electorate should not come as a total surprise. Rather than being able to assume popular approval, this government had to constantly work harder at winning and maintaining their popular support.

And support for the party, even for veterans such as the minister, was as unpredictable as the waves in the sea. To him there were always various undercurrents and it was impossible to predict the next big wave. This was the reason why wooing the 5–10 per cent 'unreliable' voters was so crucial, he argued, because they could swing either way. To prove his point, he cited an example from the previous year when the LF had lost a safe local Panchayat seat in a place where the Municipality had actually done some excellent work. But even he was willing to admit that the incidents of excellent work were extremely uneven across the state, that it had been a while since the party or the government had done anything radically new to challenge the status quo, and that they had no truthful answers for West Bengal's abysmal development record, despite being the highest rice-producing state in the country.

As 'Professor of Electoral Engineering' the minister therefore had to deal with the twin problems of a capricious electorate on the



Figure 3. A man sleeps in front of graffiti in the city of Kolkata, 30 April 2009. For over three decades, India's West Bengal state has been run by the world's longest-serving democratically-elected Communist government. Yet the Communist power base is slowly being eroded by farmers alienated by aggressive plans to attract foreign and local industry. The graffiti depicts Mamata Banerjee, chief of regional political party Trinamool Congress, breaking West Bengal by opposing industry there. Photo: Reuters/Jayanta Shaw.

one hand, and a party running out of revolutionary ideas on the other. His solution therefore was to create the grandest spectacle that also carried people with it. This, he felt, could only be achieved by mounting a campaign that reached every voter and overwhelmed the electorate by its sheer and ubiquitous presence, and by having slogans that had an enduring message and carried a commitment behind them. Returning to the example he had used at the start of the conversation, he pointed out that in the forthcoming elections there were 70,000 new voters in this constituency, caused by improved voters' lists and first time voters. Of these, by the cadres' pre-poll estimation ('scrutiny') only 10,000 could be relied upon to vote for the LF. This left 60,000 of the new voters to woo but this would be whittled down to the more realistic figure of 50,000 because of 'erosion' (of party support). 60,000 votes, it will be recalled, was also the shortfall between the guaranteed 490,000 LF voters and the required 550,000 votes in this constituency.

After 'scrutiny' of these new voters and their backgrounds by the local cadres of all lists across the seven Assembly constituencies that made up this large parliamentary constituency, it was their assessment that about 40,000 of these votes, if cast, could be theirs, subject of course to the mounting of the 'grand spectacle' of a campaign mentioned earlier. The juggernaut of the party machinery would make this happen he said, but 'It is my job to make sure that these 40,000 voters actually vote'. This, as I observed for myself, was achieved on polling

day as a result of weeks of relentless pressure, in subtle and not-so subtle ways, of persuading people to cast their vote. The party hoped that their overwhelming campaign would keep the LF candidate foremost in the mind of the voter.

Concluding the discussion, the minister pointed out to me the irony in his account. 'All this huge election campaign is therefore mounted ultimately for those 40,000 voters', i.e. less than 5 per cent of the electorate, a story that was repeated across the state. And while he admitted that that is what electoral politics was about everywhere, there was also a veiled critique of the party and its policies. To his mind, the party's inability to recognise that they could not take the electorate's gratitude for granted and the need for revolutionary programmes to address people's growing needs was its biggest failure. 'Unless we are able to do this as a philosophy, as an ideology, we will continue to fail.'

This was a remarkably candid observation for a powerful leader of a seemingly invincible party on the eve of a confident campaign. But the Communist Party was also a complex organisation within which most individuals were merely cogs in the wheel. The minister had clearly managed to carve out his niche as the man on the coalface among the more urbane and cultured leaders who desperately needed him to fight the heat of an electoral battle. But his modest ministry, rough manner and place in the campaign also indicated that his career in the Communist Party was limited. While such men were crucial to the functioning of a mass based

party such as the CPI (M), there was no room for such a personality in the ranks of its leadership. He must have realised this for his final ruminations were accompanied by a sarcastic smile: 'I can only guarantee that I will make sure our supporters show up to vote, but I cannot guarantee the result of the elections. But what I can guarantee are two things: "I cannot save the dead" and "I will never be a big CPI (M) leader".'

Note

1 Mody was the Tata chief in Jamshedpur for many years.

Dr Mukulika Banerjee is Reader in Social Anthropology at the London School of Economics. She is completing a monograph (*Democracy: An ethnographic approach*) discussing the grass roots experience of democracy and political participation in village India (based on extended fieldwork); among other things, this asks why poor illiterate people vote with such enthusiasm. In 2009, she directed a multi-sited study *Comparative Electoral Ethnographies* (funded by the ESRC) that provided ethnographic description of local practices during the Indian general election.

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