

Electoral Processes and Political Violence: An Observational Analysis of State Elections in West Bengal

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Abstract: *Democracy is the form of government where citizens choose their representatives through free and fair election. This is the finest way for the citizens of a nation to express their opinions and preferences. The ideal type of democracy is only possible when the citizens, the maker of democracy feels free to participate in the democratic electoral process. But in reality, democracy is in crisis. Violence during the elections challenges the basic democratic principles and citizens right. Basically, in Indian Sub-continent, violence has become an inseparable part of democratic politics. Particularly, in West Bengal, it has its own tradition and unique style which is very much different from the other States of India. This paper is an attempt to evaluate the correlation between democratic values and violence in West Bengal from 60s to till of the date. In addition to this, an initiative has been taken to examine the longest history and its characteristics of various types of violence which make West Bengal unique.*

Keywords: Democracy, democratic values, unique types of violence, violent tradition, antithetical relation

1. Introduction

It is supposed that democracy is the safest and the finest way to alternate rule of any authorities. Democracy provides a multiple of channels through which individuals and groups can voice their grievances and concerns. [1] In reality, however, there is an inverse relationship between democracy and violence. Hannah Arendt in her seminal work, 'On Violence' mentioned that democracy was against rule by violence. Democracy ought to be about power being exercise through people coming together and assessing their issues and collective goals and persuading each other to adopt rules and procedures to realize these goals. [2] When a violence can be defined as political violence? One possible response is to define political violence as violence that takes place in a political context or that is political in origin or political in motivation. Politically motivated violence is defined as any act of violence that is committed with a political intent. It is nothing but to achieve political goals at any cost. Eric Hobsbawm explains that there is a fine line between criminal activity and political activity. On either side of that line, it is often difficult to tell where criminal activity ends and political activity begins. [3] Another thing should be mentioned here that any kind of violence becomes dangerous when it is justified by a section of people. In simple words, the legitimacy of violence occurs when individuals other than the perpetrators of the violent act, they acknowledge that the behaviour is somewhat legitimate and that it is partially their right to do so. At the same time, Political violence is a form of violence that both divides and unites communities. It divides communities through the identification of adversaries and the identification of legitimate targets. Political violence in this sense is indistinguishable from criminal violence in its own right. The only difference between the two is that some view political violence as legitimate.

Political theorists John Schwarzmantel defines political violence within the following phrases:

"...the use or threatened of physical coercion to achieve political ends. Such actual or threatened acts of coercion are carried out by identifiable persons, whether they are acting as agents of the states or as members of non-states bodies opposing the state. Political violence is here understood as the use (actual or threatened) of physical coercion to achieve a change in the nature of the political order, or (when carried out by the agents of the state) to defend that order in its existing form. Political violence is thus defined as distinct from criminal violence, since that is carried out for personal gain. Political is here understood as challenging or defending particular policies or more generally the nature of the political regime in question, through the use by identifiable agents of the specific means of physical coercion, or the threat of such coercion". [4]

Many organizations, political parties, and state entities with political intentions create an artificial environment to seize power. When analyzing the causes of violence, it is very evident that socio-economic disparities and political motivations are at play in creating the conditions of violence. The poor social and economic conditions of the society encourage the youth to become involved in politics for the sake of earning money and other opportunities.

The majority counties in the glob follow the democratic system to rule their nations. But there is another observation that democracy and violence is interrelated to each other. Violence has been used to obtain electoral plenteousness, maintain political dominance, capture scarce state resources and dominate the democratic space. In many democracies' violence seems to have become an accepted means of engaging in politics. [5] It is a message or communication to control the expectations of majority.

Democracy, legitimacy, and violence are also interrelated concepts. Government, with a large majority, attempts to repress the insurgents through the use of legitimate force, and at times supports or justifies the use of violence for its own benefit. However in reality, violence is inseparable

from democratic politics. Unfortunately, the state, whether it's democratic or otherwise, tends to monopolize violence in multiple methods and regularly through legitimate method. Once in a while it is the state subsidized violence to occupy the power and position.

Political violence involves denial of full citizenship, lack of political representation, unjust imprisonment, confinement, and forced servitude. Political violence destroys democratic values. Our right to participate in elections, to vote for our preferred candidates, campaign without fear, to be safe during elections, and have the freedom of expression which have been violated by members of various major political parties.

Political violence is thus not just a challenge for democratic institutions but also a danger to the democratic process. Since India's independence, political violence has become a necessary component of the political system of the nation. As India is the largest democracy in the world, regular election from Panchayat to Lok Sabha, political struggle is inevitable.

West Bengal, in the east of the country isn't an exception of it. It has a long history of political violence which is persisting over many a long time and deeply impacted on the people of West Bengal. It's real that West Bengal became leaded by means of different political parties which includes CPIM, Congress and TMC, but the image of violent clashes among ruling parties is far away to be stopped. This has made the phenomenon of political violence in West Bengal extensively discussed land in India.

Genesis of Political Violence in West Bengal

The origin of the story can be traced back to the pre-independence period. There were some instances of anti-colonial armed struggles in the pre-independence period led by certain groups such as Anushilan Samiti, Jugantar and Tebhagapeasants' violent movement and communal violence in the form of Great Calcutta Killings in 1946. The members of Anushilan Samiti challenged the British rule by involving military nationalism, including bombing, assassinations and politically motivated violence.

Tebhagapeasants movement was one of the fierce movements initiated in Bengal by the All-India Kisan Sabha of peasant front of the Communist Party of India. The poor economic situation, political unrest and unbearable social conditions of the peasants compelled them to fight against Zamindar and Jotdars. [6]

Another incident which is known as Great Calcutta Killings (1946) or Direct Action Day marked the black history in undivided Bengal in pre-independence period. It was a communal riot for a separate Muslim homeland after British exits from India. It led to large scale violence between Hindus and Muslims in the city of Calcutta in the Bengal Province of British India. [7]

After the freedom of India, West Bengal noted for its political violence since the formation of new government. In 1960s, Bengal's Marxists first tasted power in 1967 through the formation of the United Front Government. Since the

Congress was losing ground, especially in the rural belts, the turf war between State's two primary formations-the Congress and the Communist-was bloody and extensive. [8] Three years later in 1970, the members of 'Sai' family were butchered cruelly. In February 1971, Hemanta Basu, the National Secretary of All India Forward Bloc, was murdered. Record shows that in between 1972-1977, the Congress Government headed by Siddhartha Sankar Ray unleashed a fierce attack against the ultra-left.

In 1977, the Marxists came back to power with the main goal of capturing the rural political and governmental infrastructure using a nearly comparable apparatus. Most people agreed with the choice they made, to start the land reform process, however there were some complaints made about Communist Party officials using threats of violence. In a brutal episode that horrified the country in July 2000, CPI (M) cadres killed 11 landless labourers. Violent crime became a routine, primarily instrumental issue under CPI (M) administration. More significantly, the party's objectives converged with those of builders and other mafias, who began to dominate it locally. At that time, TMC led by Mamata Banerjee made an effort to challenge the party supremacy. [9] We can still clearly recall the violent altercations that took place between 2006 and 2008 between CIP (M) and Trinamool over the purchase of land for the TATA Motor Nano automobile factory in Singur and a land acquisition project in Nandigram in Midnapore. When the Maoist supported People's Committee against Police Atrocities, led by Chatradhar Mahato, launched a series of assaults on the CPI (M) and police in 2009, Lalgargh, the Jhargram district, was evidently developing into a war zone. Reports from several media outlets claim that 70 individuals died in a span of months. According to claims made by the previous chief minister Buddhadeb Bhattacharya in 1997, the state has seen 28000 political killings between 1977 and 1996. In 2010, the Leftist Weekly Mainstream reported that there had been 55000 political killings in the state from 1977 to 2009. [10]

In 2011, TMC came into power with huge mandate but without any change in political culture. The party workers started taking revenge from the CPI (M) workers using same patterns of violence. They treated the opponent party members as enemies.

2. Some Major Political Violence

The origin of the story can be traced back to the communist era, before they assumed power under the banner of Proletariat. The five episodes of violence that marked the era of Communist rule in West Bengal will forever remain a symbol of its violent politics. These incidents demonstrate the inherently anti-democratic nature of a democratic government in India.

Sainbari Killings (1970), was one of the worst incidents in the history of West Bengal's politics. The CPI (M) began experimenting with assassination as a political tool long before they assumed power in 1977. In 1970, two prominent members of the Congress family from Burdwan, the Sain brothers, were murdered by communist cadres. To demonstrate their level of savagery, they forced the Sain

brothers' mother to consume rice soaked in their dead sons' blood. This caused the mother to lose her mental stability, a condition from which she did not recover until her death ten years later. The communist cadres responsible for this act of violence rose to become Ministers and Members of Parliament under the Left Front government, yet no one was ever held accountable. This incident has become a symbol of political violence in the state of West Bengal, and it is ironic that the Congress now relies on the Communist Party of India (Marxist) for its political oxygen. [11]

Marichjhapi Massacre (1979) was the failure of complete administration and law-order situation in which the ruling party sponsored violence. On the day of the 'Saraswati Puja', the Left Front Government led by Jyoti Basu began firing, starving, shooting and killing Bengali Hindu refugees from Bangladesh who had come to the state and were staying in the area of Sundarban. The refugees, mostly Dalits who had fled in Bangladesh and were seeking refuge in India, numbered around 60, 000 and were admitted by the Left Front under the poll promises. The refugees were transferred from the Dandakaranya rehabilitation institution in Odisha to Marichjhanpi in Sundarban. . The Left Front cadres used tear gas, blockades, firing and burning of camps to disperse the refugees.

Ananda Margi Monk Burnt (1982) was one of the shameful incidents happened when at least 17 Ananda Margis were burned alive while attending an "educational conference" at Tiljala in Kolkata's south suburbs. Communist Party of India (Marxist) cadres under the leadership of city leaders were worried that the Ananda Margis would become a powerful force in the state, hindering their growth. The procession went through what is today known as Bijon Setu in south Kolkata's Ballygunge. Taxicabs carrying Ananda Margis and their Sanyasins were stopped at three different places. The Ananda Margis, including two women monks, were drenched in petrol and petrol kerosene and torched. Several others were injured. The massacre was meticulously planned and carried out by the Marxist cadres in retaliation for a land dispute between the Marg and the CPI (M). No CPI (M) leader has been arrested so far.

Nanoor Killings (2000) on July 27, 2000, Communist Party of India (Marxist) cadres and their local leaders murdered 11 landless Muslim workers just because they were the supporters of opposition parties and were fighting against encroachments and land grabbing. The main witness was also assaulted and injured by the Communist goons. In an editorial, the Statesman said, "The only reason to attack the main witness in the Nanoor massacre in July 2000, where 11 supporters were killed by armed Communist cadres, was to protect those responsible and to get their trial annulled, by

any means necessary. It has been five years since the horrendous murders committed by the Marxists but the trial of 79 accused comrades has yet to begin." The CPIM's bike-riding cadres, known as the Harmad Bahini, spread terror across the region, as they have done for many years in places where the Communist power was challenged politically. The modus operandi was to terrorise the women, burn the huts, beat and sometimes even hack at the men, and burn the gathered grains before leaving. Villagers were often forced to leave the villages and forced to live in camps in neighbouring villages or even to leave the state.

Nandigram Incidents (2007) the Communist Party of India (Marxist) government of the "poor and peasants" attempted to take over 10, 000 hectares of agricultural land from the farmers in the district of Purba Medinipur in order to provide a foreign company with access to the land. The farmers, who had formed an organisation known as the "Bhumi Raksha Committee", resisted the seizure of their land. Initially, the CPI (M)'s Harmada Bahini attacked the villagers, threatening and burning their huts and setting the stage for the outbreak of firing which resulted in the death of over 14 farmers and the injury of over 70. The exact number of victims will remain unknown; however, it is widely reported that piles of farmers' bodies were disposed of without hesitation. The CPI (M) government, which was based on the power of the farmers and landless labour, did not hesitate to massacre the villagers.

Unique Style of Political Violence

In 'Arthashastra', the famous Indian political thinker, Kautilya said that wrong guidelines of the authorities conceited behaviour of rulers provide birth to revolts of the people. However, in West Bengal, a section of individuals belongs to specific political party use violence to seize political strength and want to preserve a grip to exist in the function. In West Bengal, during elections, there is violence that involves threatening voters and polling personnels. Party members of ruling party used to capture booths, prevent other from voting or force them to vote for a specific political party. This kind of unlawful and unconstitutional behaviour is totally anti-democratic. It attacks the core of concept of democracy that believes in freedom of expression.

It's far essential to apprehend the scale of violence in West Bengal for closing two decades. As per NCRB reports of 2021, West Bengal has recorded highest numbers of political murders in the country. [12] West Bengal, for a long term, witnessed an excessive degree of political violence. In 2010 and 2011, general 72 folks had been killed recorded by way of NCRB.

Table 1: Showing the political murders in different Indian States

State	Political Murders in different States										
Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
West Bengal	38	38	22	26	10	1	1	1	12	12	161
Bihar	24	32	32	12	3	0	26	12	9	6	156
Madhya Pradesh	19	13	28	22	1	10	8	1	3	2	107
Jharkhand	9	8	4	00	00	15	02	42	1	6	87
Andhra Pradesh	5	33	2	12	11	4	0	2	0	5	74
Uttar Pradesh	1	2	2	2	2	28	29	03	0	3	72
Kerala	6	4	5	7	6	12	15	5	4	4	68

Karnataka	8	5	4	5	2	8	10	9	6	4	61
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Source: NCRB Crimes in India report—2010-19, Motive of Murders-Political

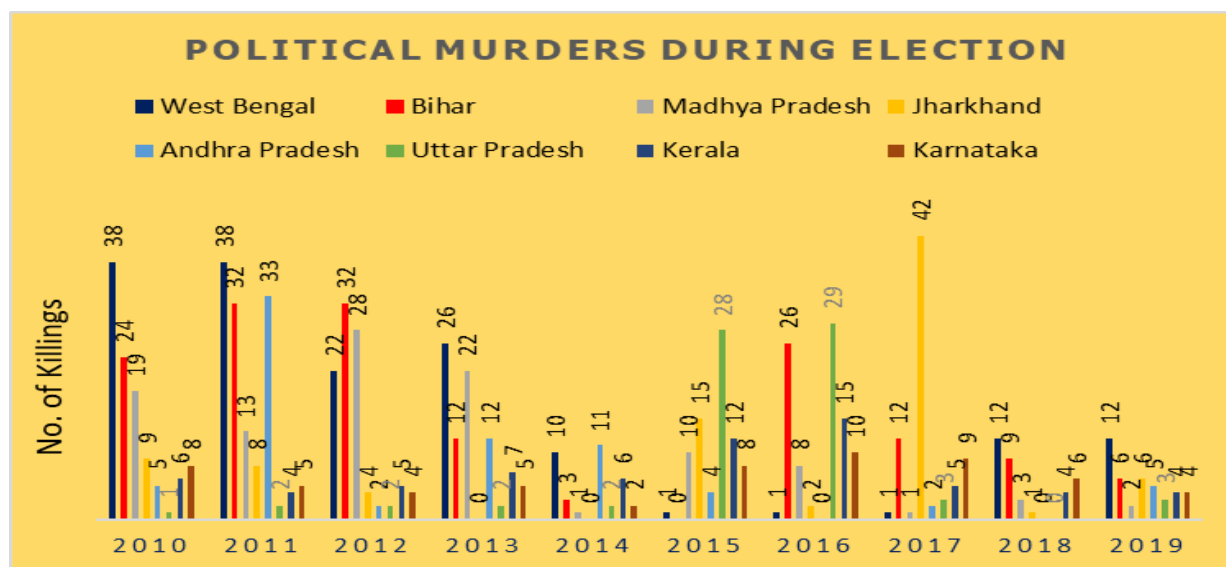


Figure 1: Showing number of Killings in different Elections

The above desk indicating those states of India wherein maximum of the political murders occurred at some point of the election. Sadly, West Bengal is main in the case of political murders. Many analysts argue that the upward thrust of BJP after Panchayat election in 2018 is the precept motives of growing numbers of political murders in West Bengal. NCRB data suggests that there have been as many as 47 political killings involving TMC and BJP workers since the 2019 Lok Sabha election. [13] Now BJP has become the main opposition after winning 18 Lok Sabha Seats in 2019 election. As per many analysts, presently political violence is increasing its high peak due to the aggressive push by the BJP to unseat the ruling party TMC. [14] In assembly election 2021, the conditions became uncontrollable, every party blamed each other for creating violence, especially in rural areas. The violence touched its top after the declaration of result of election on 2nd May 2021.

It was alleged that 6 BJP workers were killed in the attack of Trinamool Congress. [15] Himanta Biswa Sharma, the senior minister of Assam claimed that 100 of BJP workers families had crossed West Bengal-Assam boarder to take shelter in Assam away from the violence against them. He called this violence as “ugly dance of democracy”. [16]

Politics of Terror

Once the famous philosopher Simon Critchley said, “politics is essentially is about the management of fear, an economy of fear, continually adjusting the level of fear to produce the right level of affect in the citizenry”. [17] By limiting the authority of opposing wing organizations, the ruling parties in West Bengal have been instilling terror in the population since the 1950s.

One of the distinctive aspects of West Bengal's political culture today is the politics of fear. In 2011, TMC came into power with a huge mandate. As West Bengal's new chief minister, Mamata Banerjee made the pledge, “We will bring in the politics of change, not revenge, ” yet nothing changed.

In just nine months after the 2011 Assembly Election, 56 CPI (M) party members were murdered, allegedly in attacks committed by TMC workers. [18] 39 people lost their lives in the TMC and CPI (M) violence during the 2013 panchayat elections. There have been several reports of vote manipulation, booth captures, and ballot paper burning. The situation remained identical during the 2018 panchayat elections. Ten individuals were murdered on election day, and several media outlets covered the story of booth capturing all day. A point to take note of was the fact that 34% of seats were uncontested. It was the TMC party workers who terrorized the opponents party members by creating a violent situation and did not allow them to file nominations. [19] As per reports of State Election Commission, there are total 48650 Gram Panchayat seats in West Bengal. Trinamool congress begged 16814 seats without any contest. The fate of 3059 Panchayat Samiti seats and 203 Zilla Parishad seats were uncontested. [20] This was the all-time record in the political history of West Bengal. Almost 34 percent seats were bagged by the Trinamool Congress without any contest.

In 2023, Panchayat Election, Trinamool Congress has filed 85817 nominations for 73887 seats of the three-tier election. On the other hand, BJP has filed about 75% seats at the Panchayat level which is second highest, following by CPI (M) and Congress. [21] But the it has been reported from the various news-papers that the opponent candidates were pressurized to withdraw their nominations with the help of police administration. Unfortunately, in 2023, the Panchayat election repeated the pictures of previous years. It was reported that poll related toll rose to 55 [22] In West Bengal, Panchayat elections are not a low-power politics because it is the gateway of power of control.

In West Bengal, some of the analysts argues that ‘there is an acute sense of fear. In politically polarized Bengal, cadres of every party look at their competitors from opposing parties as the ‘other’. In the State, searching for revenge or retribution became a dominant sub-culture of politics of fear

and anger. The purpose of these targeted killings, particularly after the election, is to teach lessons to the workers of the defeated party. [23] Violence has become a language of political life in West Bengal.

Table 2: Uncontested Seats in Panchayat Election West Bengal

Years	Uncontested Seats	Percentage
1978	338	0.73
1983	332	0.74
1988	4200	8.9
1993	1716	2.81
1998	680	1.36
2003	6800	11
2008	2845	5.57
2013	6274	10.66
2018	20076	34.2
2023	7019	9.5

Source: Times of India [24] Time of India [25]

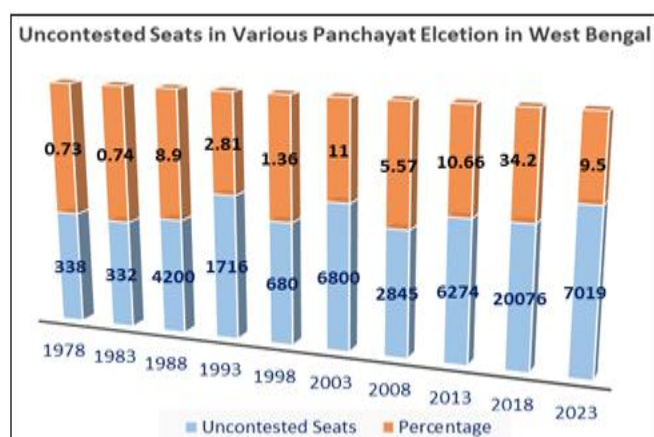


Figure 2: Indicating no. of uncontested seats in Panchayat Election

It is clear from table 2. That percentage of uncontested seats in Panchayat election has been increased consistently from 1978 to 2018. But the last Panchayat election (2023) was very much controversial and violent in the sense that there was an equilibrium situation created from both side the ruling party and opponents. The opponents succeeded to file maximum numbers of nominations this time.

Drivers at the back of the political violence

Analyzing the previous records of the political violence, it is clear that West Bengal mounted a black scar in the country. West Bengal has no longer set up any example of political violence concerning with caste, creed or religion in latest time. For that reason, the drivers of political violence in West Bengal are very extraordinary from other States of India.

First of all, Lack of political will from the leaders of various parties is one of the main causes of increasing political violence daily. Most of the party leaders in West Bengal need to be well-aware about the usage of abusive phrases towards their opponents. At the same time, the senior leaders as the blind obedient support this kind of absurdness.

Secondly, lack of rule of law is another reason responsible for political violence in West Bengal. Every government in

West Bengal, whether it was Left, Congress or the present government (TMC), tries to minimize the power of administration for the sake of their own. Every time, the administration becomes the “yes man” of the government. Police administration is playing their role as the servant of the leaders of the ruling party. Politicization of police force is one of the reasons behind prevailing lawlessness in West Bengal. In each government, the Chief Minister (CM) exercised control over the Ministry of Police. Consequently, no disciplinary action was taken against party leaders or cadres who had committed any criminal offences or committed any corruption. This is nothing more or less than an endorsement or permission for anti-socialists to engage them for political interest without any accountability.

Thirdly, the connections between Mafias and politicians have been used to eliminate opponents and to shape the political interest. It's far clear that the entry of criminals in politics is being advocated best to capture the powers of rulers. This results the legalization of violence.

Fourthly, maximum party employees get concerned with different political events to earn their livelihood. A segment of people being engaged with political events to boom their energy and role within the society. As a result, a hierarchical chain of power and position is being manufactured and people are engaged in exclusive varieties of crime with support of party help.

People in rural and semi-urban areas have largely become dependent on the government schemes and projects to maintain livelihood, as a result of the increase in unemployment over the past two decades, and ruling parties have taken advantage of this dependency. [26] This is a calculated attempt to exaggerate the level of unemployment within the State and present themselves as the saviour of the unemployed youth, offering them financial assistance and making them dependent on the ruling party. This creates a precarious future with unquestioning loyalty to the ruling party.

Fifthly, circulation of Political power in one family leads to nepotism. This encourages political violence to protect family reputation. Once, they taste political power, they consider themselves invincible and try to retain the power within their family members at any cost which promoting corruption all over the place.

Sixthly, party hegemony is one of the reasons behind legalization of political violence in West Bengal. There is no check and balance on such violent activities, rather party leaders of different level try to justify the unlawful activities of party workers. According to Dwaipayan Bhattacharya, the prominent intellectual, the dominate on of the party all over in other spheres of rural life is called ‘party society; a culture which has continued with far greater strength since the TMC won the election in 2011 [27]

The local nexus between politics, economic activities and criminal offences has tried to draw attention to the higher leaders. This culture has flourished under the successive regimes in West Bengal. Manage over the local resources and economic activities have become a bone of dispute not only between rival parties but also within groups of the same

party.^{xvi} The recent killings of Bogtui village are another example of intra-party factionalism within the ruling TMC over economic and political domination in the area. ^{xvi}

At last, but not the least, it must be noted that politics at present has become an easy way to earn money without any accountability.

3. Conclusion

Political violence in West Bengal at present time is leading by the Trinamool Congress and following the identical legacy of past. After the discussion of political nature and dynamics of political violence in West Bengal, it's proved that there is a distinctiveness in political tradition from the other States in India. The primary objective of the party workers of winning party is to ruin the party offices and take revenge from their opponents. Domination over the resources and different institutions make the activity of the political culture of West Bengal is unique. Secondly, ideological flexibility is one of the important features in political culture in West Bengal. Most of the party members of CPI (M) joined TMC after the blunder in 2011 Legislative Election. The same incident repeated again before the Legislative Election in 2021, when a section TMC leasers and workers joined BJP. [28] Thirdly, in the case of other states of India, political violence is sporadic or episodic, but in West Bengal, political violence has become an everyday phenomenon.

This would lead society to an uncertain future with no purpose. It is essential for the voters to be aware of the political environment surrounding them and civil society should speak out against any form of violence associated with politics. In this respect, a non-political civil society must be formed to stop any kind of violence associated with politics. Unfortunately, a large section of intellectuals has taken party membership for the sake of their own interests. Currently, intellectuals have taken to the streets to protest, but their actions being motivated by political opportunism and a desire to prevent administrative complications. This can be understood as a response to the politically charged environment, wherein individuals seek to avoid undesirable outcomes. The majority of the population, who are characterized by their lack of political organization in their daily lives, are unaware of the numerous political issues that are being faced. As a result, it is relatively easy for them to take bribes and obtain government assistance in their own interests. Furthermore, some of them are very active in various ways, which can lead to administrative harassment. Speaking out against the ruling political party can be seen as a risk to one's own life.

The political landscape of West Bengal is undergoing a rapid transformation. A lack of ethical and ideological principles leading the next generation to an uncertain future with no purpose. Certain undemocratic circumstances have been accepted and encouraged by a segment of unscrupulous individuals.

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