

## **The figure of the migrant in the electoral times: A report on West Bengal assembly elections 2021**

### **Overview**

This report focused on the visibility of the issues of migrants in the election campaigns. The report covers the dynamics of the election campaigns in different districts of West Bengal and the issue of the migrants rose during the campaigns. The report also gives a view from the migrants and refugees on the policies taken by the state and the central government to secure them or to protect them as citizens. The report also covers the intervention of different civil society initiatives to make the voters concern about the constitutional rights of the citizens as well as the migrants and refugees. Last but not the least the report focused on the role of different social media that take the election campaigns to almost all the voters. The study shows how the songs, rhymes, podcasts, short videos, memes and cartoons played a crucial role in the election campaigns.

### **The sections on the reports**

Based on the central question, the report is dived in different sections.

#### **Migrant labourer as a political subject**

That the migrant labourer has emerged as a distinctive target group of election campaign is something unique to this election. Both the BJP and the Left-Congress alliance leaders repeatedly reminded the public that Mamata Banerjee called the Shramik specials trains bringing back the migrant workers home 'corona specials' and her government's total lack of empathy for them. CPM's manifesto promised a separate ministry for migrant labour if the party comes to power. 'The state government will register the names of all migrant labourers and support them during their stays in other states'. Advertising materials asking voters to poll in favour of individual CPM candidates or the party in general mentioned how they helped the returnee migrant workers during last year's countrywide shutdown. The success of Shramajibi canteens were often highlighted in this context.

BJP's leaflet calling people to join PM Modi's public meeting at Brigade, asked the following question while highlighting the bleak job scene and the corrupt governance of the TMC regime:

Men and women from Bengal are forced to leave for states like Gujarat, Maharashtra and Kerala to get petty jobs as menial labourers. There are around 40 lakh of such migrant workers. The state government hides that data from you. Why do 40 lakh youths of Bengal has to go to other states for jobs? Why can't huge employment opportunities be created by developing fruits and food processing industries in Bengal? Why can't the growth of tourism bring unprecedented development in Bengal?

The figure of the inter-state migrant worker, in this order of things, becomes a sign which represented the imagination of the 'Sonar Bangla' in BJP's campaign through *negation*. As a mere *symptom*, it gets subsumed under the apocalyptic rhetoric about the imagined *disease* – that is the misrule of TMC government.

TMC was also not behind in staking their claims. The list of various achievements of previous TMC governments as declared in their manifesto included the mention of the 'Samarthan scheme', which 'had provided a one-time grant of Rs. 50,000 to labourers who were forced to return to the State from different parts of the country after demonetization'.

This year's migrant labourers' return for the assembly election was of an unprecedented scale has been pointed out by many commentators. Newspaper articles in March and April reported that timber, plywood, construction and hospitalities industries in Kerala were severely hit by an unprecedented exodus of the migrant workers from West Bengal and Assam who left their workplaces to cast vote in their villages.<sup>1</sup> Not all the migrant labourers who had returned to their home villages during last year's first wave of pandemic went back to their work places.

## The NRC and the Question of Citizenship and Infiltration

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<sup>1</sup> Toby Antony, 'Kerala industries hit as migrant workers head home for elections', 12 March 2021, The New Indian Express, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/2021/mar/12/kerala-industries-hit-as-migrant-workers-head-home-for-elections-2275448.html>, accessed on 22 June 2021; M. P. Praveen, 'Industry hit in Kerala as workers from West Bengal, Assam leave for voting', The Hindu, 5 April 2021, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/industry-hit-in-kerala-as-workers-from-west-bengal-assam-leave-for-voting/article34240471.ece>, accessed on 22 June 2021.

While the migrant labour became an important issue during this election, the debate on the citizenship question is no far behind. The issue of NRC provided a unique background to this year's election, against which the cut-outs of the different political actors, both the voters and the vote-seekers, needs to be seen. Election has always been an event, but this year was unique for many voters who believed it to be necessary to vote this year in order to ensure that their names were not excluded from the electoral roll. Presence in the electoral roll of the state was thought to be a security of legal citizenship rights in a time when there is a union government and the political party in its driving seat are gunning for a country-wide NRC and subsequent expulsion of the 'illegal migrants' from the nation. In a classic example of this, Debkumar Sarkar, a fish and meat retail shop owner at Noida, told the reporters of The Indian Express that he stayed put at Noida during the lockdown last year, but returned to his village at Gajol in Malda with family this year only to cast their votes. 'We have heard that this year casting vote is very important because we have to prove our citizenship', Sarkar said. It was not surprising at all for us to hear someone at a tea shop near Kolkata, clearly a Hindu by faith, sharing similar concerns. 'What if I don't vote and they struck off my name from the voter list'? It seemed to be a quite common concern among many Hindus and Muslims electors, across constituencies of the state, in this year's assembly polls. TMC's campaign against the NRC, before and during the assembly elections, probably had a role to play in this increased importance of elections. All throughout their opposition to BJP's NRC proposals and the passing of CAA in the parliament, they maintained that the voter card issued by the election commission is a sufficient document to prove one's citizenship. Trinamool supremo and the incumbent CM, Mamata Banerjee emphasized this point in many of her election rallies. The argument is simple: a voter card, which is a proof of being a legitimate elector of the governments in this nation, indicates membership to the body politic of the nation and therefore is a valid document of citizenship. Perhaps no other election made this connection between voting and being a citizen so visible before the voters of West Bengal.

The BJP, on the other hand, was following their long traditions of blaming illegal infiltration behind every socio-economic crisis in West Bengal, especially in the Border districts. The national and local leaders were busy to blame the communal biasness of the ruling TMC behind all the crisis. At PM Modi's public meeting at the Kolkata

Brigade Parade Ground on 7 March, a mega event which in a way inaugurated BJP's star-studded, high-cost campaign for West Bengal assembly, Sayantan Basu, the state general secretary, declared that if his party comes to power in Bengal, they would expel the 2.25 crore 'infiltrators' from the state. The same issue was repeatedly raised by local and district committee presidents of the party. As for example While Mamata Banerjee was talking about the development at an election rally at Raghunathpur, Purulia, the president of the Purulia district committee was blaming the minority appeasement of the TMC government as one of the reasons behind the poor socio-economic condition of the region.

On the other hand the figures, anecdotes and images of Assam's detention camps served as major electoral campaign materials for TMC. They were recycled through the speeches, social media posts and other modes of communication. Uttar Banga Sangbad published a report which said the TMC Refugee Cell organized a North to South Bengal rally in which there were tableaux with the families of Bengali detainees in Assam. The detention camps featured in the campaign trails of the Sanjukta Morcha as well. The study showed the gift of *pattas* to the refugee colonies had been a major campaign highlight for TMC in this assembly election. From a few months before the elections, refugee colonies across West Bengal were adorned with huge flex banners congratulating the CM for the *pattas*. The party leaders in the state or the local levels never forgot to mention these achievements. The campaign at Gaighata also talked about government programmes like *Duare Sarkar* that focused on the distribution of caste certificates, allocation of funds for the Matua and Namasudra Development Boards and other welfare policies of the government.

### **The Bengali and Non-Bengali Question**

A different meaning of the term 'migrant' was added to the already existing connotations of the term in the political discourse of West Bengal. TMC accused its main rival, the Bharatiya Janata Party of bringing the migrant politicians (*porijayee neta*) and cadres to the state to fight the election. This campaign was rooted in Bengali regional-linguistic identitarianism in which the BJP was portrayed as a party of the Hindi heartland and therefore an 'outsider' to West Bengal politics as against the TMC.

The slogan which reverberated at every level of TMC's electoral campaign was '*Bangla Nijer Meyeke Chay*' (Bengal wants her native daughter). The argument is one of self-determination: Bengal will be governed by those belonging to Bengal only. Now, who belongs to Bengal? TMC leaders were quick to explain that it could be those residents of Bengal as well who were not Bengali-speaking. BJP party was not a deserving candidate as the party was controlled by leaders from New Delhi, TMC said. However, in the everyday usage of the trope of 'outsider' in the campaigns of TMC and their allies, belongingness to Bengal often slipped into an identitarian ethno-politics. If BJP wanted to highlight the borders of the nation-state in its campaign rhetoric, TMC's campaign drew a different set of borders around a different imagination of the nation – the Bengali *jaati*. A culturalist discourse celebrating the 'bengali way of life' was produced to counter BJP's representation of the 'Hindu way of life'. 'Jai Bangla' became a favourite slogan in the TMC rallies and public meetings. TMC leaders and cadres lost no opportunity of lampooning the BJP leaders from outside of Bengal who, in their desperation to connect with the Bengali voters, mispronounced Bengali words. Social media platforms became full of jokes and memes on this.

In response to this, BJP took refuge to the trope of the national border once again. They shared their strong displeasure of TMC's slogan '*Jai Bangla*', which they claimed was borrowed from Bangladesh and therefore reflected Mamata's anti-Hindu tendency. Its leaders tried to explain this as yet another show of Mamata's policy of appeasement towards the 'Muslim infiltrators' whom she never considered to be 'outsiders' but the PM and HM of India are. In a tangential reference to this, a BJP graffiti near Basirhat Bazar read: 'Shah [Amit], J. P. [Nadda] are outsiders and Noor, Firdous are brothers. Is that justice? Come on friends, let's play'. If the comparison of the names were not enough, the walling also included slogans like '*Bharat Mata Ki Jai*' and '*Jai Shriram*' to drive home the point.

Soon the borders started multiplying everywhere and in constituencies after constituencies the political parties faced criticisms of fielding candidates who were outsiders to the area. Words like *bhumiputra* and *bhumikanya* repeatedly appeared in the campaign talks and publicity materials. Thus BJP attempted to brand Mamata Banerjee as an outsider in Nandigram AC when she filed her nomination for the seat and highlighted Shuvendu Adhikari, who hails from Kanthi as the 'son of the soil'. To counter TMC's '*Bangla Nijer Meyekei Chay*', BJP coined a counter-slogan: '*Bangla Nijer Chheleke Chay*' with Shuvendu as its face. The language of electoral politics therefore reproduced the insider/outsider binary at multiple levels. Factional fights within the parties could feed on this discursive imagination and add to the multifaceted layers of the election as a singular event.

### **The role of civil society in the electoral game**

In this year's election, the state of West Bengal witnessed uniquely organized civil society efforts in voter mobilization against BJP. No Vote to BJP campaign, a loose assemblage of rights activists, students and youth, artists and performers, run a highly spirited campaign in the state cutting across old and new mediums of campaigns. They organized street corner meetings, rallies, social media campaigns, produced music videos, short videos, painted graffiti on the walls or put up posters to politicize the electorate against the communal, fascist, xenophobic, and anti-people politics of BJP and their allies. Circulation of textual and visual materials opposing NRC-NPR-CAA as well as on the vagaries of the migrant labourers during the Covid19 constituted an integral part of the campaign. This was probably the first time in the history of West Bengal, when different civil society actors and a few left political parties like CPI(ML) Liberation joined forces to organize an active electoral campaign which asked people to vote any party except BJP. The campaign attracted much attention from the mainstream press and media. The Left criticized it of doing TMC's bidding, while TMC simply tried to appropriate it by recirculating the campaign's materials from their own channels and social media platforms.

A different civil society intervention in voter mobilization along similar lines came in the form of a music video. Famous film and theatre actors, film makers and musicians of West Bengal came together under the banner of Citizen United to write, compose and produce the song titled '*Nijeder Mawte Nijeder Gaan*' and its music video. The lyrics of the song which would soon become viral in social media as well as on traditional news platforms included the following lines:

Ami Goebles-er aynay  
Thik tomakei dekhe phelechhi  
Ei hanorer dnat purono  
Tate poka lege ache dekhechhi

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Tumi sob dhroner onko  
Pakistan diye gun korechho  
Tumi sobaike khub ragiye  
Nachhorbanda kore chherechho