



# The lotus blooms in West Bengal

The BJP's surge in the 2019 Lok Sabha elections has put the political legitimacy of the state's ruling Trinamool Congress on the mat

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West Bengal today will wake up today to an altered reality. The result of the 2019 general elections has seen the Modi juggernaut lay to rest, or rather blown to smithereens, what many would like to believe, was one of the last bastions of opposition against the BJP government.

Such has been the saffron surge in the state that even Saumitra Khan, BJP's Bishnupur candidate, who could not even enter his own constituency, due to multiple cases filed by Mamata Banerjee government, has taken lead.

A top-level BJP leader in Delhi told *Mumbai Mirror* that "strong anti-incumbency of Mamata government" and "strong pro-incumbency of central government" have contributed greatly in charting the party's success in Bengal.

The massive inroads of BJP can be broadly explained by the following factors:

1. Mamata Banerjee is a victim of her own success: The space for political opposition in the state had shrunk to non-existent levels over the last few years. She used muscle to weed out the CPI(M) – which she saw as her principal enemy. People found it easier to go against her by joining hands with the BJP than being even associated with the Left. The shrinking of opposition space is the single biggest reason for the BJP's entry into West Bengal. The panchayat election rigging/violence is further part of this narrative strand.

2. BJP emerged as a local party: Amit Shah's coup of getting Mukul Roy from the TMC over to BJP helped a great deal. Roy was Mamata's right-hand man and knew the inner workings of the party as well as its strengths and weaknesses. This helped

the BJP to be seen as a party with a local face in Bengal, which gave it a huge advantage. Roy brought many TMC workers to BJP, including the Barrackpore BJP candidate Arjun Singh, Bishnupur candidate Saumitra Khan and Jadavpur candidate Anupam Hazra. He strategised and travelled to every nook and cranny of the state, almost two months ahead of the polls, and did all the recce for Narendra Modi's rallies.

3. Mamata played into the hands of the BJP: The TMC chief owes her rise to power in Bengal to the Muslim vote. It was this vote that left the CPI(M) en masse to join her party, leading to the Left's ultimate downfall. The BJP was quick to cotton on to this connection and blow it out of proportion. TMC was late in realising this and when it tried its hand at "soft Hindutva", by organising its own Ram Navami celebrations and Hindu themed yatras, it failed to pass muster. "Mamata polarised the elections by her Muslim appeasement policies," Sunil Deodhar, RSS swayamsewak and BJP national secretary, told *Mumbai Mirror* as the trends poured in.

"This helped us so greatly that it ended up consolidating the CPI (M) and TMC vote bank in our favour."

4. Single leader party: Mamata was finding it increasingly difficult to control her cadres on the ground. As a re-

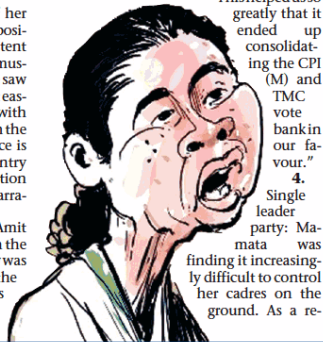
sult, there was widespread discontent and corruption that was destabilising the party at its base. A lot of Mamata's social projects, barring the exceptions of 'Khadya Sathi' and 'Kanyashree Prakalpa' (scheme aimed at preventing child marriage and spreading women's education), did not reach the grassroot beneficiaries. Rural people, especially in tribal belts of Jhargram, Medinipur, Bankura and Purulia felt antagonised by the TMC leaders. "Only the relatives of local leaders and their close aides received the benefits. We have not received anything from Bangla Abash Yojana to toilets under Nirmal Bangla project," a rural voter told us. Even special BPL cards issued in the tribal belt did not reap much benefit for Mamata in the polls.

5. Mamata also lost her foothold in the tribal belt constituencies of Bankura, Purulia and Jhargram. BJP national general secretary Sunil Deodhar told us, "This is one reason behind the decline in people's support. The other is the multi-crore chit-fund scam. Poor and lower middle class people lost their livelihoods because of this." Deodhar was in-charge of the last leg of the Lok Sabha elections in Kolkata from May 1.

One also cannot deny the impact Modi's rallies have had on the state. In all, the prime minister visited the state 10 times and addressed at least 16 public rallies over the campaign. In every district, all through the course of its seven phases, the rallies were a hit. The saffron wave was apparent in those who came in droves for a "Modi darshan" and believed it to be a once in a lifetime opportunity.

Credit also goes to Kailash Vijayvargiya, the Madhya Pradesh leader, who even gave up his own seat as MP to stay put in Bengal for the last two years.

The fight in Bengal is now neck-and-neck between the TMC and BJP. It will no doubt make life uncomfortable for Mamata.



## The Mumbai boy who got it right

Pradeep Gupta's post-poll survey delivered a 100 per cent accurate prediction

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As the initial poll trends gave way to a clearer big picture, pollster Pradeep Gupta broke down on national television. The 50-year-old chairman and managing director of Axis My India had hit the jackpot. Not only did he stand vindicated after three days of naysayers questioning the integrity of his survey, his 26 years of struggle in Mumbai finally seemed to have paid off.

At a time most journalists, psephologists, poll pundits and even the BJP failed to see its own prospects, Gupta delivered a 100 per cent accurate prediction for India Today-Axis My India post-poll survey, which gave 339-365 seats for the BJP-led NDA and 77-108 seats for the UPA.

A migrant from a small village in Waraseoni in Balaghat, Madhya Pradesh, Gupta arrived in Mumbai in 1993 to work for an advertising agency after his stint with Thompson Press in New Delhi. "They were days of great struggle and like all other bachelors living in shared accommodation, I too lived in a cramped apartments, sharing them with several other boys. I lived in several neighbourhoods across the city and briefly in Vasai too," recalls Gupta, who now lives in Vile Parle but spends most of his time in his Andheri East office. "My favourite place in the city now is my office," he laughs.

Since 2013, when Gupta first took to poll predictions, he has worked on 36 exit and post-poll surveys, of which only two went off the mark; the remaining were 95 per cent accurate. "In fact in the assembly polls at the end of last year, my predictions were 100 per cent accurate," he insists.

"The key to getting poll predictions right is to catch the voter when she is back home, comfortable and relaxed on an honest chat," Gupta lets out his secret. "It is the sheer hard work of our over 500 field workers and the rigorous training camps in the run-up to the data collection. We had organised a big three-day training camp and during this I told my team to work on just one basic thing – to connect with the people. It depends on how the team members connect with the voters. I told them to get the voter's insight, ask their problems and issues and then question them on who or which political party is better placed to address them..." Gupta told *Mumbai Mirror* between breaks from his daylong commitment at the India Today studio.

Asked how others failed to see what he managed to read, Gupta pointed out: "Journalists have a geographical outreach... they usually catch hold of voters outside the polling booth or on the road. Nobody can talk on the road. We reached out to 7,42,187 voters across 542 constituencies and spent five to 10 minutes on each of the voters in the face-to-face interviews. It was not an exit poll but a post-poll prediction, which is far more accurate because the voter is at ease in his or her own house."

Gupta said it is in his DNA to do this job. "In addition to poll predictions, my company works on corporate and social research. My partner Mukesh Kabra handles the back office extensively, I am the operations guy. We will keep up our work on poll predictions," says Gupta, 50, who has a degree in Owner/President Management from Harvard Business School.

