

WHEN FACTIONALISM IS FATAL : HOW TRINMUL CONGRESS LOST THE COOCH BEHAR LOK SABHA SEAT

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ABSTRACT

While few general factors precipitated the ground-swelling, somewhere more crucial and immediate cause of loss of Lok Sabha seats for Trinamul Congress was due to factional feud spinning around personal enmity and domination.

KEYWORDS: Lok Sabha elections 2019, Cooch Behar constituency, Trinamool Congress, BJP, Mamata Banerjee, horizontal split, factional feud,

I

In Lok Sabha elections 2019, the TMC (All India Trinamool Congress) straightaway lost 12 seats in West Bengal— down to 22 from previous 34 seats. Such whacking is disquieting particularly when the party harped on winning all 42 seats from the state.¹ As per reports, internal squabbling was the cause of drabbing for TMC candidate in Balurghat and Barrackpur seat.² However, in Cooch Behar parliamentary seat as well the defeat of TMC contestant was basically— not exclusively though— due to factionalism within TMC.

From organisational standpoint political parties are not homogenous; rather they consist of coalitions of political actors who pursue their individual interests and goals. Indeed, factionalism is intrinsic to political parties operating under democratic systems (Kothari 1967), though its manifestation and degree may vary. Factionalism— conceived as the group or party within the party— may occur because of ideological drift or for personality clash among the leaders.³

Factional conflict particularly in the Indian National Congress is more an offshoot of personalised structure of power where personalised enmity is the primary organising principle, (Brass 1966). However, factionalism in Congress party and its derivatives is different from other parties— both national and regional— in the sense that the power structure of the party is almost exclusively cult based and the phenomenon is more open, publicly displayed (Nielsen 2011) and more degenerative as through defection and mushrooming of breakaway outfit.

Factionalism in almost all parties surfaces more prominently during election times— or with the allure of position, power and pelf— and it is often accounted for the trounce in the fray. Nonetheless, it is not easy to establish statistical correlation between factionalism and electoral performance, but it is perceptible particularly when the margin

of defeat is not quite high. Without entering into the methodological imbroglio, the following analysis evinces that the defeat of the TMC in Cooch Behar parliamentary seat during 2019 elections was hastened by staid scale of factionalism.

II

At least three mutually reinforcing general factors can be identified for the walloping of the TMC (and the ascendancy of the BJP) in Lok Sabha (LS) elections 2019. i) One was the misadventure of TMC during Panchayat polls, 2018 when unprecedented excesses— highest ever uncontested seats (34.2 percent of total) and use of brute forces— denied many of the 1.75 crore rural electorate to cast votes freely and fairly which led to public rage and repugnancy.

ii) Strategic and concerted electioneering of the BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party) was another critical factor. The BJP, emerging as the main opposition eclipsing CPI(M) and Congress since Panchayat elections, 2018 set forth its 'mission Bangla', carpet bombed the state with high profile rallies— 2nd highest among states by Narendra Modi himself—, engineered large scale defection from TMC and attacked the underbelly of TMC: alleged corruption, illegal businesses, syndicate-raj, haughtiness of the leadership, fiasco over School Service Commission examinations, dilly-dallying with Pay Commission report, Muslim appeasement etc.⁴

iii) A section of electorate, however minuscule, was more concerned with the formation of a strong and stable central government and the TMC with its regional confinement was found wanting on this front. While the overall experience of coalition led central governments was upsetting, the abortive pre-poll alliance of any hue influenced the vote decision of a few away from the TMC.

While the aforesaid factors had almost uniform impact throughout West Bengal, somewhere, as in Cooch Behar constituency, factionalism within TMC emerged as the crucial and immediate cause for the loss and it put the final nail in the coffin. After all, Mamata Banerjee, TMC supremo, has rued that BJP would not have gained in the general election had factionalism been reined in.⁵

III

In Cooch Behar district— like few others— multiple TMC factions had been at work. Of all the factions, the more manifest and destabilising was the horizontal split of TMC into Mother (parent) and Yuva (youth) wings.

The Mother faction, owing allegiance to Mamata Banerjee, was led by Rabindra Nath Ghosh, minister of North Bengal Development Department and the then district president and the most senior and dominant TMC leader in Cooch Behar. The Yuva faction accepted Abhishek Banerjee, national president of All India Trinamul Youth Congress, as its chieftain and was led by the then district Young Trinamul president Partha Pratim Roy—Nisith Pramanik and Abhijit Dey Bhowmik were other prominent leaders of this faction.

From 2017 onwards each faction turned out to be other's bête noire. The wrangling between two factions turned fierce; thrashing, arson, torching of houses and forceful change of faction for the rival group members.⁶ Particularly in Dinhata sub-division, such infighting was rampant and the Yuva faction drove the opponent group virtually out. The minister Ghosh could not venture into Dinhata for months. Many student leaders openly sided with Yuva faction and organised public meetings with their faction leaders. The situation worsened during panchayat elections, 2018 when recurrent clashes erupted. The Yuva faction fielded at least 300 parallel or independent candidates against the official panchayat candidates and many independent contestants emerged victorious.⁷

It is absorbing to note that Roy was brought into politics, mentored and offered LS ticket by Ghosh. Yet the relationship between the Guru and disciple began to sour and reached its nadir around 2018. The purported starting point was the control over project/fund allocation from MPLAD. Ghosh demanded absolute acquiescence which was increasingly resented by Roy. Then the assertive role of Roy as Yuva president was perceived by Ghosh as audacious. The personal enmity reached such a pass when both the leaders refrained from eye contact even. Eventually, Ghosh felt betrayed, apprehended Roy as threat to his unilateral domination in the district and was determined to teach Roy a lesson or two. He publicly declared that if the party fields Roy as the Lok Sabha candidate in 2019, he would take political Sannyasa.⁸

When nomination for LS elections was being finalised, Mamata Banerjee reportedly favoured candidature of the then sitting MP (Roy). But Ghosh opposed the choice and insisted that Roy had no winning prospect. Ghosh instead pushed through the candidature of Paresch Adhikary who switched flank from Forward Block few months before LS elections. Ghosh supposedly assured Mamata Banerjee that he would ensure the safe passage of Adhikary. Mamata Banerjee eventually budged and cleared the candidature of Adhikary.

Driving out Roy and bringing in Adhikary was a move that cut the TMC in both ways. Firstly, denial of LS ticket to Roy was perceived to be due to vindictiveness of Ghosh and as such Roy was publicly supposed to have been wronged despite having somewhat clean and approving image. Being young and holding political position (MP and district Young Trinamul president), Roy did have a group of loyal followers who could not easily digest the leader's humiliation. Moreover, Roy hails from Rajbanshi community— having around 60 percent share of Scheduled Caste people that account for 50 percent of district population— and he sought to attend to the community centric issues in Lok Sabha sessions like demand for inclusion of Rajbanshi language in the 8th Schedule of Indian constitution. As such, a section of Rajbanshi community people had apparently felt aggrieved. However, contrary to speculations, Roy did not formally switch over to the BJP and maintained somewhat diplomatic as well as subdued profile.

Secondly, the nomination of Adhikary surprised many and caused convulsion among Yuva faction in particular and TMC supporters in general. Many TMC leaders and cadres felt upset over offering ticket to one who has just defected from the party that won the seat 10 times (1977- 2009). There were serious allegations of misappropriation of fund against Adhikary when he was Food Minister under Left Front government. Furthermore, Adhikary had extracted his pound of flesh for the defection: as by securing appointment to teaching post in a school for her daughter even without taking the test of School Service Commission. Indeed, the selection of Adhikary was resented by the factional leaders as well as rank and file. Getting the ticket just after defection and the state level indignation over the appointment of Adhikary's daughter was not palatable for many hardcore TMC supporters. Thus, checkmating Roy with Adhikary dented even the staunch support base of TMC.

When the fight between Mother and Yuva faction reached flash-point and when the Yuva faction's more prominent and vocal leader Nishit Pramanik gained so much clout that he was able to corner many of the district leaders, Pramanik was expelled from TMC for 'anti-party' activities. Thereafter, Pramanik joined in the BJP, 'anyway arranged' ticket for LS election and eventually won the seat.

Suspension of Pramanik unwittingly eroded the prospect of the TMC. Among multiple factions, Pramanik enjoyed the support of one of the stronger wings (Yuva). Moreover, he had the acquaintance (some suspect 'arrangement') with high-ups and firsthand experience of the working of several TMC groups which he exploited to his advantage.¹¹

In the Cooch Behar LS constituency almost all anti-TMC votes constellated in favour of BJP. But that was not love for BJP, its candidate or its ideology per excellence. It was rather tactical voting or counterintuitive politics. In the process, the Yuva faction, disgruntled TMC supporters and few others felt that voting for BJP was the only viable option, as there was no alternative—Left or Congress candidates had no real chance. The strategy was rather straightforward: weeding thorns with thorns. In the net, the TMC lost this seat, rather than the BJP winning it!

IV

The TMC has borne out of Congress womb, thus the factionalism that is proverbial in the Congress gene has been inherited by TMC as well. After all, Mamata Banerjee herself had been one important factional leader in the Congress and she deserted the parent party with her followers after being denied the post of party President of the state unit.

The TMC is a political party that revolves around persona (charisma!) of its supreme leader, it is bereft of ostensible ideology and well knit grassroots organisations. The Party tends to depend on select regional and district level party leaders who control the power grid through a network of sub-district/ Ward level units and leaders. Such lower hierarchy of leaders often act autonomously and the so called 'exchange dependence' bars them from control by higher-ups. Such operative praxis generates internal conflicts, more so during the time of power grabbing. During election times such bickering among the faction leaders becomes intense and somewhere and sometimes it turns fatal in electoral terms. Yet, the party cannot but put up with such infliction.

NOTES

¹. At the Martyrs' Day Rally on 21 July 2018, Mamata Banerjee had called for a clean sweep of all the 42 parliamentary seats in the state.

². "In the seat of Balurghat, factionalism within the Trinamool ranks ensured that the BJP went ahead". Lahiri Ishadrita (2019), 'BJP's Surge in Bengal: Where Mamata Lost Ground And How', *The Quint*, 24 May 2019. See also *Economic Times*, 'Discontent brewing in TMC over ticket distribution', 16 Mar, 2019.

For Barrackpore seat, when former TMC MLA Arjun Singh, locally known as 'Strongman', was denied ticket, he defected

to BJP. He had "a mass-base and strong organisational strength". Singh defeated TMC candidate by around 14000 votes. Soumya Das, 'Barrackpore: TMC, BJP struggling with internal rift', *Deccan Herald*, 4 May 2019.

³. Though factionalism within Indian National Congress has evoked relatively more attention than others, few studies have focus on regional parties; Carras Mary C. (1970), *Factionalism in Maharashtra: A Case Study of the Akola Zilla Parishad*, *Asian Survey*, Vol. 10 (5); Sarma Dipak Kumar (2017), *Factional Politics in Assam: A study on the Asom Gana Parishad*, IIT Guwahati, Doctoral Thesis; Radhakrishna Kurup (2004), *Politics of Congress Factionalism in Kerala since 1982*, New Delhi: Gyan Pub.; Chatterjee, Partha. (1998). *The Present History of West Bengal*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press;

⁴. One insistence is that the transfer of the Left party votes can explain the substantial stride of BJP. However, the spatial patterns point to shift of Left votes to both BJP and TMC (Basu, Deepanagr & Basu (2019): "Three Factors that Led to the BJP's Impressive Gains in West Bengal", *The Wire*, 27 May.). About 2/5 of traditional Left voters shifted to the BJP and about 1/3 to TMC. Similarly, 32 percent of old Congress voters moved to the BJP and 29 percent moved to TMC. (Chatterjee, Jyotiprasad, Basu, Suprio (2019): "Post-poll Survey: When the Left Moved Right in West Bengal", *The Hindu*, 28 May.)

⁵. *The Telegraph*: "Mamata Banerjee lays stress on unity in Trinamul", 19 November 2019. The question remains why factionalism could not be contained and why her repeated warnings and interventions failed to stem the rot.

⁶. For instance, violent clashed (with casualty) erupted between mother and yuba as in Sitai Block. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wj8TzVP1TjY>: *Hindusthan Times*: "Two school teachers injured in TMC factional fight in Bengal's Cooch Behar", 20 December, 2018.

⁷ Factionalism came out in the open during Panchayat Election, 2018. TMC did not publicly declare the list of party candidates. The party instead allowed aspirants to file nomination and this aggravated rivalry, if not encouraged sale of office to the highest bidder. The infightings cost the party dearly, as in Purulia, Bankura, West Medinipur districts where, not coincidentally, TMC was almost routed in LS elections.

⁸. *The Telegraph*: "Call me mama, but not kaka: minister", 24 September 2018

⁹. Nishit Pramanik was arguably the most controversial BJP candidate in West Bengal as he had against him serious charges like attempt to murder, attempt to outrage the modesty of woman, criminal intimidation and rioting with

weapons. *Deccan Herald*: “Nisith Pramanik: BJP’s controversial winning candidate”, 29 May 2019.

¹⁰. BJP candidate defeated his nearest (TMC) rival by 52295 votes, polled 48% of valid votes and gained lead in 5 of the 7 assembly segments. TMC candidate could lead by around 1000 and 24000 votes in two segments. Fascinatingly, the seat witnessed pitched battle between two turncoats. In 2014 elections TMC won the seat and BJP finished third with around 16% votes.

¹¹. *Ananda Bazar Patrika*: “Nisith won by exploiting infighting in Trinamul”, 24 May 2019

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