

Competitive Communalism An Analysis of Recent Political Scenario of West Bengal (2011-2025)

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Abstract

Communalism can be understood as a specific ideology. One outcome of this ideology is the occurrence of communal riots. Communalism posits that individuals belonging to a particular religion share common secular interests, including social, political, and economic aspects. However, it is often described negatively. Recently, various communal incidents have challenged the concept of nationalism in India from a narrower viewpoint, highlighting the growing communal identity that stands in opposition to secularism, particularly in West Bengal. The rise of Hindu nationalism and the emphasis on Hindu festivals foster a more communal atmosphere in West Bengal. Both the ruling party and the opposition in West Bengal strive to align themselves closely with the Hindu majority. On the other hand, the Trinamool Congress is very much concerned about the 30% Muslim voters. Meanwhile, BJP leaders are attempting to create a divide between Hindu and Muslim voters by promoting Hindutva. This study aims to examine the current communal rivalry fueled by the two major political parties. This study also compares the era of the Left government and the present Trinamool Congress Government.

Keywords: Communalism, common interest, Hindutva, communal rivalry, political trade; ideological vacuum.

Introduction

Once, Mahatma Gandhi opined that “Religion is the personal affair of each individual. It must not be mixed up with politics or national affairs.” Some people think that India's multireligious landscape played a significant role in the rise of communalism. That isn't true. The idea that communalism must inevitably emerge in a multireligious society is untrue. In this case, it is important to distinguish between religion as a belief system that individuals adhere to as part of their personal beliefs and communalism, which is the ideology of a religion-based socio-political identity. Neither religion nor communalism is the root cause of the other. When religion is used to further politics in nonreligious domains, it becomes a part of communalism. Political trade in religion is a good way to characterize communalism. The parties used religion as a tool to further their political agendas. On the other hand, secularism is not incompatible with religion. It simply means keeping religion out of politics and the state and limiting it to an individual's private life. But in the present time, religion has become an inseparable part of politics and secular identity of India, as well as its States have been facing a real challenge with the increasing threat of communalism.

In a broader sense, communalism is a strong attachment to one's community. It is an ideology that aims to unify the community, and the people of a particular community believe in their rituals, rules, and regulations. At the same time, they glorify their culture, promote belief in orthodox tenets and principles, and suppress others. Of course, there is a positive aspect to this. Communalism stands for the affinity of an individual towards his community for the socio-economic upliftment of his community. On the other hand, communalism in the Indian subcontinent has come to be associated with tension and clashes between different religious communities and groups. Currently, in India, Communalism is a political trade in religion. This is the ideology on which communal politics is based, and communal violence is a conjectural consequence of communal ideology. When different communities claim dominance over others and try to establish communal hegemony in society, a rival group emerges to neutralize it, and different ethnic and communal groups spread a type of communal competition based on their propaganda. According to Bipan Chandra, the famous historian, "Communalism is basically an ideology. Communal riots are only one sequence of the spread of this ideology. Communalism is the belief that because people follow a particular religion, they have a result, common secular interest, that is, social, political and economic interests. It is the belief that in) India religious groups, like Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians from different and distinct communities; that all the followers of religion share not only commonality of religious interests; but also, common secular interest; that there is and can be no such a thing as an) Indian nation or Muslims nation and so on; that) India can therefore only be a mere confederation of religious communities."ⁱ

Left Govt vs. Trinamool Govt.

According to Neeti Nair, an associate professor at Virginia University and author of "Hurt Sentiments: Secularism and Belonging in South Asia," competitive communalism primarily refers to rivalry between groups that primarily define their identity along religious lines. This competition coexisted with the ethic of shared living among members of various sects and religious communities, which forms the foundation of the Indian brand of secularism, which is inclusive rather than exclusive.ⁱⁱ West Bengal is currently experiencing a troubling rise in communalism that lacks a guiding ideology. This has led to a deliberate gap in mainstream politics, distracting from critical issues in society. It must be acknowledged that politicians are now competing over religious values. Previously, Marxist philosophy focused on ideological conflicts, but it is now swiftly shifting from a broad political ideology to a more self-serving and ethno-religious one. Class struggle and development policies were once the main political issues in West Bengal. There was political competition based on a particular ideology. Recently, most political debates or discussions on various platforms have been dominated by Hindu-Muslim, majority-minority, riot, and violence issues, and the basic needs of common people are being distracted or diverted from mainstream politics. From discussions in the legislative assembly to conversations on street corners, the discourse around religious identity is overshadowing talks about education, healthcare, and job opportunities.

West Bengal is a land of festivals all around the year and Bengali people love to celebrate all kind of festivals with enthusiasm. The coalition of Communist and Left-Wing parties took over the office of the State Administration in 1977 and never encouraged communal atrocities. They tactfully swapped the issues of religion and caste for class politics. The entire period (1977-2011) witnessed a different form of governance compared to the other provinces in the country, that is, the separation of religion and politics.ⁱⁱⁱ In 2011, the Trinamool Congress won the Legislative Assembly election with a huge majority, and the era of the left government came to an end. One of the main factors behind the Trinamool Congress's

victory is that 30% of Muslim votes were diverted towards them. Thereafter, the West Bengal polity started changing its dimension, and a new political scenario was established. The new government started giving priority to observing and organizing fairs and festivals instead of strengthening the administration. These steps primarily involve the imitation of religious celebrations in northern India including Ganesh Puja, Hanuman Jayanti, Ram Navami etc.

Large religious processions armed with guns and swords have become an everyday occurrence. There is no doubt that after the fall of the Left Government, the number of festivals has increased gradually. Simultaneously, the competitive mindset of various communities has rapidly increased. The famous veteran journalist Sudipto Sengupta criticized it by saying, “West Bengal’s politics was once divided by ideology, not religion. The muscle-flexing and communal rhetoric in the Assembly today are unprecedented. Both BJP and Trinamool are stoking tensions outside the House, avoiding accountability. This descent into barbarism is alarming.”^{iv}

TMC Vs. BJP, A Communal Fight for Vote Bank

Some political observers argue that the Trinamool Congress, with party involvement emphasizing certain regional religious symbols and landmarks, encourages tension and mobilizes voters along communal lines. Since 2018, West Bengal's chief minister Mamata Banerjee has promoted the slogan: ‘Religion is personal, but the festival is for everyone’ (‘Dharma jar jar, utsab shabar’) when celebrating major religious occasions like Durga Puja (a Hindu festival), Eid, Buddha Purnima, Christmas, and Chhat Puja, among others. She replaced the term puja, which is closely associated with Hindu rituals, with the term ‘Utsav,’ meaning a celebration, festival, or carnival that can pertain to any religious group. West Bengal primarily has a Hindu population, with Muslims constituting around 27 percent of the state's demographic, predominantly in the northern regions. The Chief Minister’s message can be understood within the context of escalating tensions between Hindu and Muslim communities following the election and subsequent re-election of the Hindu Nationalist Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his two significant electoral wins in 2014 and 2019.^v Observing the present political scenario, famous anthropologist and author Mr. Suman Nath opined, “The TMC began capitalizing on adding spectacles to lesser-known cultural festivals, but then faced a strong challenge from the BJP, which champions the use of identity politics. With the BJP’s rise, Muslims found the TMC to be their new protector. This resulted in rising competitive communalism, reflected in the growth of these two parties at the expense of traditional ‘secular’ blocs like the Left and Congress.”^{vi} An initiative was taken to provide funds of Rs.70,000 to the selected clubs to observe Durga Puja and promised to increase the allowance every year. This honorarium has been granted to over 43 thousand Durga Puja Committees and the State Govt. of West Bengal spent 340 crores on these allowances. In addition, a 66 percent reduction in electricity bills has been provided. In 2023, Mamata Banerjee, the Chief Minister of West Bengal, announced that the allowances of Imams, muezzins, and purohits would be increased and assured that her government would fulfil the promise until her death. This is the strategy through which the Trinamool Congress is balancing the Hindu and Muslim vote banks.^{vii}

The Mamata government allocated 250 crores to construct a replica of Odisha’s Jagannath Temple in the coastal area of Digha, which was inaugurated on April 30, 2025. According to an opinion piece in the Indian Express, the temple is seen as a strategic response to the Bharatiya Janata Party’s (BJP) Hindutva politics. On the other hand, adding fuel to the fire, Pirzada Toha Siddiqui, a prominent member of the powerful Muslim religious dynasty of Furfura Sharif, recently called for the establishment of a mosque in

Digha to "balance" the temple initiative. A few days later, Mamata Banerjee visited Furfura Sharif and attended an Iftar party to balance the situation.

In an unrestrained clash between the Trinamool Congress (TMC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), religious identity is being exploited to solidify voter groups, fundamentally changing the political landscape of the state as the 2026 Assembly elections approach. The era where class conflict or development agendas were the focal point of discussions is in the past in West Bengal's political dialogue, Hindu majoritarianism, and minority favoritism, which have become the twin forces shaping conversations.

Throughout Bengal, a striking new image welcomes those who pass by: saffron-coloured banners displaying the phrase "Hindu-Hindu, bhai-bhai" (Hindus are brothers), put up by BJP supporters that reflect the shifting political environment. This type of communalism is reminiscent of Savarkar's concept of Hindutva, in which he identified the common characteristics of a Hindu. He said, "A Hindu, thereof, to sum up the conclusion arrived at is he who looks upon the land that extends from Sindhu to Sindhu—from the Indus to the seas—as the land of his forefathers—his fatherland (Pitribhu)." ^{viii} BJP leaders in West Bengal are indirectly supporting this ideology and attempting to divide the vote bank into two sections. On the other hand, in West Bengal, the BJP began their agenda intending to unite Hindus by celebrating all Hindu festivals with greater enthusiasm.

This slogan, in sharp contrast to poet Kazi Nazrul Islam's idea of Hindus and Muslims as "two blooms on one stem," simplifies Bengal's pluralistic heritage into a blunt dichotomy. The narrative is well-known: after achieving electoral victories in Haryana, Maharashtra, and Delhi, the BJP is once again reinforcing its established strategy of demonizing Muslims—this time targeting Bengal. This reflects the contest between the BJP's heightened efforts to mobilize Hindus and the TMC's mixed strategy of presenting itself as a guardian against majoritarian threats while appealing to Hindu voters through saffron imagery. Once again Comrade Md. Salim argued, "With the upcoming Assembly elections in mind, a deliberate attempt at division has begun within the Assembly itself. Instead of discussing crucial issues such as education, healthcare, employment, agriculture, industry, and overall development, the focus has shifted entirely to playing the card of communal division. Mohan Bhagwat, during his visit to Kolkata, laid the blueprint for this strategy, and now it is being executed." ^{ix}

"The TMC started to leverage lesser-known cultural festivals by enhancing them with spectacles, but soon confronted significant opposition from the BJP, which promotes identity politics. As the BJP gained influence, Muslims began viewing the TMC as their newfound guardian. This led to an increase in competitive communalism, evident in the rise of these two parties at the cost of traditional 'secular' groups like the Left and Congress," notes anthropologist and author Suman Nath.

Another interesting trend emerged in West Bengal politics with the support of Abbas and Nausad Siddiqi. They launched their political party Indian Secular Front to challenge TMC and BJP. Nausad Siddiqi said, "Trinamool and BJP are two sides of the same coin. We need a broader alliance against them in 2026". ^x

Conclusion

The evolving political landscape of West Bengal has increasingly become religion-centred. Essential matters such as education, healthcare, employment, agriculture, industry, and overall development have been overlooked as a result of communal politics. On the other hand, the increasing prevalence of parochial political culture, along with the issues of extortion and the growth of organised crime within institutions, has intensified the apathy and disengagement of the general public towards political matters. The prevailing political ideology is currently facing a crisis. It is more accurate to state that there is an

ideological void present in the recent political landscape of West Bengal. A robust political ideology is essential for the advancement of political studies. Ideology, ethics, and values constitute the fundamental requirements for cultivating a political culture and a political society.

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