

STATE POLITICS: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF THE FEDERAL DIMENSION OF WEST BENGAL POLITICS TODAY

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ABSTRACT

One of the most important features of the state politics in India may be noticed as politics in the states are guided by regional assertion and identity. The scholars of the state politics throw light on this fact that there has been continuous trend of struggle and assertiveness on the ground of religion, language, regional pride and so on in the political culture of the various states in India. The electoral politics of the state and the attitude and role of the state leadership towards federalism in India may also be studied and analyzed in this direction. The present study is an attempt to investigate and analyze the attitude of West Bengal Government towards Union-State Relations in India.

KEYWORDS: *State Politics, State Government, Central Government, West Bengal Politics, State Governors, Disputes in Financial matters.*

Unlike Kerala West Bengal has been dominated by the communist parties long time in the post-independent era. West Bengal has been ruled by different sets of political parties at different times just as – Congress rule (1947-1962), United Front (1967-1969), Congress rule (1972-1977), Left Front rule (1977-2011) and Trinamool Congress (TMC) rule since 2011 to present. The TMC was founded by Mamata Banerjee on 1st January, 1998 after a split in the Congress party. The political climate of Bengal has to be studied in the light of the strong regional pride, the radical ways of its youths and the five main events in history which have had an everlasting impression on the Bengalis, namely, the first partition of Bengal in 1905, the shifting of India's capital from Calcutta to Delhi in 1912, the great Bengal Famine of the early 40s the second partition of Bengal in 1947, and the huge influx of refugees which flowed in from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) following the partition. The significance of the first four events has to be judged in view of the fact that all of them occurred at a time when the country was passing through a phase of intense political struggle for independence under the leadership of Congress.

In 1905, the partition of Bengal brought radicalism in Bengal's political culture. Newspapers like Jugantar, Vandematram, Navasakti, and Sandhya seemed to create a climate of political radicalism and accentuated the choice of extremist ways by the youth of Bengal .

When the capital of colonial ruled India was shifted from Calcutta to Delhi, the sensitive Bengalis did not take it lightly. Undoubtedly it hurt their regional pride which not only enraged them, but also made them feel discriminated, and neglected.

The partition of Bengal of 1947 was responsible for the strengthening of regionalism and radicalism in the state. The Bengalis felt that they were discriminated by the All-India leadership and they realized that it was a planned attempt to suppress them. In the midst of the great economic difficulties which resulted from partition, the communist Party launched a three-year post-independence revolutionary movement in Bengal designed to overthrow the Nehru Government at the centre and the newly established Congress government in the state. In Bengal, the political tradition has always played an important role in directing the tune of party politics. The personality of B.C. Roy and his eagerness to build up an independent base of power were important factors in the politics of West Bengal. The Congress ruled the state from 1947 to 1967.

FEDERAL ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVES DURING UNITED FRONT AND LEFT FRONT GOVERNMENT'S REGIME

In March 1967, the Congress party of West Bengal failed for the first time since Independence to gain a majority in the state Legislative Assembly, until November 1967, when the Governor of the state appointed a successor ministry, West Bengal was governed by a coalition of fourteen parties, including both the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India- Marxist (CPM). Again after a period of President's Rule in 1969, this time with much larger number of seats in the Legislative Assembly and a much larger role for the two communist parties.

During B.C. Roy's stewardship the memoranda which was submitted by the West Bengal Government before

the successive Finance Commissions are extremely revealing. The memorandum before the Third Finance Commission said:

"We request to the Finance Commission that they should discharge their Constitutional functions untrammelled and uninfluenced by the Planning Commission. On the other hand, the Constitution specifically requires that the Finance Commission's recommendations regarding grants-in-aid of those states which are in need of assistance should be considered before orders are passed. In this case, indications of the likely assistance from the Centre have been given prior to the Finance Commission even having considered the matter. The sequence followed is therefore contrary to what is envisaged in the Constitutions."

During the second term of United Front Government in 1969, the CPI(M) with its enormous strength was able to harness regional demands for organized Centre-baiting. Although ideologically Centralists, the Communist Marxists also were the supporters of regional demands.

Only after the dismissal of Mukherji ministry in late 1968 that CPI (M) and the non CPI (M) parties came to be united in a massive anti Centre agitation. Constant Centre baiting for promoting powerful political mobilization became the main strategy of the United Front government of the state. The disputes related to being under the control of state government the role of Governor, law and order demand for more financial autonomy, Indian Administrative Services etc. On March 24, 1969 the Central Reserve Police (CRP) fired at a mob in the Administrative Building of the Durgapur Steel Plant as a result of which sixty people were injured. The then West Bengal Home Minister JyotiBasu sharply reacted to the CRP action and urged the withdrawal of the CRP units from the state. He reacted: "There cannot be two parallel forces in the state."

Jyoti Basu the then Chief Minister of West Bengal urged immediate withdrawal of the CRPF while Y.B. Chavan, the then Home Minister of India, emphasized the right of the Centre to maintain and deploy CRPF units in the state.

Again in the mid-term election which was held in March 1971, the CPI (M) emerged as the largest single party in West Bengal. The leader of this party, Jyoti Basu wrote to the Governor that he was capable of forming a ministry in co-operation with some other likeminded parties and individuals in the State Assemble. But this party was not invited to form the ministry on the same old ground that the earlier coalition government had not been very successful in the state.

The then West Bengal Government formulated a sixteen point memorandum for a better Centre- State relations in India and presented it to the Union Government for favour of consideration and necessary action. The emphasis of the document was on the following points:

"As India has great diversities in cultural settings like language, race and religion, conscious and deliberate efforts are required to achieve and maintain the aim of national integration. Devolution of powers may help ward off fissiparous tendencies instead of encouraging them. A strong and unified India can only be one in which the democratic aspirations and the distinctiveness of the different states are represented and not treated with disdain. We are definitely in favour of strong states, but not on the cost of a weak Centre."

The document demanded that the power of the Centre should be confined to defence, foreign trade currency and communications, and economic coordination i.e. to the subjects that could be carried out only by a central authority and not by any single state"

In the document's language: "It is a part of the democratic aspirations of the people that federal principles should be correctly understood and applied so that this multi-party democratic pattern may survive".

It is therefore clear that the anti-Centre attitude of West Bengal Government is not just the result of the difference at two levels which are ruled by two different sets of political parties, but it is also the result of a long history of the perceived negligence of West Bengal by the Centre. With the coming of eighties the confrontation between the West Bengal and the Central Government became more sharpened.

On various occasions, when the President's rule was imposed under Article 356 by Central Government in many other states, the West Bengal Government reacted vigorously. JyotiBasu the then chief minister of West Bengal is reported to have said in an interview to Doordarshan that it was absurd to have this article in the Indian Constitution and had suggested that Article 356 should be deleted. While speaking at the Seminar on "Democracy, Federalism and Article 356" organized by the Indian School of Social Science, On 31 March 1991 at Madras he spoke: "We recommended to the Sarkaria Commission, in our document, that Article 356 should be deleted, but if it continues, if there is an Inter-State Council formed, then in every case where it is sought necessary to impose Article 356 even for a few months or a few weeks and so on, it should be discussed first in the inter-state council and then placed before parliament all the facts as to why Article 356 should be imposed in a particular state."

The West Bengal Government has been of the view that Article 356 has been blatantly misused by the Union Government of serve its partisan purposes. It has also upheld that Article 356 and Article 357 should be so amended as to preclude future possibilities of such misuse. A potential cause of difference of West Bengal Government with the Centre has been the reservation of bills for the assent of the President. Articles 200 and 201 of the Indian Constitution allow the

Governor to reserves a state legislature bill for the consideration and assent of the President. However, this power of consideration regarding state bills has not been exercised in conformity with that intent and spirit and purpose of the provision of the Constitution. Another controversial issue between the West Bengal Government and the Central Government in the era of 1980's has been the Gorkhaland agitation generated in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal. The then Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi refused to consider the movement as anti-national. On December 19, 1986 he told a rally in Darjeeling that he had found nothing in the GNLFF utterances or demands to be even remotely anti- national.

The issue of the state projects also drew a good deal of attention as it became a matter of great tension in Centre-State relations. The Centre, for political considerations, has been inordinately delaying viable and important state projects, particularly those in non-Congress (I) states. In the case of West Bengal, the Haldia Petrochemicals and Bakreshwar Thermal Project have proved to be major obstacles in the harmonious relations between Union and that state government. According to the state government the Central Government made unduly long delays in according necessary approvals for the project which provided an irritant to the Centre-State relations.

Centre-State relations have often been found to become tense because of a centralizing tendency and imbalance in their financial relations. These imbalances arise out of the fact that while the major responsibilities in the fields of development and administration are with the states, the sources of revenue are concentrated in the hands of the Centre. Out of the total resources raised in the country, about two-thirds get raised in the hand of the Centre and the remaining only one-thirds in all the states taken together. Of the total market borrowing, about 85 per cent goes to the Centre and the remaining 15 per cent only go to the states taken together.

In such a situation, the states have been increasingly forced to fall back upon their own resource base to discharge developmental and administrative responsibilities. In West Bengal more than 70 per cent of the state's budget was being funded out of that state's own resources. Even after the marginal increase in devolution recommended by the 9th Finance Commission, there was no significant change in the position relating to the much needed expansion of the resource base of the state.

While expressing his views in the Chief Minister's conference held in New Delhi November 2, 1983, Basu said, "The government of West Bengal is of the view that the extremely poor rate of economic growth in the country as also its uneven spread between the different regions is one of the major consequence of the increasing trend towards over

centralization of economic and financial powers for resource gathering. The West Bengal Government was critical of the functioning of National Development Council and the Planning Commission. It was of the view that since these bodies had neither a Constitutional sanction, nor any statutory provision and were set up by a resolution of the Union Government. A memorandum was submitted to the Ninth Finance Commission by the West Bengal Government asking for an overall devolution in terms of increase in percentage share of devolution for the states, expansion of divisible pool by including the more elastic sources of revenue and effecting remedial measures for the enormous debt burden of the states of the Centre.

The West Bengal Government urged the Ninth Financial Commission for grants to tackle the problems of industrial sickness, unemployment and specific problems of Calcutta etc. It also asked for a separate grant of Rs.250 crores for development of economically disadvantaged areas relating to Sunderban, The Western laterite Zone and North Bengal. It also wanted some of the outstanding loans to be written off by the Centre. The State Finance Minister Dasgupta said before the Ninth Finance Commission.

The left front Government of West Bengal, in its reply to the Questionnaire to Sarkaria Commission said thus:

"The Statutory devolution, that is, devolution to the states made in pursuance of the awards of the Finance Commissions, have comprised of only a part of the total transfers from the Union to the states. Over the period since 1951, nearly 60 percent of this total has consisted of plan and discretionary transfers. Plan transfers too are in effect discretionary transfers, since the Planning Commission, to all purpose, now acts in accordance with the guide-lines laid down by the Union Government. It is thus obvious that the hope cherished in regard to an automatic and free from interference has not borne fruit." There have also been serious differences between the Union Government and the Government of West Bengal regarding the state of law and order in West Bengal.

It is observed in the present study that in comparison to other party ruled central governments at the Centre, the relationship of Atal Bihari Vajpayee government with the government of West Bengal(1999-2004) was cordial and smooth. The Vajpayee government had gifted Quadrilateral programme under which Durgapur Express way was developed.

In August, 2018, Mamta Banerjee, the present chief minister of West Bengal recalled her relationship with Vajpayee government and commented that, "I had a cordial relationship with Atalji. I hold him in high steam. The way Atalji functioned was quite different from the manner the current BJP government functions. There is no similarity."The

present chief minister of West Bengal, Mamata Banerjee had served in Vajpayee's cabinet from 2001 to 2004. This will go in Mamata's tenure regarding governor's role and chief minister dispute with the governor.

TRINMOOL CONGRESS GOVERNMENT'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS FEDERALISM

Since its installation in 2011 as the state government of West Bengal under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee, Trinamool Congress ruled government of the state has federal experience with two central governments of United Progressive Alliance (UPA) headed by Dr. Manmohan Singh and present National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government under the leadership of the Prime Minister Narendra Modi. During this period, the study of the federal perspective of West Bengal government makes it evident that the state government adopted an aggressive attitude towards central governments for its discriminatory behaviour in the matters of West Bengal. Consequently differences between the Centre and the State on many cases may be observed. It is also observed in the present study that central governments (run by Dr. Manmohan Singh and Narendra Modi successively) also deal issues with partisan approaches many times. The same attitude may be observed by the West Bengal too.

During Mamata Banerjee regime the issue of governor's role in the politics of West Bengal also caused strained relationship between centre and the state. In 2011, Mamata Banerjee was invited by the then West Bengal governor Jagdeep Dhanbhar to unveil the portrait of former Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee at Raj Bhavan. But keeping in view the differences with the then governor on several issues, Mamata Banerjee refused to attend the ceremony.

In 2015 while speaking in Chief Ministers' conclave at Delhi, Mamata Banerji, chief minister of West Bengal criticized the partisan role of state governors appointed by the central government. She categorically remarked that the Narendra Modi government is running parallel governments in the state through state governors appointed by them. The chief minister further added that, 'I can understand that law and order in Delhi is under the home ministry, but how can the West Bengal Governor write to the Centre to deploy central forces in municipal elections there?' The chief minister alleged the central government for adopting a discriminatory approach towards West Bengal and favouring state governments ruled by Bhartiya Janta Party.

In 2016, MP of Trinamool Congress, SS Roy, during a short duration discussion in Lok Sabha on the power of the Governor mentioned the happenings in Arunachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand had proved once again that the governors are merely the agents of the ruling party at the Centre in some

States. Therefore according to the Trinamool Congress ruled government of West Bengal there is an urgent need to review the Article 157 which deals with the appointment of the Governor and Article 356 which deal with President's rule in the states. The TMC is of the opinion that there should be more specific and broad eligibility criteria or qualification for the appointment of Governors.

While discussing the issue of governor in Lok Sabha SS Roy further mentioned that the incident of the imposition of President's Rule in Uttarakhand and informed that it was the 115th instance of imposing the President's Rule in the states since independence. Out of these 115 instances, eighty four times was imposed by Congress and Congress-led coalition governments whereas seven times was imposed by BJP or BJP-led Governments but more interestingly, the Janata Party Government in its tenure from 1977 to 1979, i.e. for only two years, imposed President's Rule sixteen times, mostly on some unprecedented grounds. He also quoted Dr. BR Ambedkar's view on the Article 356 who had said— "In short, I share the sentiments that such Articles will never be called into operation and they would remain a dead letter. If at all they are brought into operation, I hope the President, who is endowed with these powers, will take proper precautions before actually suspending the administration of the provinces." The discussion regarding the role of state governors and misuse of Article 356 was further strengthened by Trinamool Congress in Lok Sabha.

In this regard the Trinamool Congress also added the recommendations of the Advisory Panel of National Commission as it was suggested by the panel that "whether the Ministry in a State has lost the confidence of the Legislative Assembly or not should be decided only on the floor of the Assembly and nowhere else. If necessary, the Central Government should take necessary steps to enable the Legislative Assembly to meet and freely transact its business. The Governor should not be allowed to dismiss the Ministry so long as it enjoys the confidence of the House. Only where a Chief Minister of the Ministry refuses to resign after his Ministry is defeated on a motion of no-confidence, should the Governor dismiss the State Government."

In August 2016, the West Bengal government under the stewardship of Mamata Banerjee, chief minister of West Bengal in association with other regional parties raised the issue of "assault on the federal structure" in matter of financial package to the state. She took this subject as 'brazen violation of state rights by the centre'. The Trinamool Congress had good number of MPs (19 members) in Lok Sabha at that time. She also slammed the Centre for disbanding the Planning Commission, which she said was the brain child of Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose. She warned the Central government that it must remember its jurisdiction. She

also asserted that her government would support the Central government in positive decisions, but no parallel government in the state would be acceptable. There must be a clear demarcation between the roles of the centre and the state governments. Apart from this, she pointed out the discrimination made by the central government in the allocation of the funds for the implementation of the programmes of central government and said that her government did not get any fund under the Swachh Bharat Mission. This situation is opposite to the spirit of cooperative federalism.

Likewise in August, 2016, intervening during a discussion on Supplementary Demands for Grants, Trinamool Congress MP Sugata Bose, questioned the policies of the central government and emphasized on the need for taking measures required to attract domestic private investment. He also criticized the central government's move regarding the establishment of an Expert Committee to review the Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Management Act in its Budget speech and requested to take the lower House into confidence as this might affect the vital social sector schemes run by the state government to provide health, education and social security to the poor and the oppressed people of the state. Another Member of Parliament of Trinamool Congress Abhishek Banerjee in his speech on the Supplementary Demand for Grants (2016-17) criticized the attitude of the central government towards the federalism and said that the Narendra Modi government speaks only about 'cooperative federalism'. But in the past two years, cooperative federalism has merely been a slogan nothing else. He referred this as to the 'Camouflaged Centralism'.

Regarding the fiscal transfers to the States, as Trinamool Congress criticized the approach of the Central government for withdrawing its financial support from some major schemes like National e-Governance Action Plan, Modernization of Police Force, additional central support for LWE affected areas, Backward region grant funds, schemes for setting up 6000 model schools, central support to states for setting up export infrastructure, national mission for food processing and tourist infrastructure and other allied activities. The Central Government as TMC said that they also reduced its funding to some important schemes like rashtriya kisan vikas yojana, Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, national livelihood mission, national food security mission etc.

The Trinamool Congress further demanded the debt relief for West Bengal that is being weighed down by a massive debt of more than Rs 3 lakh 8 thousand crore left behind by the previous Left government who ruled and ruined the state for 34 long years. He also alleged the Central Government that the Planning Commission has been abolished due to which the States have lost an important

platform to raise important issues. Now, meetings are being called without consulting or discussing with the state governments and time is being given to the Chief Ministers to speak on the basis of the colour of their party flag and Central Government's political equation.

The Trinamool Congress also criticized the Central Government for imposing cess on certain developmental schemes such as- 0.5% Swachh Bharat cess, 0.5% Krishi Kalyan cess levied on the service tax. As the collection of cess is not a part of the divisive pool and hence does not get shared with the states. This causes the negligence of the states from the collected funds and goes against the spirit of cooperative federalism

Similarly, in October 2012, Mamata Banerjee government reacted on the appointment of Deepa Dasmuni as the new Union Minister of State for Urban Development by the then Dr. Manmohan Singh government and argued that her appointment seemed to stimulate petty political rivalries rather than delivering good governance to the people of India. Deepa Dasmuni's action as the Minister to announce a probe into the West Bengal government's spending money under the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission invited a stringent reaction from the Trinamool Congress government of West Bengal. The state government argued that though there is an urgent need to strictly monitor the utilization of funds allotted by Central government including those under the JNNURM but Ms Dasmuni seems particularly focused on the TMC-controlled Kolkata Corporation for all the political reasons. Besides this, Ms Dasmuni described her own appointment along with two other ministers from West Bengal as a fitting reply to the Trinamool Congress and an attempt to strengthen the Congress party at the state level. It was also conveyed the message that this appointment was made to expand the political space for the Congress party in West Bengal and not in public interest.

Likewise, in 2015, at Chief Ministers' conclave in Delhi, Mamata Banerjee raised the issue of misusing of central agencies by the Central government and said, "They (Centre) are making things communal, looking at the religion of people killed in accidents to vitiate the atmosphere. If two people die in West Bengal, the NIA is rushed to the state, but when 100 people died in Madhya Pradesh not a word is said because it has a BJP government. This is not good governance." She advised the Centre to restrict itself to making policies and administering sectors such as defence and railways and "nothing else".

In June 2019, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee said that she would not attend the NITI Aayog meeting scheduled to be held on June 15, 2019. She argued that the NITI Aayog has not sufficient financial powers to support state plans and as such it is not as effective as its

preceding institution 'the Planning Commission' which is founded by Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose. In earlier institution there was some scope for the states to put forward their views, but with the present set up it is not possible. NITI Aayog meetings are held on the agenda set by the Central Government and states are supposed to discuss it. It is not as per the norms of cooperative federalism. She alleged the Narendra Modi Government saying that they removed the Constitutional set up of Inter-State Council that was empowered to discuss the issues of the states. She, therefore demanded the revival of the Inter-State Council so that all the chief ministers got a platform to present their respective views and demands before the prime minister and other union ministers.

Mamata Banerjee's refusal to attend the above mentioned meeting of NITI Aayog convened by the Prime Minister Narendra Modi stimulated political uprising in state politics and it was presumed that Mamata was not willing to let go the events that unfolded in West Bengal last month during the Lok Sabha election campaigns. It was observed that Mamata's decision not to attend the NITI Aayog meeting might prove to be politically incorrect as she lost her chances of presenting her point to the 15th Finance Commission, headed by N. K. Singh. Only for political reasons, she did not take interest in pitching the pending projects of Bengal including two major ports, airports and even railway projects that could have very useful for the economic growth of the state. It was also observed that Mamata Banerjee government opted to be out of the central projects like the Ayushman Bharat merely due to the political conflicts with Narendra Modi led NDA government in centre. Although, she had a conversation with other chief ministers before writing to the prime minister, none of the chief ministers had decided to follow her line of politics.

It is evident from the abovementioned facts that attitude of different state governments of West Bengal towards the Central Government or vice-versa has been more or less same due to the reason that the two levels of governments are ruled by two different sets of political parties. The sense of regional pride and sentiments among the people of West Bengal are so strong that all political parties try to reap their political benefits as much as possible. Therefore, the state of West Bengal has become the most apparent battle field for the concerned political parties. All these conflicts weaken the federal structure of India and eventually hinder the development of the state. Therefore, there is a greater need of establishing the cooperative federalism and this is responsibility of both the Central as well as the state governments.

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