



METAMORPHOSES OF THE POLITICAL: WEST BENGAL IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

International workshop: University of Göttingen, June 22-23, 2023

Heyne Haus, Papendiek 15, 37073 Göttingen

An initiative of the Research Module "Critiques and Renewals of Democracy (TM3), ICAS:MP

Convenors: Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, Abdul Matin, Srirupa Roy

Schedule

June 22

9:00-9:30 **Welcome, Introduction, Coffee**

Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, Abdul Matin, Srirupa Roy

9:30-11:30 **New Hindutva**

Snigdhendu Bhattacharya

Sangh and the Advent of "Apolitical" NGO Politics

Ayan Guha

Politics of Memory: Namasudra Mobilisation and the Rise of Hindutva in West Bengal

11:30-13:00 Lunch for workshop participants

13:00-15:00 **The Muslim Question**

Semanti Ghosh

The Minoritized Muslim in West Bengal, a Long Political Perspective

Abdul Matin

TMC-BJP Binary and the Trajectory of the 'Muslim Question' in the Politics of Post-Sachar West Bengal

15:00-15:15 Coffee

15:15-16:00 **Screening + Discussion**

Lalit Vachani

Some Preliminary Visual Notes on Hindutva in Bengal

16:00-18:00 **The Politics of Everyday Life**

Suman Nath

The Dynamics of Identity Politics and Violence in "Post-Left" Bengal: Theorising Consent Making, Invented Traditions, and Protesting Voices (c. 2009-2023)

Nandini Gooptu

Vegetarianism and the Gastropolitics of Religiosity in West Bengal

18:30 Dinner for workshop participants

June 23

9:30-11:30 'Poriborton'/Change

Ruchir Joshi

Living with Parivartan

Zaad Mahmood and Soham Bhattacharya

Elites, Policy Preference, and State-society Relationship in Contemporary West Bengal

11:30-11:45 Coffee

11:45-13:45 After 'Poriborton'

Dwaipayana Bhattacharyya

Understanding Political Change in West Bengal: In Search of a Framework

Ritanjan Das

The Production of Hegemonic Consent in the Left and Post-Left Era: A Comparative Perspective

13:45-15:00 Lunch

15:00-16:00 Planning session (closed)

16:30-18:30 Public roundtable, "Millennial Bengal and the Metamorphoses of the Political"

18:30-21.30 Dinner for workshop participants

Concept Note

Politics in the Indian state of West Bengal has changed quite dramatically over the past decade. Mamata Banerjee, a firebrand popular leader of the Trinamool (“Grassroots”) Congress (TMC), became the chief minister of the state in 2011, unseating the communist CPI(M) government that had been in power for more than three decades. In many ways, this was the culmination of a long anti-land acquisition battle she waged against the incumbent Left Front and its industrial policy. Banerjee was widely perceived by the electorate as pro-poor with an austere lifestyle; the leader of a party whose populist outreach marked a distinct contrast to the organizational machine politics of the CPI(M). The TMC government adopted the populist slogan ‘Ma Mati Manush Sarkar’ or the “government of the mother, the (farm)land, and the people” as its official slogan, derived from the name of a popular Bengali folk-play (jatra).

This workshop reflects on the political transformations underway in this “post-left,” populist scenario of TMC rule in West Bengal. Changes include the near total eclipse of the Left in electoral politics; the meteoric rise of the BJP and the Hindutva ecosystem in the social and political spheres of West Bengal; the active entanglement of the government – Mamata Banerjee herself taking the lead – with cultural activities of both religious and non-religious varieties involving youth clubs and local organisations; increasingly vocal and visible community-based articulations of the SCs, STs, Gorkhas, and Muslim minorities in the state; the proliferation of a host of new social welfare schemes; a massive rise in government debt per capita and deficits in revenue and capital expenditure; heightened allegations of financial and administrative corruption against the governing elite and its cronies. While these are regionally specific political developments, they must be understood in the context of key shifts in national politics that have taken place in recent years, for e.g. a pronounced centralization of the Indian federation; the deepening of the state-monopoly capital nexus; varied legal and constitutional “adjustments” that have reconfigured India as an “electoral autocracy;” the rapid spread of hate cultures and public violence in everyday social worlds.

We will take stock of these changes from the vantage point of West Bengal, a state whose political histories of the present remain curiously understudied. What can the “metamorphoses of the political” in contemporary West Bengal tell us about the meanings, practices, and futures of democracy in India and beyond? Following a small planning meeting in July 2023 we will convene a larger conference in Summer 2024 with the aim of producing a major academic volume and a set of media articles on this subject.