

THE ROLE OF ELECTIONS IN SHAPING WEST BENGAL: POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

Election is a crucial phenomenon in modern-day politics in a democratic World. All countries related to the election for the choice of their government. The election is a decision-making behavior of the citizens. Election flows both ways positive or negative, it depends on the political leader who is elected after the consent of citizens and which type of responsibility he takes for the betterment of its citizens. The general election of Lok sabha WB always made an impact from 1952 to the 2019 election, in 2019 TMC got 22 seats and BJP got 18 seats. The first two times WB Vidhan Sabha dominated Congress but later it occupied the CPIM coalition government, but later 34 years CPIM government dominated the Vidhan Sabha election by the leadership of Joyti Basu, but from 2011 to date it dominated TMC by the leadership of Miss Mamata Banerjee. The Panchayati Raj system in India existed in Rig Veda and later British government also reformed it in 1919 and 1935, and independent India in 1957, 1963, and finally 1992, 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act. The first time WB followed four types of Panchayati system but now follows a three-tier system. West Bengal officially established Panchayati Raj later Rajasthan and conducted a three-tier Panchayati system which continues to be in operation. The municipality existed in India in Kautilya time, and the British government in 1726 Kolkata municipal corporation. In 1923, 1951, 1964, 1978, 1979, and finally 1992 in the 74th constitutional amendment act. Various positive impacts are seen in an election like democratic participation, political awareness, infrastructure development, empowerment opportunities, policy change, democratic process, women empowerment, accountability, etc. Various negative impacts are seen in an election, political violence, misuse of power and resources, polarization, vote bank politics, corruption, short-term focus on development, etc.

Keywords: Domination, Election, Government, Municipality, Panchayati Raj, Positive and Negative impact.

Introduction:-

The Panchayati Raj system in India can be traced back to the time of the Rig Veda, indicating the existence of self-governing bodies in villages. The history of urban local bodies, including cities and towns, is also ancient and dates back to the Indus Valley Civilization, which emphasized planned infrastructure such as roads, houses, and public assemblies. Kautilya, in his seminal work Arthashastra, provides a detailed account of the city of Pataliputra, reflecting the early understanding of urban governance. Decentralization refers to the transfer of administrative, political, and financial authority from central government institutions to local or regional bodies. It is often adopted to promote effective governance, improve service delivery, and empower local communities by enabling them to make decisions that directly affect their lives. In West Bengal, the decentralization process has evolved gradually, with different states

experimenting with various models of local governance. A major milestone in this regard was the institutionalization of the Panchayati Raj system, which aimed to strengthen grassroots democracy in rural areas. In urban areas, local self-governance is facilitated through Municipal Corporations, Municipal Councils, and Nagar Panchayats, each governed by elected bodies responsible for planning and administration (Ghai, 2003).ⁱ

Types of Elections of West Bengal:-

Mainly three main types of elections organized in West Bengal.

Lok sabha election (For Prime minister selection).

Vidhan sabha election (For Chief Minister selection).

Local Election (For Local Authority). It is divided into two parts i.e. A-Municipality Election, B-Panchayat Election.ⁱⁱ

History of Lok Sabha election of WB:- The first general election of WB 1951-52. Emergence of Left Front in the 1960s to early 1970s The Left Front a coalition of left-wing parties by the Communist party of India, Started gaining prominence in West Bengal politics, leadership of Jyoti Basu and State in the 1977 assembly elections and maintained its position for several decades. From 1980 to 1990, there was a significant contest between the left front and the Congress in various elections. In the 2009 election, TMC supported Congress in the Lok Sabha election. In the 2014 election out of 42 seats, 34 seats got TMC, 2 seats got BJP, and left front with Congress only 4 seats. In the 2019 Lok Sabha election TMC gets 22 seats and BJP gets 18 seats in the Lok Sabha election. ⁱⁱⁱ

History of West Bengal Vidhan Sabha election: In the early Vidhan Sabha election Congress dominated and Bidhan Chandra Roy first chief minister of WB. From 1960 to 1970 communist party of India CPIM began to gain significant traction in West Bengal under the leadership of Jyoti Basu 1977 to 2000, who was the long-time CM of WB from communist party, nearly 34 years communist party rule on WB. From 2011 till the date All India Trinamool Congress occupied significant domination in the Vidhan Sabha election in West Bengal under the leadership of Mamata Banerjee.^{iv}

History of municipality election of West Bengal:- The history of urban bodies, both cities and towns is fairly old in India and can be traced to the Indus Valley civilization. Where emphasis was laid on planned roads, Houses, and town meetings. Kautilya in his work Arthashastra, has given a graphic description of the city of patliputra. The municipal corporation was first established in Madras in 1688, and in Calcutta and Bombay in 1726. The father of the municipal corporation Lord Ripon. In 1951 for the maintenance Kolkata Corporation government, made a new law, known Kolkata Municipality law, which rejected the black law of the Kolkata Corporation Act 1923. In 1964 North Indian people got the right to universal adult franchise to election, but later the age of vote was 18 years. In 1972 congress's government destroyed the municipality. In 1977 the CPIM government came into power and 1978 restarted municipality elections in West Bengal. The Kolkata Municipal Bill 1979 seeks to replace the Act of 1951. Finally, the 74th Constitution Amendment Act 1992 provides a municipality Act for India's states. The mayor is the ceremonial head of

the council and hence he/ she is the first citizen of the city. The Municipal Commissioner serves as the Chief Officer of the Corporation. At present WB has six municipal corporations i.e. Kolkata, Howrah, Chandan Nagar, Ashamsol, Durgapur, and Siliguri. Among them, Chandan Nagar is the oldest municipal corporation. There are also three types of municipalities in West Bengal. They are Nagar Panchayats for small areas, Municipal Councils for medium urban areas, and Municipal Corporations for large urban areas. The municipality has Indian constitution part 9A, article 243P to 243ZG, and 12th schedule 18th functions. (Laxmikant, 2013) ^v

Panchayat history of West Bengal:- The Panchayati system in India, has existed since the time of the Rig Veda suggesting the existence of self-governing bodies in villages. Gandhi's village gram swaraj was an attempt to give back to Village panchayats what was lost during the British rule, though during the period of national movement must was not resolved. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar opposed the idea. Article 40 of DPSP, part 4 was made non-justiciable in court. In 1919 British government introduced a dyarchical scheme of self-government. Provincial Autonomy Schemes which were introduced by the Government of India. Notable among them was the Act of 1935, which solemnly enshrined local autonomy. In 1956 West Bengal Vidhan Sabha passed a bill known as West Bengal Panchayati Raj, it came into force in 1957, and it says gram sabha consisted 1000-1400 members. In India Balwant Rai G Mehta Committee 1957, introduced the Panchayati Raj system in India. In West Bengal in 1958, Balwant Rai G Mehta was the father of the Panchayati Raj system. In 1963 WB Vidhan Sabha passed a new bill, which is known as Zila Parishad. From 1957 to 1963 west Bengal Panchayati Raj created four stages of the Panchayati Raj system i.e. Zila parishad, Intermediate panchayat, Panchayat samity, and Gram Panchayat. The gram panchayat meeting was held yearly 2 times and in 1957 Panchayati Raj system rule gave special power to villagers to call the meeting of gram sabha. Finally, the new Panchayati Raj law 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act 1992 was passed. At now West Bengal Panchayati Raj follows a three-tier Panchayati Raj system. (Laxmikant-2012)^{vi}

Positive impact of the election in West Bengal:-

Democratic participation:-

" Grassroots Peace: On Local Body Elections in West Bengal" According to The Hindu News Paper on June 20, 2023, West Bengal local body elections were scheduled on July 8, and as a result West Bengal once again brought political violence to the fore in the state even as common people were able to participate in voting. Seven persons include supporters of the ruling trinomial congress and opposition parties such as the Bharatiya Janta party, congress, and Indian Secular Front. Elections provide citizens in West Bengal with the opportunity to participate in the democratic process and exercise their right to vote. This fosters a sense of empowerment and involvement in shaping the governance of their state. From independence to date, people have participated in elections to select their choice leader. (Arora, 2016) ^{vii}

Democratic Process:-It is the oldest and most peaceful process to reform the government. Almost all countries of the world use this process. Elections are an essential aspect of a democratic system, allowing

people to exercise their right to vote and choose their representatives. In West Bengal, elections provide an opportunity for citizens to participate actively in the decision-making process.

Political awareness Bengal assembly elections 2021: does a party society subsume the politics of identity and development” – Economic and Political Weekly -5 April 2021. All India Trinamool Congress, CPI(M), Congress, ISF, BJP, and other political parties have awareness about the citizens of West Bengal. Election campaigns and debates increase political awareness among the population. Citizens become more informed about different political parties, their ideologies, and policies, which can lead to an educated electorate. Now seventy percent people of West Bengal people interested to now politics.

Policy changes govt move to implement national education policy in Bengal creates a stir” –Hindustan Times March 24, 2023. The WB government conveyed its decision to implement the four-year undergraduate program. National education policy NEP-2020 from the forthcoming academic session to universities on March 17, 2023. All political parties have their ideology and policies thus people have to power to change the government with their policies because new governments come always new policies. Elections can lead to shifts in political power, which may result in the implementation of new policies and programs that address the needs and aspirations of the citizens.(Agrawal, 1987) ^{viii}

Accountability:- The electoral process holds elected officials accountable for their actions. If politicians fail to fulfill their promises or engage in corruption, they can be voted out in subsequent elections. The constitution gives an order to elections for citizens obey to accountability for the government.(Chakrabarty and Pandey, 2008) ^{ix}

Infrastructure development:- Elections often lead to political promises of development and progress. To gain the support of voters, political parties may pledge to improve infrastructure, such as roads, schools, hospitals, and other public services, which can positively impact the overall standard of living in West Bengal. From 1948 to till date huge infrastructure development in West Bengal for the common good.(Das, 2014) ^x

Empowerment opportunity:- “Long and tortuous: on West Bengal Assembly elections” - The Hindu, April 30, 2021. A few decades ago Bengalis would have found the suggestion of learning from Bihar quite preposterous. Kolkata was the economic and cultural hub of a huge area. Kolkata has mastered the art of survival but lost the ability to grow and prosper. During election campaigns, political parties may prioritize policies that aim to empower marginalized communities, providing them with better opportunities for education, employment, and social upliftment. Political stability and well-defined policies resulting from elections can attract investments and create a conducive environment for economic growth. This, in turn, can lead to job creation and increased opportunities for people to improve their socio-economic status.(Ganguly & Ganguly, 1975) ^{xi}

Women’s Empowerment:- “West Bengal women matched men in the poll show EC data” - The Times of India, July 11, 2021. Women matched men when it came to exercising their franchise in this year’s Bengal Assembly elections with as many as 81.7% of the former and 81.4% of the latter turning up to cast their

votes data released by the Election Commission of India show. Elections often encourage greater participation of women in politics. Increased representation of women in elected offices can lead to policies and initiatives that promote gender equality, women's rights, and empowerment. Our constitution gives thirty-three percent reservation to all women in almost all posts. (Kar, 2016) ^{xii}

Peaceful Transitions:-"Grassroots Peace: On Local Body Elections in West Bengal" According to The Hindu News Paper, on 20 June 2023, elections were held in about 73897 constituencies in the three-tier local body structure. For instance, in 2013 SEC itself sought Supreme Court direction for the deployment of central forces in West Bengal elections but opposed it in this election. A well-established election system allows for peaceful transitions of power. Elections allow for a peaceful and orderly transfer of power from one government to another based on the will of the people. When conducted fairly and transparently, elections help maintain political stability and prevent conflicts that can arise from non-democratic transitions. In West Bengal, the successful conduct of elections contributes to the state's political stability and the peaceful transition of power when a new government is elected. (Raha, 2003). ^{xiii}

Stability:- "Political stability in West Bengal prosperity or Decay"- Economic and Political Weekly, 18 June 2022, vol-57, issue -25. The ruling party in West Bengal does not fully support this belief. A marginal improvement of agriculture and rural people, relying on the delivery of welfare schemes at the cost of overall growth reveals a redistribute strategy employed by the state in the federal setting. A multi-party system in West Bengal can promote political stability by providing checks and balances. It prevents the concentration of power in a single party, reducing the risk of authoritarian rule. Stability can vary depending on the specific circumstances, including the conduct of the election, the behavior of political actors, and the socio-political context. Elections can also be divisive and lead to tensions if not conducted fairly and transparently or if there is a lack of respect for democratic norms and principles. ^{xiv}

Economic Development:-"How Bengal economy has fared over the last decade"- The Hindu Business line, March 18, 2021. WB looks headed for a classic identity-based electoral battle, but the TMC is equally campaigning on a platform of poor economic policies and welfare handouts. Steering through its debt pule, Bengal has been able to achieve relatively good levels of growth. Elected leaders can formulate and implement policies that promote economic growth, infrastructure development, and job creation. Investment confidence-free and fair elections can boost investor confidence. Candidates and parties may make promises related to improving roads and, transportation can lead to actual development Post Post-election party's leadership promises are fulfilled, it can lead to increased empowerment opportunities, reducing unemployment and poverty. Government development projects and social welfare programmers. Elections can draw attention to a region, increasing tourism, and its sector can contribute significantly to local economies.

The negative impact of the election in West Bengal:-

Polarization:-"BJPs surge in west Bengal driver by polarization split in the anti-BJP vote" The Indian Express – May 23, 2019. In that election, the Left could not win any seats and on the other hand, the

Congress won only one seat. Trends indicate an unprecedented surge for the BJP in West Bengal with the party leading in 19 of the 42 seats in the state. Elections can sometimes lead to political polarization, where different communities or groups may become divided based on their support for different parties or ideologies. This can lead to social tensions and conflicts in West Bengal.

Vote-bank politics:-“West Bengal rolls out Lakshmi bhandar; largest cash transfer” – The Hindu August 24, 2021. This way government collect vote from women. Some political parties may resort to appeasing specific communities or groups to secure their votes. This kind of vote-bank politics can lead to the neglect of broader issues and hamper overall development. Almost a huge Political party leader by the vote before a few days ago of the election. Now it is a common feature of West Bengal panchayat elections.^{xv}

Misuse of Power and Resources:- “Trinamool Congress emerges victorious but at what cost” The Hindu, July 26, 2023. More embarrassment for the Trinamool has come in the form of investigations by central agencies into various scams, including in-school service recruitment, illegal coal mining and transportation, and cattle smuggling. During the election season, there is a possibility of misuse of power and resources by incumbent parties to gain an unfair advantage, potentially leading to a skewed electoral playing field. This kind of news we see every day in the news.^{xvi}

Violence and Intimidation:-“West Bengal panchayat election plunges into chaos and violence” The Hindu – Jul 8, 2023. People block a road in protest against the killing of an independent candidate in West Bengal panchayat polls at barasat in North 24 Parana’s district. On the day of the election itself, at least 12 people were reportedly killed as violence rigging and voting raged across the state. Elections may witness incidents of violence, intimidation, and electoral malpractices. It can negatively affect the electoral process and create an atmosphere of fear and insecurity. At the time of the election, we see that previously, this party formed a government this party followed violence in the election for a continuously domination position.

Corruption:- “Corruption an issue in West Bengal, but development no 1” The Indian Express -May 22, 2016. Sarodha scam: the Narada sitting and for having overlooked corruption in the construction of the flyover that collapsed recently in Kolkata, Shaw’s that voters in 2016 perceived the TMC government to be only slightly more corrupt than the left front government that was voted out in 3011. Elections can sometimes be marred by corrupt practices, such as vote-buying, misuse of state resources, and electoral fraud, undermining the democratic process and eroding public trust in institutions. We see that a large number of administrative government servants support to current government support this task for fairness and allurements. Incumbent governments might misuse state resources for electoral purposes, such as funding rallies or distributing favors to gain electoral support. This misuse can lead to corruption and unfair advantages. Election results may lead to the appointment of individuals with political connections rather than qualifications, fostering nepotism and cronyism, which are forms of corruption. Manipulation of voter lists, rigging, or tampering with ballot boxes can occur during elections, leading to corrupt electoral outcomes.

Short-term focus:- “West Bengal govt’s Lakshmi Bhandar bags the Skoch Award” The Economic Times, 29 October 2022. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee announces Lakshmir Bhandar scheme. Women's empowerment has always been a priority for us. It's a recognition not only for the government but also for the 1.8 crore empowered women of West Bengal. I think it is a short-term focus not continuous in the future. Parties may prioritize short-term gains and populist measures to appeal to voters during the election season. This might not always align with the long-term development needs of the state. All political parties promised to common people various schemes start if their party formed the government.

Economic Disruption:- Elections can disrupt economic activities, affecting businesses and daily life. Strikes, protests, and roadblocks can disrupt transportation and trade. The resources required for conducting elections, such as manpower and funds, can divert resources away from essential government functions and development projects, including the scale of the election, political stability, and the policies implemented by the winning party. It's also essential to analyze specific data and events to assess the precise impact on West Bengal's economy during a particular election cycle.

Instability:- “ Panchayat polls hold silver linings for TMC but also looming clouds” The Indian Express – 16 July, 2023. TMC 's greater concern may be that while it crossed the 50% mark in vote left, Congtoo is up, while the official stamp on the final West Bengal panchayat poll results. The result that is in so far indicates the dominance of the party in WB, 12 years after it assumed power. Frequent elections can result in political instability, as governments change, and policies may shift with each new administration. It includes several instabilities like' Political Instability-The election led to a significant shift in power as the All India Trinamool Congress (TMC) retained power, defeating the long-dominant Left Front and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Such a change in leadership can lead to a period of political instability as new policies and priorities are implemented. Social Tensions- The election saw intense political rivalry and clashes between supporters of different parties. This resulted in social tensions and violence in some areas, which can contribute to instability. Administrative Challenges- Transitioning from one government to another can create administrative challenges. There may be delays in governance and decision-making, which can hinder the smooth functioning of the state. Economic Disruption- Political instability can also have economic consequences. If protests or strikes disrupt economic activities, it can negatively impact the livelihoods of the people and overall economic stability. Security Concerns- Political instability can sometimes lead to security concerns. If law and order deteriorate, it can affect the safety of the citizens and make the region more vulnerable to various threats.

Uncertainty:- Political uncertainty during election periods can affect business investment and overall stability. A highly contested election can lead to uncertainty about the stability of the government, which can affect policy decisions and governance. Election-related uncertainty can sometimes escalate social tensions and conflicts, impacting the well-being of the population. Political uncertainty can lead to delays in infrastructure projects and development initiatives, affecting the overall progress of the state. When the

outcome is uncertain, it may be challenging for the government to make long-term decisions and plans.(Halder, 2021) ^{xvii}

Manipulation:-“TMC writes a letter to EC alleging both capturing in Purba Manipur” The Economic Times, 1st April 2021. Booth capturing in Purba Manipur during the second phase of the West Bengal assembly election in polling stations 6,7,49,27,162,21,26,13,262,256,163, and 30 were taking place. Allegations of electoral fraud, voter manipulation, and biased media coverage can undermine trust in the electoral process. Manipulation of the voting process through practices like booth capturing, ballot stuffing, or rigging electronic voting machines. The spread of false information to influence voters’ decisions, is often facilitated through social media or other communication channels. Unfair media coverage can favor one candidate or party over others, affecting voters’ perceptions. Attempts to disenfranchise or intimidate certain groups of voters, leading to a lack of fair representation. Manipulation of constituency boundaries to favor one party or group over another, undermining the principle of fair representation.^{xviii}

Conclusion:-

The impact of an election can vary depending on multiple factors, including the conduct of political parties, the efficiency of election authorities, the engagement of the electorate, prevailing socio-political conditions, the political landscape, voter turnout, and post-election policies implemented by the elected government, etc. The election of West Bengal has many positive and few negative impacts on our state, democratic participation, political awareness, infrastructure development, empowerment opportunity, policy change, accountability, democratic process, and women's empowerment, etc. On the other side, we see polarization, violence, vote bank politics, voter manipulation or corruption, short-term development, misuse of power and short-term development, etc. A holistic and robust approach that upholds the integrity of the electoral process, while fostering peace, inclusivity, and transparency, is imperative for the consolidation and strengthening of democratic governance in the state.

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