The foot soldiers of Hindutva in West Bengal

As ideological barriers give way and political activists switch sides, the BJP is relying on its tried and tested ways of getting into the mainstream on the strength of a host of communal organisations. **Suvojit Bagchi** reports on the rise of the BJP as tensions flare up and rumours abound in election time

n an oppressively hot day in Baruipur, 50 km south of Kolkata, in South 24 Parganas district, Swarup Dutta sits in a shop crammed with stabilisers and inverters. He slowly sips his morning tea while chatting with three middle-aged men. Outside, banners of the Trinamool Congress showing the grim visage of Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee are erected. But that doesn't reflect the political leanings of the four men inside. Dutta is one of the founders of the Hindu Jagran Manch, an organisation affiliated to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), in Baruipur. The Hindu Jagran Manch, according to its website, aims to "enable social harmony and Hindu unity, propagate in public interest Hindu myths, and rehabilitate the victims of love jihad," among other

The four men discuss the ongoing general election, which has been marred by violence in West Bengal. Much has changed in the eastern State in just a decade. The West Bengal political landscape underwent a transformation in 2011 when the Trinamool rode to power, bringing to an end the Left Front's 34-year rule. Eight years from then, the contest is not between the Trinamool and the Left, or even the Trinamool and the Congress. A new national player is making inroads everywhere. The Bharatiya Janata Party's steady rise is not necessarily because of the party's activities; it is supported by a host of organisations in West Bengal and has deep coffers. Established over the last three decades, these organisations have multiplied since the Trinamool came to power. Their rise has forced the Trinamool to change its election strategy and adapt to the new challenge in ways dictated by its competitor. This is a story of the work done by some of the agencies that lend their support to the BJP.

Jumping ship

Samir Naskar, 40, who has dropped in for a chat, is a member of the Hindu Jagran Manch, which is still unregistered here. He is a former member of the Sonarpur Zonal Committee and Panchayat of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). Now, he is a committed foot soldier of the BJP.

"What to do? Dilip-da wanted me," he explains. "Dilip-da" is the BJP State president Dilip Ghosh, who was particularly keen on roping in Naskar because of his ability to manage elections. Naskar says he switched recently from the Hindu Jagran Manch to the BJP. The reason is "understandable," says Dutta. "Naskar has worked with Dilip-da in the Manch. They share a bond." It is against the blurring of boundaries between ideologically inimical parties that the 2019 election is playing out.

Naskar used to be in charge of booth management for the CPI(M) - his task was to gather together boys in his Panchayat, Pratapnagar, which is adjacent to Baruipur, to mobilise voters to reach the booths and vote, he says. Now, he is the poll manager of the BJP in four Panchayats, which together have about 67,000 voters.

"Today, Hindus are supporting the BJP because of Mamata's policy to appease the Muslims," says Naskar. His grouse with the CPI(M) and the Trinamool is that they are "reluctant to protect the interests of Hindus". He adds: "Last month, Muslims planned a jalsha in Sangur village in Pratapnagar. We stopped them from organising it. The police arrested me."

With the participation of activists like Naskar from across the State, the Hindu Jagran Manch's main programme, Ram Navami, has witnessed a massive surge in participation. In 2014, Ram Navami celebrations got a big boost when the Manch provided logistical support. "We felt that the youth needed an icon in Bengal. We decided to give the Ram Navami celebrations a push. We formed celebration committees and Naskar played a key role in that," Dutta says. He reads from a yellow diary: "Last year, 20,61,000 people participated in the Ram Navami rally. Among them, 3,89,135 were matrishakti (women). Till about a few years ago, there were only a few thousand who attended the celebrations.'

Soon after BJP leaders participated in armed Ram Navami rallies, this year the Trinamool, not to be left behind, also organised processions, with participants beating drums and shouting 'Jai Shri Ram!' Trinamool leaders admit that they were - and still are - unsure about their strategy "to counter the Hindutva brigade". The district president of the Trinamool in Malda, Moazzem Hossain, who is contesting this time, says, "We do not have cadres who are informed and educated to monitor the Sangh Parivar. They [Hindutva organisations] are operating at many levels." One such 'operation' involves taking candidates to local and lesser-known shrines in the evenings, have them perform an aarti, and take the blessings of the temple priest. When a priest endorses a candidate in front of 200-500 people, it makes a difference.



"The Trinamool's bigger challenge beyond May 23 will be Hindutva outfits which are not clearly visible on ground, unlike the BJP. "A religious procession marking the Ram Navami festival in Siliguri in April, 2019. (Below): An Ekal Vidyalaya in a tiny hamlet, Kalitala, in the Habibpur developmental block of Malda district, West Bengal. • AFP/ SUBHAM DUTTA



Neither does the Left Front have a strategy. In the Kolkata office of the Party of Democratic Socialism, founded by the CPI(M)'s rebels in 2001, Samir Putatundu, one of the founders, says they "never monitored the RSS [Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh] outfits over the years, as neither the BJP nor the RSS was perceived as a threat." With the Left now floundering in West Bengal, and with the Trinamool still its main adversary in the State, more and more of its supporters are moving to the opposite ideological camp, the BJP.

A new icon in Bengal

The VHP office is located in a nondescript four-storey building on which is painted the emblem of the organisation, a giant banyan tree. Inside the office, located in central Kolkata, is a poster of Lord Krishna and two cows on the door. It reads, 'Only those who protect cows will get our votes'. Elderly Bengali women in white saris run around offering prasad in the office, someone is cooking bhog, and there is a strong fragrance of

The organisation secretary of the VHP, Sachindranath Sinha, does not deny that the VHP has been working with temple priests for a long time. "It is called Dharmacharya Samparka Bibhag [the blessings of priests are sought for every activity of the VHP]. There are half a dozen other departments of the VHP doing various kinds of work such as empowering women [through Durga Vahini], skill development, etc.," Sinha says. The VHP liaises with sadhus and arranges free pilgrimages for them to the Maha Kumbh Mela and places of religious significance.

The organisation has only been growing, Sinha says. "The Bajrang Dal is the youth wing of the VHP. Four years ago, we had 5,000-7,000 members. Now we have 70,000." He credits the rise of the Bajrang Dal to Lord Ram and the general growth of Hindutva in the State. "A few years ago, after the government

change, we began noticing how the minorities were growing from strength to strength. The majority community was complaining and the BJP was failing to take advantage of the situation," he says. "We decided then to act and began promoting Ram Navami to engage the youth."

There was some apprehension in putting the spotlight on Lord Ram in a State where Durga, Kali, local gods celebrated in Bengal's literature such as Manasha and Itu, and other godmen are celebrated, he says. "But we felt we should select only that icon, which has helped us grow elsewhere, to mobilise people. This year we have had rallies in all the 512 of the VHP's own blocks."

Sinha agrees that their programmes have helped "the BJP increase its vote share," but insists that the VHP is not "connected to elections". "We are a religio-social organisation," he says firmly. Sinha smiles while talking of the Trinamool adopting the same strategy to garner votes. "They've realised that the Hindu votes are consolidating behind

Changing strategy

At the Ram Navami celebrations in April, thousands of people could be seen brandishing hefty metal swords and rocket launchers made of thermocol. Ratna De Nag, the incumbent MP of Hooghly, stood at the tail end of the rally, following the sword-wielding men and "monitoring the situation", according to her associates.

"The ruling party is adopting the narrative of the Opposition. And that is the victory of the Sangh Parivar," says Sanjeeb Mukherjee, retired Professor of Political Science, Calcutta University. "Owing to a lack of ideology, the Trinamool is borrowing the narrative of its rivals from time to time. Earlier it had a pro-peasant narrative, which it had borrowed from the Left. Now it has a pro-Hindutva narrative, which it has borrowed from the Right."

But the Trinamool could also turn this into an advantage, he says, "An important characteristic of Mamata is that she is a quick learner. Not having a strong ideology helps her to continuously improvise. This is a kind of jugaad in the world of politics." But while the Trinamool "adapts", there is no way to tell which direction its flock will turn.

Biswanath Das (name changed) is a reasonably affluent political activist. He lives on the bank of the river Padma in Murshidabad's Jalangi block. "We are officially Trinamool and unofficially BIP. says Das. Das, a Trinamool Panchayat Samiti member, was denied a ticket when internal infighting broke out within the Trinamool. He was also attacked by members of a faction of the Trinamool. He still has a neatly spread Trinamool flag on the roof of his house. "The Hindus here are all with the BJP, but the flag is for protection," he says.

Nation-building

Seemanta Chetana Mancha (SCM), a platform to increase awareness about borders and commit to the nation-building process, is another success story of the Hindutva brigade in Bengal. Standing in a floodplain of the Padma, the SCM's State Committee member, Tapash Biswas, says the organisation, which "closely coordinates with the Border Security Force", has grown dramatically. "Our job is to ensure that people like Biswanath Das are aware of their rights as citizens living on the bor-

Owing to a lack of ideology, the Trinamool is borrowing the narrative of its rivals from time to time. Earlier it had a propeasant narrative, which it had borrowed from the Left. Now it has a pro-Hindutva narrative, which it has borrowed from the Right.

SANJEEB MUKHERJEE Retired Professor of Political Science, Calcutta University



We [Trinamool] do not have cadres who are informed and educated to monitor the Sangh Parivar. They [Hindutva

many levels. MOAZZEM HOSSAIN District president of the Trinamool in Malda

der. They report cases of cow theft, smuggling and atrocities by the 'majority' in Murshidabad," says Biswas, a swayamsevak. Muslims, who constitute about 70% of Murshidabad's population, are the majority in the district.

organisations] are operating at

Colonel Dipak Bhattacharya, the South Bengal president of the SCM, says the organisation was launched in Bengal decades ago, but began to grow only from 2017. "In the last four years, from very few volunteers we are now have about 30,000 in the State, of which 20,000 are in South Bengal," he says. The Colonel became a full-time swayamsevak after retirement, he says.

The SCM is popular in border States like Rajasthan and Gujarat. One of the key programmes that popularised the SCM in the border towns and villages of Bengal was "stopping land transfer to Muslims". Many Hindu families, especially aged couples whose children live in Kolkatta, were selling their property to Muslims and leaving the border areas to be with their children, the SCM members say. "So, we undertook a programme to reach out to those couples. We told them that if every Hindu family leaves the area, then the border will be completely dominated by Muslims. The programme gave a major boost to our membership," Bhattacharya says. Other programmes such as providing protection to cows and ensuring jobs have attracted more people.

Skill development

Along the banks of the river is a giant and partly rusted gate covered with bougainvillea. This is the Bhalukbona Gramotthan Prashikshan Kendra. The organisation was founded in Kolkata in the late 1980s and is credited for the BJP's growth in the tribal areas of central India by national leaders of the

As the gate opens, visible on a plaque are words by Prime Minister Narendra Modi: "Our mission should be skill development to take the country forward." The Bhalukbona centre, located deep in Malda's Habibpur block which has a 50% Scheduled Caste and 30% Scheduled Tribe population, is running the Prime Minister's skill development programme on a huge campus.

"Since 2001, the Ekal Vidyalaya has been in operation, but from 2011, we developed the Gramotthan project to ensure jobs for the villagers in the area," says Kanai Pande, the man in charge of the Bhalukbona project. Pande, a swayamsevak, takes us on a guided tour of the campus which has a Ram Mandir, a goshala, a computer-training school and various skill development programmes to impart training to courier + boys or automobile mechanics. But the real success story is the 85,000 Ekal schools in India. "Bengal has about 3,600 of such schools, of which 250 are in Malda," says Pande.

It is early morning. Dalit and Adivasi children chant the Gayatri Mantra in Kalitala village in Habibpur. The school has one teacher, Jolly Mondal, who is pursuing a Master's degree. She gets ₹1,000 as honorarium per month and "enjoys teaching". The children under her watch recite a series of poems recounting the greatness of Sita and Savitri. The children say that their favourite hymn is the Bijaya Mahamantra, in praise of Lord Ram.

Pande insists that Ekals are "both non-religious and non-formal schools" and that they follow the government-approved syllabus for children up to the fourth grade. These schools, some of which are residential, impart education in sports, language, culture and patriotism. "We teach children to love their country through songs. There are 90 such schools in Habibpur block, besides many run by the RSS," says Pande. Both Ekal and Gramotthan are funded by "well-wishers in many countries, especially the United States."

On way to the city, Pande says that the good work of the Ekal should "benefit the BJP" in the elections. How? "We run the finest Ekal school in Balurghat and it has an impact in the area," he says. Sinha says there are "50 families connected to each Ekal", and the teacher is asked to reach out to each family to talk "about religion and the country". The teachers do not talk about the elections necessarily, he says. But come elections, the parents carry forward the message of voting for the country first, an oft-repeated comment of BJP leaders.

The bigger challenge The heady mix of nationalism and religion has clearly found a resonance in the once Marxist State of West Bengal. Bengal now slips into the last phase of what has turned out to be a violent battle for the ballot. With educationist Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's marble bust smashed into smithereens following a clash between the BJP and the TMC a few days ago, and both blaming each other for the episode, the tension in the State has only increased. Messages about religious communities are being forwarded by organisations, many of which were founded in post-Independence Bengal, managed to survive during the Communist era, and are now consolidated in Trinamool's Bengal. The Trinamool's bigger challenge beyond May 23 will be these Hindutva outfits which are not clearly visible on ground, unlike the BJP.