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EDITORIAL OPEN ACCESS

Post-Poll Violence and the Spatial Politics of Power: Reflections on West Bengal in India's 2026 State Elections

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Abstract

The 2026 round of state elections in India—covering Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal and the union territory of Puducherry—produced one of the most consequential realignments in the country's recent electoral history, including the Bharatiya Janata Party's (BJP) first-ever victory in West Bengal after fourteen years of Trinamool Congress (TMC) rule. Yet West Bengal once again distinguished itself in a less celebrated register: it was the only one of the five polities to descend into significant post-poll violence. This editorial situates that violence within a spatial and cultural reading of electoral power. Drawing on comparative evidence from the 2026 verdicts, it argues that post-poll violence in West Bengal is neither an incidental excess nor the property of any single party, but a recurring symptom of a political order in which territorial control over neighbourhoods, booths, and local institutions is the substance of power itself. The reversal of partisan roles between 2021 and 2026—the TMC now occupying the position of the aggrieved—exposes the systemic, place-based logic of this violence. The editorial also flags the "administrative" disenfranchisement entailed in the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of electoral rolls, and the federal anxieties accompanying a more centralised political map. It calls for scholarship that treats electoral violence as a geography to be mapped rather than a scandal to be deplored.

Keywords: Post-Poll Violence; West Bengal; 2026 State Elections; Electoral Geography; Party-Society; Political Violence; Disenfranchisement; Federalism; Spatial Politics; India

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Introduction

On 4 May 2026, the Election Commission of India declared the results of assembly elections in four states—Assam, Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal—and the union territory of Puducherry, a single counting day that concluded polling held across April (Dohutia et al., 2026). Collectively, these contests decided 824 seats (West Bengal (294 seats), Tamil Nadu (234), Kerala (140), Assam (126), and the Union Territory of Puducherry (30)) and were widely read as a barometer of the national mood ahead of the 2029 general election (Dohutia et al., 2026). The mid-2026 elections were framed by the shadow of upcoming parliamentary delimitation, a process that has sparked significant demographic and political anxiety across the Indian subcontinent (Patel & Sekher, 2024). The verdicts were striking in their own right. In Assam, the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance secured a third consecutive term, winning ninety-two of 126 seats under Chief Minister Dr Himanta Biswa Sarma (Sen, 2026). In Kerala, the Congress-led United Democratic Front decisively unseated the incumbent Left Democratic Front, taking 97 of 140 seats and, for the first time since Independence, leaving no Indian state under Left rule (Sen, 2026). In Tamil Nadu, the actor Vijay's two-year-old Tamilaga Vettri Kazhagam shattered the long Dravidian duopoly, emerging as the single largest party with 108 seats and relegating the ruling Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam to a distant second (Sen, 2026). In Puducherry, the incumbent AINRC-led alliance retained office (The Print Team, 2026).

The most far-reaching outcome, however, was in West Bengal, where the BJP won a landslide of 207 of the 294 seats and ended the TMC's continuous rule since 2011, with the chief minister, Mamata Banerjee, defeated in her own contest and the state recording a turnout reported at 92.47 per cent, described as the highest since Independence (Sen, 2026; The Print Team, 2026). And it was West Bengal alone, among the five polities that voted together, that saw the transition marred by lethal political violence in the days after the count (Gupta, 2026).

This juxtaposition is the point of departure for the present editorial. Four states changed or retained governments without their streets becoming battlegrounds; one did not. That West Bengal should be the exception is not novel—it conforms to a pattern visible across the 2019 general election, the 2021 assembly election, the 2023 panchayat polls and the 2024 general election—but its persistence across a change of regime demands explanation rather than mere lament. For a journal concerned with the intersections of space, society and culture, the analytically productive question is not simply *who* killed *whom*, but *why this place*, and *what kind of power* is being contested when violence follows the vote. Thus, before beginning a critical discussion, it remains paramount to delineate the 2026 electoral landscape of the states.

- **Assam:** The results indicated a continued consolidation of ethno-nationalist narratives, where the boundary between "citizen" and "infiltrator" remains the primary axis of sovereign power.
- **Kerala & Tamil Nadu:** These states maintained their status as "sites of resistance" against the centralised hegemony of the BJP, with the LDF and DMK-led alliances respectively leveraging welfare regionalism to maintain power.
- **West Bengal:** Unlike the programmatic shifts in the South, the Bengal results were immediately followed by reports of localised skirmishes and systemic displacements. This "post-poll" violence is not merely an auxiliary of the election but a fundamental technology of rule—a manifestation of what Mbembe describes as the power to dictate who may live and who must die (Mbembe, 2003; see also Bhattacharyya et al., 2026; Biswas & Bhattacharyya, 2025).

A Violent Outlier in a Peaceful Field

The comparative frame is itself the first finding. The 2026 elections offered, in effect, a natural experiment: five polities, one election commission, one counting day, one national conjuncture, and five very different post-electoral trajectories. Tamil Nadu witnessed the dramatic displacement of an entrenched party system, yet the transfer of power proceeded institutionally; Kerala's alternation between fronts is so routinised that its peaceful operation is unremarkable; Assam and Puducherry returned incumbents without incident. Only in West Bengal did victory and defeat translate into killings, arson, the ransacking of party offices and the displacement of households (Gupta, 2026). If electoral violence were a simple function of high stakes, close margins or bitter campaigning, it should have appeared elsewhere too. Its concentration in West Bengal points instead to something specific to the state's political culture and to the spatial organisation of power within it, reminding us of Giorgio Agamben's delta—the state of exception (Agamben, 1998). Giorgio Agamben posits that the "state of exception"—a condition where the law is suspended to protect the law—has become the dominant paradigm of modern government. In West Bengal, the electoral cycle functions as a rhythmic suspension of ordinary legal protections.

The political workers in Bengal exist as *homo sacer*: a figure who can be killed but not sacrificed. In the aftermath of 2026, the "cleansing" of opposition supporters represents the reduction of the political subject to "bare life" (*zoē*), stripped of the protections of "qualified life" (*bios*) (Agamben, 1998; see also Bhattacharyya, 2018). When the state machinery (police and local administration) remains passive during these eruptions, it effectively validates the "zone of indistinction" where the sovereign power of the party-state operates outside the penal code. The suspended All India Trinamool Congress spokesperson, Mr Riju Datta—long regarded as one of the party's most ardent defenders—has now laid bare the depth of necropolitical violence in which his own organisation was allegedly entangled. His revelations, stark and unadorned, further illuminate the fraught political landscape he once helped uphold. The video of Riju Dutta further stirred political tremors in West Bengal, in which he thanked BJP leaders for ensuring the safety of his family in the fraught aftermath of the elections. In the recording, Dutta recounts that senior BJP figures had personally assured him of protection at a moment when he felt vulnerable to threats from political workers. He also voiced disappointment with the upper echelons of the TMC, suggesting that the party's leadership offered little support during that tense period. As the clip travelled widely online, the TMC moved swiftly to contain the fallout, stating that Dutta's comments were his own and did not reflect the party's official position (Mukhopadhyay, 2026; The Times of India, 2026). Mr Dutta's stark disclosures unmistakably suggest that entrenched necropower continues to animate the political economy of violence, shaping its rhythms from within.

Power as territory: the booth, the *para*, the home

The scholarship on West Bengal's political order helps make sense of this concentration. If biopower governs the administration of life, necropower—*the subjugation of life to the power of death*—marks its darker counterpoint. In West Bengal, the endurance of the incumbent regime despite stagnant industrial growth has long been linked to what scholars describe as a *moral economy of rent-seeking* (Arora & Tawa Lama-Rewal, 2009). Through the entwined practices of the "syndicate" and "cut-money" systems, access to the most elemental conditions of survival—food rations, housing, rural employment—becomes contingent on partisan intermediaries, binding everyday life to a politics of dependency.

Successive analysts have described a political order in which the boundary between party and society is unusually permeable—what Bhattacharyya (2016) characterises as a regime of *party-society*, in which the local party apparatus mediates access to the state, welfare, dispute resolution, and livelihood itself. Partha Chatterjee's (2004) influential distinction

between "civil society" and the "political society" of the governed, along with Ruud's (2003) ethnography of the everyday production of rural authority, similarly situate power not in abstract representation but in the intimate, territorial control of place. Within such an arrangement, an election is never merely a cyclical referendum; it becomes a struggle over who will command the neighbourhood—the *para*, the booth, the panchayat office—until the next contest resets the terrain. Read through a spatial lens, the pattern of post-poll violence becomes starkly intelligible. It concentrates in those zones where local-state capture is most entrenched and its dividends most tightly held: the rural peripheries and border districts rather than the anonymised expanses of the metropolis. The 2026 incidents were reported across Birbhum, the two Twenty-Four Parganas, Howrah, Nadia, Bankura, the Burdwans, Purulia, and Cooch Behar (Gupta, 2026)—a cartography of contested rural and peri-urban terrain rather than the urban core.

The targets of violence are themselves spatial: the body of the cadre who commands a locality; the house set ablaze to expel a family; the party office that signifies a claim to territory. Even the symbolic landscape is drawn into the struggle. Reports of a Lenin statue being damaged in Murshidabad in the immediate aftermath suggest how electoral turnover is enacted as a re-inscription of ideological space (Gupta, 2026).

In this reading, violence is not a rupture in the political order but its continuation by other means—the material adjudication of who now holds the ground. Arguably, the post-poll violence of 2026 served as a necropolitical tool to:

- **Territorial Mapping**: Re-establishing the party's physical monopoly over "para" (neighbourhood) spaces (see, Chatterjee, 2004; Bhattacharyya, 2016).
- **Symbolic Annihilation**: The destruction of homes (punitive domicide) serves as a visual marker of the state's power to render the opposition "homeless" within their own nation (Zuberi, 2026).
- **The Moral Economy of Lying**: Survival for the marginalised often requires a performative shift in loyalty, a "narrative capital" where one must lie about past affiliations to escape physical harm (Beneduce, 2015).

The Reversal of 2026: Violence as System, not Partisanship

The most instructive feature of 2026 is the near-perfect inversion of roles when set against 2021. Five years earlier, after the TMC retained power, it was the BJP that documented the killing of its workers and the displacement of its supporters. Acting on a Calcutta High Court directive, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) eventually recorded 1,934 police complaints filed between early May and late June 2021—including twenty-nine cases of murder and twelve of rape or sexual assault—and described the situation as one governed by the "law of the ruler" rather than the rule of law, recommending a Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) probe (Business Standard, 2021). Banerjee dismissed the findings as a partisan intervention by central agencies (Business Standard, 2021).

In 2026, the script is reversed almost line for line. Now dispossessed, the TMC alleges organised violence against its workers and seeks judicial protection, with Banerjee herself appearing before the High Court to press the case (Gupta, 2026).

This reversal is analytically decisive. If perpetrators and victims can exchange places so completely when power shifts, then the violence cannot be reduced to the ideology or temperament of any single party. It is a *systemic* property—an artefact of competitive clientelism in which losing territorial control exposes local agents to retribution, while victors are incentivised to consolidate their hold by force before institutions can intervene. The body count falls upon whichever network has just been displaced. A change of regime does not end the violence; it merely redistributes its incidence.

A note of evidentiary caution is essential and is itself part of the analysis. In the days following

the 2026 result, most reporting placed the death toll at four to five, divided between the two principal parties, with scores injured and roughly eighty arrests in Kolkata alone (Gupta, 2026). These are early, contested figures. As the 2021 precedent demonstrates, tolls in West Bengal are routinely inflated by the aggrieved and minimised by the incumbent, and only a month-long judicial and human-rights process produced anything resembling a consolidated account (Business Standard, 2021). At the time of writing this editorial, no such reckoning exists for 2026. The numbers that follow must therefore be read as provisional, and the comparison between cycles understood as structural rather than precisely quantitative.

Administrative Violence: The Disenfranchisement of Electoral Space

Alongside the visible violence of the street lies a quieter, bureaucratic mode of exclusion that a spatial reading must also register. The 2026 campaign unfolded under the shadow of controversy surrounding the Election Commission's Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the electoral rolls, which required voters to resubmit their particulars and which opposition parties argued disproportionately disenfranchised minority communities (Dohutia et al., 2026). Estimates of the scale of removal in West Bengal vary sharply: Sen (2026) cites roughly 2.7 million voters struck off for "logical discrepancies," disproportionately Muslim, while *Britannica* reports figures exceeding nine million exclusions (Dohutia et al., 2026).

Whatever the precise tally, the SIR amounts to a cartographic and administrative reconfiguration of the electorate—a redrawing of who counts as a voter, and in which place—that operates on the same terrain as physical violence, albeit through subtler instruments. To understand disenfranchisement as a form of spatial exclusion is to recognise that the contest over electoral territory is waged not only through the booth-capturing of political folklore but also through the database, the verification drive, and the bureaucratic map.

Institutions, Federalism and the Centralising Map

The institutional response to West Bengal's recurrent cycles of violence has settled into a familiar choreography: public-interest litigation before the Calcutta High Court, demands for protection and rehabilitation, and the summoning of central bodies such as the NHRC and the CBI (Business Standard, 2021; Gupta, 2026). The 2024 general election produced a comparable cascade of petitions and court-mandated complaint mechanisms. What shifts in 2026 is the political valence of these instruments. Mechanisms the TMC once condemned as tools of central overreach now appear to be the very channels through which it seeks redress against a BJP-led state government—an irony that underscores how thoroughly the meaning of "central intervention" is conditioned by who occupies the state.

This dynamic gestures toward a broader structural reading offered by Sen (2026): the 2026 results extend the BJP's influence across eastern India and reduce the number of regional and Left counterweights, a consolidation with implications for the federal balance. Post-poll violence, and the adjudicatory apparatus surrounding it, must be situated within this shifting architecture. When the party at the Centre and the party in the state align, the appetite for invoking central agencies wanes; when they diverge, those same agencies become contested terrain.

The geography of violence, in other words, is nested within a larger and continually reconfigured geography of federal power.

Conclusion

This editorial has traced the 2026 electoral outcomes across Assam, Kerala, and Tamil Nadu, noting the diversity of India's democratic fabric, yet the West Bengal case reveals a darker underside. The shift from *ballot* to *bullet* in the post-poll phase is not a rupture in the system but its logical expression under a necropolitical order. For the "bare life" of the Bengali voter, the

election becomes less a choice over policy than a fraught negotiation for the right to endure.

An equally significant, if less heralded, lesson lies in what did *not* travel across these five polities: only West Bengal answered its electoral verdict with sustained, lethal violence. That exceptionalism is best understood not as the moral deficit of any single party but as a feature of a spatial order in which power is territorial, and in which the counting of votes merely initiates—rather than concludes—the struggle over who holds the ground.

I argue that 2026 state elections will be remembered for their headline reversals—the fall of the TMC in West Bengal, the eclipse of the Dravidian duopoly in Tamil Nadu, and the disappearance of Left governance anywhere in India. For *Space and Culture, India*, this reframing suggests a research agenda. Post-poll violence must be studied as a geography—mapped by district, by booth, by the typology of its targets (body, home, office, monument)—and as a cultural practice of territorial domination, rather than catalogued solely as an episodic scandal. It calls for attention to the administrative as well as the physical reshaping of electoral space, and to the ways federal realignments recalibrate the institutional channels through which the displaced seek justice.

The provisional figures of 2026 will, in time, be revised upward or downward by the slow machinery of commissions and courts. The underlying pattern, however, is unlikely to shift unless the territorial logic that produces it is named, studied, and confronted.

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