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POLITICAL BATTLE

In Bengal's badlands, war rages between ruling Trinamool and upstart BJP

The two parties are locked in a violent struggle to take over whole villages in Birbhum district, just a few kilometres away from Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan, the Abode of Peace.

Swati Sengupta

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In a village in West Bengal's Birbhum district, a teenage boy came out of a hut holding two crude bombs. A little later, he pulled out a pistol from his trouser pocket. A younger boy took one of the bombs from him.

“Should I show you how to hurl this?” the younger boy asked me in Bengali, breaking into a buck-toothed grin, on a sunny morning in early February. On hearing him, a woman came out of the hut and admonished him. “Don't waste the bomb,” she said. “If there is danger when I am alone at home, these will come in handy.”



Many homes on rural Birbhum stock crude bombs and pistols. Photo: Swati Sengupta

At a distance were paddy fields, where men and women, standing in ankle-deep water, bent over to plant saplings. In a nearby pond, other villagers rinsed utensils and took baths, barely looking up at the boys showing off their ammunition.

In the villages that fall under the jurisdiction of the Panrui police station, close to Rabindranath Tagore's Shantiniketan, or Abode of Peace, many homes have firearms and bombs. For decades West Bengal's political parties have recruited villagers to fight their battles over turf. About ten years ago, the battles turned violent.

Until four years ago, the clashes were between the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Trinamool Congress. But after 2011, when the Trinamool roundly defeated the Leftists, who lost power after 34 years, the battles have been between the Trinamool and the Bharatiya Janata Party, which is making inroads into a state where it has traditionally had no support.

Over the past year, violent clashes have taken place between the two parties in North 24 Parganas, South 24 Parganas and Hooghly districts. The most recent violence has been in Birbhum district, in the Panrui area, in Sattor, Kasba, Makhra and Chaumandalpur villages.

The villages are criss-crossed by red, laterite paths flanked by paddy fields. Mud huts and grazing cattle dot the landscape. Muslims constitute more than half the population in these villages, significantly higher than West Bengal's average of 27 percent. Despite this, the BJP has gained

considerable control here because of infighting within the Trinamool and strong-arm behaviour by its activists.



A BJP poster says, 'Hindu-Muslim bhai, bhai'. Photo: Swati Sengupta

For many villagers in the region, most of whom are poor paddy farmers, the only guarantee of safety is to pledge loyalty to one or another political party. The parties arm villagers, usually unemployed young men, to intimidate locals into supporting them and to threaten members of rival parties. The pistols come from Bihar and Jharkand while the crude bombs are made locally, villagers said.

The two armed teenage boys, for instance, said they belonged to a political party, but did not want its identity to be revealed. They also did not want to reveal their names or want me to identify their village.

New rivals

Panrui has been on the boil ever since the BJP entered the area in mid-2014. In clashes in September and October, two BJP and two Trinamool supporters died in the area.

Sheikh Tausif, 17, was among the four people killed. Trinamool supporters, accompanied by armed men, tried to enter his village, Makhra, which is under the BJP's control.

Tausif was working in the fields when a bullet hit his belly, his elder brother Sabir Ali said. "It pierced his body from the front and came out from the other side," he said. "He was drenched in so

much blood that I fell unconscious as we were taking him to the hospital.”

The family used to support the Trinamool but a few months ago it switched to the BJP. “After forming the government, Trinamool leaders began forcing us to pay cash or paddy,” said Sabir. “The CPM was unable to protect us. Most villagers had no option but to seek help from the BJP. We’ve had enough. Muslims support the BJP now. We’ve seen the CPM and the Trinamool. We don’t care what the BJP has done in other states. Let’s see how they rule Bengal.”



Tausif's father, Shaukat, and brother, Shabir. Photo: Swati Sengupta

Hriday Ghosh in nearby Kasba village broke away from the Trinamool Congress and won a panchayat seat in 2013 as an independent candidate. “But it is hard to work without organisational support,” he said. “Like many others who were once a part of the Trinamool, I joined the BJP out of compulsion,” he said.

The police have also been caught up in the violence. Prasenjit Dutta, the policeman in charge of Panrui station, was injured in October when he and his colleagues went to recover bombs from a hideout in Chaumandalpur village. Locals began to throw bombs at them. They later found 800 crude bombs in a primary health centre.

In Sattor village, a woman said that a few policemen accompanied by Trinamool workers beat her up in late January when they came looking for her husband's nephew, a BJP worker. She showed me her broken fingers.



The BJP and Trinamool both deny that their members use arms and say that the other party is using anti-socials to take control of villages. There is no sign of either backing down. “Our men have been ousted from homes in Panrui area,” said Trinamool Congress’s Chandranath Sinha, a state minister who represents this constituency in the assembly. “But they will surely stage a comeback.”

History of violence

For years, homes in rural West Bengal have been under pressure to ally with a political party, whether or not an election is round the corner. In many villages there are “CPM homes” and “Trinamool homes”, and now there are “BJP homes”.

In 1998, the political violence took a new turn, when parties began using arms to take over whole villages, a strategy they called “gram dokholer lorai” – the village takeover. At that time, a series of clashes broke out between the ruling CPM and the Trinamool Congress-Bharatiya Janata Party combine, in Keshpur, Garbeta, Chandrakona in Midnapore district and Khanakul, Arambagh and Goghat in Hooghly district, all about 130 km from Kolkata.

Opposition workers ousted CPM men from their homes, but less than a year later, the CPM managed to retake control of villages. This pattern has continued in different rural belts of Bengal. In Panrui, it is the BJP that is in now control while Trinamool men are unable to enter their homes.