



Songs as Contested Political Appeals and Claims to Power in West Bengal Politics

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Abstract

Change is built into the fabric of society—and politics is no stranger to it. The gradual decline of the Left party, a political vacuum enabled the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to anchor its political foothold in the West Bengal political landscape. The BJP brought religious and nationalist songs as a political appeal to legitimise its ideological narrative among the broader Hindu groups. which repositions the existing ruling party's (TMC) previous ideological narrative from mass representative to broader Bengali cultural identity protectionism. Therefore, the 2026 election reflects a clash between two antagonistic ideological narratives of TMC-led Bengali regional identity and BJP-led Hindutva nationalism. which is cultivated and fostered through the purposeful deployment of musical expression. By deploying music as a tool of affective mobilization, both parties consolidate mass popularity and legitimise their political authority through narrative building.

Keywords – Political songs, ideological narrative, Legitimacy, Emotional appeal, Musical warfare,

Introduction

A song will shoot straighter than a long bore 32-20, and do more damage than the biggest cannons. The crooked politicians know this... Music is a weapon, the same as a gun, and can be used by the slave just the same as by the big boss – Woody Guthrie (Kennedy & Kolar, 2023)

Reviving the slogan “Khela Hobe” against the BJP, the TMC chief, Mamta Banerjee, mounts a challenge to the BJP's religious politics, SIR (special intensive revision), and the centrally controlled election commission before the pre-election phase at the packed Netaji indoor stadium (Sen & Banerjee, 2025). The post-left political landscape empirically demonstrates the utilisation of music's affective power, in which political parties sought to build a psychological bridge to establish ideological legitimacy and popularity. However, songs are a long-standing political orthodoxy to maintain and uphold the authority's legitimisation. In Britain, the song “God



Save the King” functions as a performative tool of statecraft (Colley, 2005). The institutional isomorphism was also observed in ancient India, where the king's authority was legitimised through Sanskrit songs and slokas. thinkers across political and cultural traditions have long affirmed the teleological impact of music on electoral politics (Brown, 2008). With a high degree of digital adaptability, songs achieve broad-spectrum penetration and bypass material and static emblems such as flags, posters, etc., in a highly contested election. Ahead of the 2026 assembly election polls in West Bengal, the dramatic surge in musical campaigning has escalated. Where parties are purposefully deploying songs for ideological narrative building and public opinion manufacturing, which is a recent issue with significant political relevance.

The musicalisation of political discourse began with the post-2011 power vacuum in the West Bengal political landscape. With the gradual erosion of the Left party and the incremental ascent of the BJP as a primary electoral rival. Although during the Left party (CPI (M)) hegemony, a corpus of ideologically inscribed revolutionary repertoire aligned with CPI (M) political narrative, though these songs were not group-specific nor gained mass-market popularity nor repeatedly charismatised leaders' names. With the TMC's rise in 2011, a populist paradigm shift, repositioning itself as the genuine voice of grassroots people, while framing CPI (M) as an elitist party. As the primary rival shifted from CPI (M) to the saffron party (BJP), a nationalist Hindutva political party, the TMC strategically recalibrated its ideological narrative of mass representation to Bengali regionalism. The BJP made its political push into West Bengal by strategically deploying religious musical songs and slogans, using them as a vehicle to disseminate its Hindutva ideological narrative. To neutralize the BJP's religious narrative, the TMC strategically deployed songs centred on Bengali ethno-linguistic identity, and characterising the BJP as a “bohiragoto” (outsider) party seeking to dismantle Bengali cultural values. Through the emotive capacity of musical expression of political narrative, both parties seek to build an affective connection with the masses and secure popular legitimacy and cultural resonance.

In this article, the author examines the rise of the BJP as a potential competent political rival in the West Bengal political landscape, leading to a corresponding shift in the method of political persuasion. And both parties' instrumentalization of musical appeal as a multiplier of political charisma. It also discussed the evolving nature of political communication over time.

Political Method Shifts within a Transformed Political Landscape

The 2011 Assembly election marked a seismic shift in West Bengal's political history, as the AITMC secured a landslide mandate of 227 out of 294 seats and effectively dismantled a regime that had dominated the state since 1977 (Chakrabarty, 2011). The TMC party strengthens its hegemonic political footing with the Singur & Nandigram movements as a mass representative while successfully positioning CPI (M) as a corrupt elitist party organisation. Through deploying the musical and rhetorical output of “*Maa Mati Manush*,” where *Maa* symbolises the imagery of Goddess Durga or motherland, *Mati* signifies soil or land that connects peasants, farmers, and rural Bengal, and *Manush* embodies ordinary people. However, the gradual decline of the left party (CPI(M)) as a credible political rival created a power vacuum that the BJP successfully filled by consolidating an initial foothold of two Lok Sabha seats (Darjeeling and Asansol) in North Bengal (17.02 per cent of the vote) in the 2014 election (Hussain, 2023). The BJP's calculated entrenchment of its political appeal within the broader Hindu community and its aligned method of Hindutva religious music compelled the TMC to change its initial ideological narrative and mobilisation methods. Therefore, countering the central saffron nationalist rival necessitated a paradigm shift in the TMC's strategy, framing the ideological narrative as a civilisational defence of Bengali identity against an ‘outsider’ force.

The pre-Left political landscape, both the TMC and the BJP, strategically weaponized verbally aligned, rhetorical musical expression as a tool to advance their ideological narratives. By characterising the BJP as an anti-Bengali or existential threat to ‘Bangalians’, TMC alleges that the BJP is utilising SIR for the systematic manipulation of electoral rolls and large-scale voter deletions in the upcoming 2026 election. The TMC party successfully politicised this by strategically releasing the song “*Jotoi Koro SIR ei Bengla Fir Mamotar*.” In contrast, the BJP attempted to construct a narrative that the TMC is an anti-Hindu and corrupt political party, which facilitated the systematic settlement of illegal Bangladeshi migrants, and spread negative information about SIR, which is a



technical ‘cleaning’ exercise of ‘detect and delete’ on illegal Bangladeshi infiltrator voters. To facilitate the spread of those incumbent narratives, the BJP released a campaign song, “Paltano Dorkar Chai BJP Sarkar.” Through utilising music as a vehicle, both parties engage in a simultaneous process of self-legitimation and adversarial de-legitimation.

Instrumentalisation of Musical Appeal as a charisma Multiplier

Alpers and Carroll elucidate various ways that music may function as a tactical asset to shape and influence the body politic; they also argued that “music can also play an explicit role in the promotion of social and political action, and this can take several guises” (Ross, 2013). Even Arendt (1967) argues that strategic repetition is the cornerstone of modern narrative building, blurring the line between fiction and fact and leading to the eventual atrophy of political judgment (Medina & Wood 2005). The digital musical nexus has supercharged the power of repetitive messaging, through which political actors foster narrative consolidation. By utilising affective Hindu religious narratives, the BJP weaponizes the Bangladeshi infiltrator narrative, arguing that the removal of the incumbent anti-Hindu ruling party is the only path to save Bengal's Hindu population and demographic change. In contrast, the TMC utilises affective Bengali identity to frame the BJP as a culturally dissonant ‘outsider’ party, alleging the mistreatment of Bengali-speaking workers as Bangladeshi in BJP-ruled states such as Gujarat, Delhi, and UP. These political narratives gain significant ideological leverage through the instrumentalisation of songs and function as a mechanism of indirect persuasion of voters, which is an accepted tactical staple of democratic competition.

The party workers in both competing formations systematically deployed music to idealise their respective political personas as charismatic authorities and to present their political figures as non-mediated representatives of the masses. The repetitive naming of leaders and their ideological narrative authenticates political identity, thereby effectively institutionalising their political legitimacy through rhythmic reinforcement. The TMC party utilises music as a sub-national Branding, through making political mandate into a family-centric bond, with a deeply nativist song as “Bangla Nijer Meyekei Chay” (Bengal wants its own daughter). And achieves charismatic legitimation as Didi (elder sister), which symbolises closeness and care. In the pre-election 2026, TMC combined welfare initiatives with the rhythmic structure of the folk ballad song “Unnayaner Panchali” to document its 15-year Didi’s persona governance welfare data to connect with the masses. The BJP’s counter-discourse centers on TMC as a cut-money, anti-Hindu governance, and safeguard of Bangladesh’s Muslims. Therefore, the BJP rhythmically demands change through “Paltano dorkar Chai BJP Sarkar,” which means Change is needed; we want the BJP government. Even this charismatisation of songs extends to marginalised sections of society in West Bengal. The Matua community (a marginalised community in West Bengal) has expressed expectations and hope for the BJP. The Bharatiya Janata Party MLA Ashim Sarkar, who is also a folk singer (Kavigan) and a Matua leader, uses or sings folk songs to convey the Bharatiya Janata Party’s trustworthiness, where he said, “Modi udbastuber bhogoban” (Modi is the god of refugees) and only the BJP’s party will safeguard Matua’s citizenship. It is imprecisely observed that both the TMC and the BJP parties utilise high-decibel personalist narratives for constructing a charismatic binary, Mamata Banerjee as the ‘Daughter of Bengal’ (Didi), vs Narendra Modi as ‘Saviour of Sanatan’ (chowkidar), effectively mobilising the voters.

Songs as a tool of political communication to build a narrative

Michel Foucault (2000) argued that narratives are not merely forms of representation but a discursive mechanism through which knowledge is produced, and power is exercised (Arif et al., 2023). Political parties and leaders strategically construct narratives to produce and disseminate particular forms of knowledge that support and legitimise their political agendas. Political actors often construct a common narrative, where they connect past grievances, present difficulties, and future aspirations, through which they present their leadership as the solution to national or original challenges. Such narrative strategies are particularly visible in contemporary West Bengal politics. The TMC has consistently alleged that the 34-year Left Front government was the cause of the economic and political decline of West Bengal. The state would have experienced further decline. Through



which TMC presented itself as the force that stopped the decline. The transformation of political rivalries, the TMC reshapes the aspect of its ideological orientation from grassroots politics to Bengali identity. The TMC's electoral narrative increasingly emphasises the potential risks associated with a BJP victory in the 2026 Assembly election, particularly for the people of West Bengal. In contrast to the TMC's narrative, the BJP frames the difficulties facing India and West Bengal as the outcome of policies pursued by earlier Congress and CPI(M)-dominated governments. BJP also argued that the TMC has facilitated migration, leading to significant demographic transformations in the state. The BJP frequently presents itself as the primary political force capable of protecting Hindu interests and addressing concerns related to security and identity.

Political actors' rhetorical justification to support their political agenda (Patterson & Monroe, 1998). In the West Bengal political landscape, the TMC presents the BJP as an external political force that does not adequately represent Bengali interests and values, while raising concerns about the welfare and security of Bengali workers in BJP-ruled regions. In contrast, the BJP advances a narrative that characterises the TMC as anti-Hindu and claims that its policies have encouraged the settlement and documentation of migrants from Bangladesh. Through narrative construction, political parties strategically foster social divisions by distinguishing insiders from outsiders, thereby creating an "us versus them" framework. This encourages citizens to view politics through a binary framework of competing options. The dissemination of political narratives in West Bengal extends beyond speeches and campaigns, as political parties routinely utilise songs to convey ideological messages and mobilise supporters. In the context of the 2026 election, the use of political songs became a highly influential campaign strategy, in some cases overshadowing traditional modes of political communication.

Changing political communication in West Bengal politics

The political sphere exists in a state of perpetual flux, where ideological narrative and power dynamics are continuously renegotiated. That phenomenon is vividly exemplified in the West Bengal electoral landscape, where the strategic utilisation of songs has replaced traditional campaigning tools. During the 34 years of the Left Party's domination, the political mobilisation relied on street meetings, campaigning rallies, and a subtle 'hypodermic' dissemination of Marxist-Leninist ideology through curated cultural artifacts, including translated Soviet literature and agitprop theatre (Nath & Ray, 2024). However, the Left party deployed a few revolutionary and class-based compositions that aligned with their ideology, rather than the charismatisation of individual leaders. The 2011 Assembly election marked a tectonic shift with the rise of TMC as a mass representative, where leftist class and party politics ended, and subaltern populism/ Welfareism emerged. The gradual marginalisation of the Left Party as a potential political rival facilitated the BJP's occupation of the opposition space by utilising religious music to gain an ideological foothold in West Bengal. As the shift in ideological rivalry and strategy (religious music), TMC has modified its political position and strategy (identity songs). Through the persistent repetition of songs, both parties glorify their leader's name and engineer charismatic authority.

Conventional campaign techniques are insufficient for disseminating ideological narrative construction in a digital-first era. By employing the melodic recurrence of songs as a more socially inclusive and affective instrument for asymmetrical inculcation of ideology, through affective binary framing for one's own virtuous self-image, while presenting others as a derogatory narrative. The typical conversational style is insufficient to explain the multi-layered narratives required for diverse groups, where political campaign music acts as a narrative synthesis that embeds multiple group interests inside a singular rhythmic framework, coupled with opposition criticism. In the 2026 political landscape, the high-velocity distribution of ideological political music produces a co-productive environment of voter engagement: active participation and listening.

Discussion and conclusion

Ahead of the electoral climate in West Bengal, both the TMC and the BJP political parties strategically deploy political songs, which gain unprecedented viral velocity among political supporters in digital and ground-level campaigns. By instrumentalising political songs, each party tries to gain narrative saturation through effectively transforming its ideological narrative. The proliferation of political music in West Bengal has been empirically



observed in the pre-Left political landscape, with the gradual emergence of the saffron party (BJP) as the principal opposition. The BJP party utilises nationalism and Hindutva-infused melodies or songs as a method to spread its ideological narrative. To counter the BJP narratives, the TMC recalibrated its earlier narrative of mass representation to Bengali identity. Therefore, the pre-election landscape is a legitimisation and a delegitimisation political warfare, which gains hype through recursive sonic reinforcement. Through those songs, the BJP projects its party as the safeguard of Hindu and Sanatan Dharma, while characterising the ruling party as a corrupt and anti-Hindu formation. In contrast, TMC utilises songs to show that their party is the protector of Bengali identity against the outside. The deployment of songs in the pre-election landscape, contesting political parties bypass rational deliberation, activating a spectrum of discrete emotions—fear, security, hope, and pride to establish a charismatic bond that legitimizes their authority and delegitimizes the opposition. Therefore, in West Bengal, electoral contestation increasingly takes the form of musical warfare, where political parties TMC and BJP compete through songs, with voters primarily listeners and audiences.

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