

Party Society and Hegemony in West Bengal: An Analysis

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Abstract:

This article examines “party society” in contemporary West Bengal to explain how party-mediated governance becomes durable and normatively legitimate within a democratic setting. While existing scholarship highlights distributive politics, organizational embeddedness, and mediated access to the state, it insufficiently theorizes the processes through which such arrangements are stabilized as legitimate. Addressing this gap, the study reconceptualizes party society as a Gramscian hegemonic formation. The study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design based on the analytical synthesis of secondary sources, including ethnographic studies, political economy analyses, and policy materials. It employs conceptual mapping to analyse the interconnections between welfare mediation, ideological production, and the transformation of civil society. The findings identify three interrelated mechanisms. First, consent is produced through the mediated delivery of welfare, where access to state resources is structured through localized party networks, transforming formal entitlements into relational benefits and generating political loyalty. Second, ideological mediation operates through what may be termed populist hegemony, wherein development-oriented and affective narratives are articulated in ways that embed political authority within everyday “common sense,” thereby normalizing and legitimizing party rule. Third, civil society is reconfigured into decentralized political networks, blurring the boundary between state and society. The study concludes that party society constitutes a durable form of democratic hegemony, sustained through institutionalized mediation, ideological normalization, and forms of populist hegemony, with significant implications for understanding governance in postcolonial contexts.

Keywords: Party Society, Informal Political Mediation, Civil Society, Hegemony, Populist Hegemony, Postcolonial Governance, West Bengal

Introduction:

The relationship between political parties, state institutions, and social life has long occupied a central place in debates on democratic governance, particularly in postcolonial contexts where formal institutional arrangements coexist with deeply mediated practices of rule. West Bengal offers a distinctive empirical terrain for examining this relationship through the conceptual lens of “party society,” a term developed by DwaiPAYAN Bhattacharyya to describe a political formation in which organized political parties permeate and structure the everyday functioning

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of society. In such a formation, the boundaries between state and society, public authority and social organization, are systematically blurred, as parties emerge not merely as electoral actors but as central mediators of access to resources, institutional processes, and social recognition. This configuration challenges conventional liberal-democratic assumptions that posit a clear separation between an autonomous civil society and a neutral, impersonal state. Situated within the contemporary socio-political context of West Bengal, this paper examines how party society operates as a hegemonic formation in the Gramscian sense. Antonio Gramsci developed the idea of hegemony as a form of rule that rests not primarily on coercion but on the active production of consent, the diffusion of legitimizing ideologies, and the incorporation of civil society into structures of political authority. In the present conjuncture, characterized by the dominance of the All India Trinamool Congress (TMC), these processes manifest through an expansive regime of welfare delivery, affective and populist political narratives, and dense networks of local mediation that link citizens to the state through party structures. In this sense, governance is not experienced as an abstract institutional arrangement but as a relational and negotiated process embedded within everyday social interactions. The analytical significance of this study lies in its effort to bridge and extend two influential strands of political theory. On the one hand, it builds upon Bhattacharya's formulation of party society to foreground the structural embedding of political parties into social life; on the other hand, it engages with the work of Partha Chatterjee, whose concept of political society highlights the mediated and negotiated character of citizenship in postcolonial democracies. While Chatterjee emphasizes the contingent and often informal nature of such mediation, this paper argues that in West Bengal, these processes have acquired a more durable and institutionalized character through their embedding within party networks. By situating these insights within a Gramscian framework, the paper advances the argument that party society constitutes not merely a pattern of political mediation but a relatively stable hegemonic order.

The central research question guiding this analysis is: in what ways does party society in contemporary West Bengal constitute a Gramscian hegemonic formation characterized by the production of consent, ideological mediation, and the incorporation of civil society into political structures? To address this question, the paper advances three interrelated arguments. First, it demonstrates that the production of consent is achieved through the mediated delivery of welfare, wherein access to state resources is structured through localized networks of political actors, generating perceptions of legitimacy and responsiveness. Second, it argues that ideological mediation operates through the construction of affective and development-oriented narratives that become embedded in everyday "common sense," thereby normalizing political authority. Third, it shows that civil society is transformed and incorporated into party structures, resulting in a blurring of boundaries between social and political domains and enabling the continuous reproduction of hegemonic control. The study seeks to contribute to broader debates on the nature of democratic power in postcolonial settings. It demonstrates that hegemony in such contexts is not sustained through ideological coherence alone but through adaptive and decentralized practices that combine material distribution, narrative construction, and institutional penetration. In doing so, the paper not only extends Gramscian theory beyond its classical context but also provides a nuanced understanding of how democratic governance can operate through deeply embedded structures of mediation and control.

Literature Review:

The phenomenon of party-mediated governance in West Bengal has generated a substantial body of scholarship across political sociology, comparative politics, and South Asian studies. Much of this literature has sought to explain the durability of political parties and their deep entrenchment within everyday governance. However, while these studies offer valuable empirical insights, they remain limited in theorizing how such a system becomes normatively accepted and hegemonically stabilized. This section critically engages with these strands of literature and identifies the conceptual gap addressed by the present study.

A significant body of work has examined party-mediated governance through the lens of patron-client relations and distributive politics. For instance, Stuart Corbridge et al. (2005) argue that democratic politics in India often operate through negotiated exchanges between political intermediaries and citizens, where access to welfare and development is contingent upon political alignment. Similarly, Aseema Sinha (2005) highlights how regional political formations rely on distributive mechanisms to consolidate support. While these analyses effectively demonstrate how material benefits structure political participation, they tend to frame such engagement as instrumental and transactional, thereby overlooking how these arrangements are internalized as legitimate. As a result, they explain why citizens participate, but not why they accept party mediation as natural or necessary. Another influential strand focuses on electoral mobilization and organizational embeddedness, particularly in the context of long-term party dominance.

Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya (2016) shows how political parties in West Bengal have developed dense grassroots networks that embed local governance and structure political participation. Likewise, Anirban Ganguly (2018) and Mukulika Banerjee (2014) emphasize the role of party organization and political culture in sustaining electoral dominance. These studies convincingly explain how parties maintain control and reproduce authority through organizational capacity and social embeddedness. However, their primary focus remains on mechanisms of mobilization and control, leaving the question of how such dominance becomes normatively accepted and rarely contested at the level of everyday political consciousness. A third strand, shaped by the work of Partha Chatterjee (2004), shifts attention to the domain of “political society,” foregrounding the mediated and negotiated character of governance in postcolonial democracies. Chatterjee’s analysis is crucial in demonstrating that large sections of the population access the state through informal and extra-legal practices, thereby challenging the universality of liberal democratic categories. Building on this, Kanchan Chandra (2004) and James Manor (2010) have shown how identity and local political networks shape democratic participation in India. While this body of work effectively explains the structural necessity of mediation, it does not fully address how specific mediating institutions—particularly political parties—come to dominate this space, nor how their dominance is stabilized as legitimate. In this regard, Bhattacharyya’s (2016) formulation of “party society” represents a significant advance by identifying the institutional centrality of political parties in mediating state–society relations in West Bengal. Yet, even here, the analysis remains largely focused on institutional processes and empirical description. As Suman Nath (2019) notes, studies of party society often emphasize organizational penetration and distributive

mechanisms without sufficiently theorizing the ideological processes through which such arrangements are normalized. Consequently, the question of how party-mediated governance becomes internalized as “common sense” remains insufficiently explored.

Research Gap:

While existing studies explain how party society operates through distribution (Corbridge et al., 2005), organization (Bhattacharyya, 2016), and mediation (Chatterjee, 2004), they do not adequately explain why it is accepted as legitimate and enduring. The persistence of party society cannot be reduced to material incentives or organizational strength alone; rather, it points to deeper processes of ideological normalization and consent formation. Addressing this gap requires a shift toward a theory of hegemony, as developed by Antonio Gramsci (1971), which foregrounds the role of consent, ideology, and everyday practices in stabilizing power. By incorporating this perspective, the present study seeks to move beyond existing explanations and provide a more comprehensive account of how party society in West Bengal is not only reproduced but also legitimized as a durable political order.

The purpose of the study:

This paper aims to critically examine the functioning of “party society” in contemporary West Bengal as a form of Gramscian hegemonic formation, building upon the conceptual insights of Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya. It specifically investigates how consent is produced through the mediated delivery of welfare schemes, wherein access to state resources is structured through localized political networks. Further, the paper examines how ideological mediation operates through affective and development-oriented narratives that become internalized as common sense, thereby normalizing political authority. It also analyses the transformation and incorporation of civil society into party structures, extending the insights of Partha Chatterjee on political society to demonstrate how the boundaries between state and society are systematically blurred. In doing so, the paper seeks to contribute theoretically by situating party society within a Gramscian paradigm of hegemony, thereby offering a nuanced understanding of how democratic power is reproduced through consent, ideology, and institutionalized mediation in postcolonial contexts.

Methodology of the Study:

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design to analyse party-mediated governance in contemporary West Bengal as a form of hegemonic political formation. It is based on a theoretical–analytical approach that uses key concepts such as consent, ideological mediation, and the transformation of civil society as interpretive tools to examine state–society relations. Empirically, the study relies on secondary sources, including field-based studies, ethnographic accounts, political economy analyses, and literature on decentralised governance and welfare distribution, along with policy documents and publicly available data to situate the analysis in the current socio-political context. Methodologically, it employs conceptual mapping and analytical synthesis to interpret empirical findings and identify patterns of political mediation, everyday governance practices, and the reproduction of authority. While the study does not involve primary data collection, it ensures analytical rigor through the triangulation of diverse sources. Although reliance on secondary data may limit micro-level

insights, the approach enables a theoretically grounded and contextually informed understanding of how mediated governance sustains political authority in West Bengal.

Understanding ‘Party Society’ and ‘Hegemony’:

Analysing contemporary political authority in West Bengal requires a clear understanding of party society and hegemony, as these concepts illuminate how power is exercised through social and institutional mechanisms beyond formal state structures. Clarifying these concepts is essential for examining how political parties mediate access to welfare, development programs, and social opportunities, shaping loyalty, consent, and governance practices.

Party society, as conceptualized by Dwaipayana Bhattacharyya, refers to a political formation in which parties become the primary reference point for citizens’ political and social life. It is characterized by the structured mediation of state resources, the embedding of party networks in local governance, and the influence over civil society institutions. Bhattacharyya highlights that party society involves: (a) dense grassroots networks connecting citizens to the state; (b) facilitation of welfare distribution through party intermediaries; (c) shaping of political expectations, loyalties, and everyday interactions; and (d) the transformation of social institutions such as self-help groups and cultural associations into conduits of political authority. In West Bengal, these features are evident in local party networks coordinating welfare schemes and mediating administrative processes, embedding party influence into daily life.

Hegemony, in this regard, provides a theoretical lens to capture the subtle yet pervasive forms of authority. Antonio Gramsci conceptualised hegemony as the ability of a dominant group to secure the voluntary consent of subordinate groups, not solely through coercion but through the shaping of cultural norms, social practices, and ideological frameworks. He writes that it is “the spontaneous consent given by the great masses of the population to the general direction imposed on social life by the dominant fundamental group” (Gramsci, 1971, p. 161). This process operates through the interaction of political society, associated with coercive institutions, and civil society, where consent is produced through social institutions and everyday practices. Central to this process are organic intellectuals and social institutions, which translate ruling ideas into the “common sense” of everyday life, thereby embedding authority into ordinary social practices. In the West Bengal context, this perspective helps to explain how citizens come to perceive welfare schemes, political outreach, and party-mediated governance not merely as instruments of power but as legitimate and responsive expressions of state authority.

Thus, the study interprets party society in West Bengal as a hegemonic formation in the Gramscian sense, wherein consent, ideological mediation, and the transformation of civil society constitute interlocking mechanisms of political authority. The combined lens allows for a nuanced analysis of how welfare schemes, political narratives, and mediated networks produce loyalty, reproduce power, and embed political legitimacy in the social and institutional fabric of contemporary West Bengal.

Party Society as a Hegemonic Formation:

The concept of “party society” in West Bengal provides an empirical ground to analyse the operation of hegemony in a postcolonial democratic context. Originally theorized by Dwaipayan Bhattacharyya, the term captures a political formation in which organized political parties penetrate and mediate the social, economic, and institutional life of society. When interpreted through the theoretical lens of Antonio Gramsci, party society can be understood as a hegemonic formation—one that rests not primarily on coercion but on the production of consent, ideological mediation, and the incorporation of civil society into political structures. While this phenomenon was historically consolidated during the rule of the Left Front, its persistence and transformation under the contemporary regime of the All India Trinamool Congress (TMC) demonstrate the adaptability of hegemonic processes in changing political contexts. This essay argues that party society in present-day West Bengal continues to function as a Gramscian hegemonic order, albeit in a reconfigured form marked by populist welfare, affective ideological narratives, and decentralized patronage networks.

The first dimension of this hegemonic formation is the production of consent, which operates through the material mediation of welfare and development schemes. In classical Gramscian terms, consent is generated when subordinate groups perceive the existing order as legitimate and beneficial. In contemporary West Bengal, welfare programmes such as Kanyashree, Sabuj Sathi, Swasthya Sathi, and the administrative outreach initiative Duare Sarkar play a crucial role in this process. These schemes are widely recognized for their extensive reach and visibility, but their political significance lies in the manner of their delivery. Field-based studies of decentralized governance in West Bengal indicate that access to welfare schemes—such as housing benefits, pensions, and employment guarantees—often involves layers of verification, recommendation, and facilitation by local intermediaries (Bardhan et al. 2015; Mookherjee 2015). These intermediaries, typically embedded within ruling party networks, function as gatekeepers of access, thereby transforming formal entitlements into relational goods mediated through political structures. Rather than functioning as purely bureaucratic entitlements, access to these benefits is often facilitated through local party networks, intermediaries, and grassroots actors aligned with the ruling party. This mediation produces a relational dynamic in which beneficiaries associate the receipt of welfare with the efficacy and benevolence of the ruling regime. Empirical research on decentralized governance and clientelism provides strong support for this argument.

Bardhan, Mookherjee, Mitra, and Sarkar (2015), in their study of rural West Bengal, demonstrate a statistically significant correlation between the receipt of targeted benefits and political support for incumbent authorities. Their findings indicate that recurring and personalized benefits, as opposed to universal public goods, are more likely to generate durable political loyalty. Similarly, studies on political clientelism (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007; Berenschot 2018) show that when material benefits are mediated through political networks, they create reciprocal expectations and structured dependence. In the contemporary context, although the ideological framing has shifted, the underlying mechanism persists: welfare distribution continues to function as a means of embedding citizens within networks of obligation and loyalty. Importantly, many beneficiaries interpret these benefits as legitimate

outcomes of responsive governance rather than as instruments of political control. As Partha Chatterjee argues, in postcolonial democracies, marginalized populations often access state resources through mediated negotiations that blur the boundary between rights and patronage (Chatterjee 2004). In West Bengal, this mediation has been normalized to the extent that it constitutes a widely accepted mode of citizenship. Thus, the production of consent is not merely transactional but is grounded in the perception of welfare as both legitimate and necessary. However, the consensual character of this process remains analytically complex, as the distinction between voluntary political support and structurally induced dependence is often blurred. What appears as consent may, in part, reflect constrained choices within a field where access to material benefits is mediated through partisan networks.

The second dimension is ideological mediation, which shapes the interpretive outlines through which citizens understand governance and authority. Under the Left Front, ideological mediation was anchored in class politics, redistribution, and Marxist discourse. In contrast, the contemporary regime has shifted towards a more flexible and effective ideological repertoire, emphasizing development, inclusivity, and regional identity. Welfare schemes are discursively framed as instruments of empowerment, dignity, and social justice, often accompanied by strong symbolic associations with leadership and governance. This shift reflects a transition from a relatively coherent doctrinal ideology to what may be termed populist hegemony, where legitimacy is constructed through emotive narratives and direct appeals to the people. From a Gramscian perspective, this transformation does not signify the decline of ideology but rather its reconfiguration. Ideological mediation continues to operate through the production of “common sense”—the taken-for-granted assumptions that structure everyday understanding. In contemporary West Bengal, the idea that the state, embodied in the ruling party, is both accessible and responsive has become deeply ingrained. This is reinforced by a wide array of actors functioning as organic intellectuals, including local party workers, school teachers, community leaders, and media intermediaries, who translate governmental initiatives into locally meaningful narratives. While Partha Chatterjee conceptualizes political society as a domain of negotiated access to state resources, the structure of party society demonstrates how such mediation becomes institutionalized and routinized, thereby stabilizing what would otherwise remain contingent forms of political negotiation.

As Bidyut Chakrabarty (2014) notes in the context of the Left, organizational penetration was central to ideological consolidation; a similar dynamic persists today, albeit with different ideological content and forms of articulation. The diffusion of these narratives ensures that political authority is not perceived as external or coercive but as embedded within the moral and social fabric of everyday life. Citizens come to interpret welfare delivery, administrative responsiveness, and local governance as evidence of a benevolent and effective regime. This internalization of legitimacy is crucial for sustaining hegemony, as it reduces the need for overt coercion and aligns popular expectations with the practices of governance. Even opposition forces often adopt similar discursive agendas, emphasizing welfare and development, which indicates the extent to which the hegemonic field is structured by dominant ideological norms.

The third dimension of party society is the transformation and incorporation of civil society into party structures, which represents a critical mechanism for the reproduction of hegemonic

control. In the contemporary context, civil society in West Bengal remains deeply politicized, with a wide range of associations—local clubs, cultural organizations, self-help groups, trade unions, and informal networks—operating within or in proximity to party structures. While the degree of centralized control may be less rigid than during the Left Front period, the pervasive influence of political mediation persists. Access to resources, opportunities, and even dispute resolution is often facilitated through these networks, reinforcing the centrality of party affiliation. For instance, local clubs, self-help groups, and neighbourhood associations frequently act as intermediaries in facilitating access to welfare schemes and administrative processes, thereby reinforcing the centrality of political networks in everyday governance. This process can be understood as a reconfiguration rather than a retreat of party society. Civil society has not regained autonomous space in a liberal sense; instead, it has been reorganized into decentralized and competitive patronage networks, where multiple actors operate under the broad umbrella of political authority. The result is a blurring of the distinction between civil and political society, closely approximating Gramsci's notion of the integral state. Social institutions, rather than functioning as independent arenas of collective action, become sites for the articulation and reproduction of political power. This incorporation enhances the capacity of the ruling regime to mobilize support and manage dissent, but it also constrains the development of autonomous civic engagement.

When these three dimensions are brought together, party society in contemporary West Bengal can be seen as a dynamic hegemonic formation. The production of consent through welfare mediation legitimizes political authority by aligning material benefits with governance. Ideological mediation normalizes this arrangement by embedding it within widely accepted narratives of development and inclusion. The incorporation of civil society ensures that these processes are continuously reproduced at the grassroots level. Therefore, they create a system in which power is exercised not primarily through coercion but through the active participation and acquiescence of citizens. At the same time, this hegemonic formation has significant democratic implications.

The deep entanglement of party and society blurs the distinction between state and civil society, raising concerns about autonomy, accountability, and the universality of citizenship rights. When access to welfare and services is mediated through partisan networks, the principle of equal treatment may be compromised, and political competition may become uneven. Moreover, the reliance on mediated consent can generate tensions and contradictions, particularly when expectations of welfare and inclusion are not met. Incidents of local conflict, allegations of partisan bias, and the emergence of competing political forces indicate that hegemony remains contingent and contested. From a theoretical standpoint, the analysis of party society in its contemporary form extends Gramscian insights into the domain of postcolonial democratic politics. It demonstrates that hegemony can be sustained not only through ideological coherence but also through adaptive and flexible strategies of consent production, capable of responding to changing political conditions. Furthermore, it deepens Partha Chatterjee's construction of political society by showing how mediated access to resources can be institutionalized within party structures to produce a relatively stable, though internally contradictory, order. At a deeper analytical level, the persistence of party society in contemporary West Bengal suggests that hegemony in postcolonial democracies must be

understood as a dynamic and adaptive process. Rather than relying solely on ideological coherence, it operates through the institutionalization of mediation, the personalization of welfare delivery, and the continuous rearticulation of legitimacy through populist narratives. This not only extends Gramscian theory beyond its classical context but also reveals the limits of liberal-democratic assumptions regarding the autonomy of civil society and the neutrality of state institutions.

Conclusion:

Party society in present-day West Bengal continues to constitute a Gramscian hegemonic formation, characterized by the production of consent through welfare mediation, the reconfiguration of ideological narratives, and the incorporation of civil society into political networks. While the form and content of these processes have evolved—from class-based mobilization to populist welfare and decentralized patronage—the underlying logic of hegemony remains intact. This underscores the resilience and adaptability of hegemonic power, as well as the need to critically interrogate its implications for democratic governance and political transformation.

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