

West Bengal's saffron turn and the new reality facing Dhaka



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For 75 years, West Bengal told itself a story: we are the land of Tagore and Vivekananda, of Bankim and Bose, of Amartya Sen and Abhijit Banerjee, of coffee house Marxists and high-minded *bhadralok* secularism. We are too refined for the politics of mandir and masjid. The Partition of 1947? A regrettable necessity inflicted upon us by lesser provinces.

On May 4, 2026, that story died as Suvendu Adhikari beat Mamata Banerjee on her own turf, Bhabanipur, by at least 15,000 votes. The BJP walked away with over 200 of West Bengal's 294 seats, and the Trinamool Congress (TMC) collapsed to roughly 80. The Left and the Indian National Congress remained where they have been parked since 2011: in near oblivion. The Kolkata *bhadralok* society has, at last, found its inner Sanatani. Partition, it turns out, was not a tragedy of misunderstanding; it was a verdict ahead of its time.

This matters for Bangladesh in ways our political elites have yet to absorb. The country is now, geographically, surrounded by the saffron flag. Tripura: BJP. Assam: Himanta Biswa Sarma, who campaigned in West Bengal for Adhikari and vividly spoke of pushing individuals across the border—a phrase that does not appear in any Vienna Convention I know of. Dhaka summoned the acting Indian high commissioner on April 30 to protest remarks by the Assam CM; four days later, the BJP won West Bengal on precisely that rhetoric. In retrospect, the summons seems only to have goaded the politics it sought to restrain.

So, how did the citadel fall? First, the Election Commission's Special Intensive Revision (SIR) of the voters vaporised nearly nine million voters, roughly 12 percent of the electorate, with a disproportionate impact on Muslim communities. It reminds me of the Bollywood cult Gabbar Singh. *Kitne aadmi the?* Nine million, *sardar*. TMC's most reliable bank was emptied before the first



BJP party workers parade through the streets of Kolkata on May 4, 2026 after learning of their win in West Bengal legislative assembly election. PHOTO: AFP

ballot was cast. Adhikari helpfully assured Indian Muslims that the SIR would target only Bangladeshi infiltrators, a category whose definition appears to expand with every rally. The Awami League was structurally deaf to all this; the BNP dispensation, judged by the foreign minister's first outing (to India), appears to be auditioning for the role of selfie partner. But let's not get ahead of ourselves.

Second, the central government deployed 2,400 companies of Central Armed Police Forces—probably the largest paramilitary footprint in any state election in Indian history—supplemented by the National

Investigation Agency (NIA) debuting in a state poll. This obliterated TMC's booth-level apparatus. Turnout hit 93 percent. That was not suppression but redirection: voters who had operated under TMC's organisational canopy found themselves, for once, voting freely. Freedom, it transpires, broke decisively for the BJP.

Third, years of anti-incumbency—stalled industrialisation, the SSC scandal in which

\$770 million in Bangladeshi exports, 42 percent of what we send to India. And the securitisation of the entire 4,096km frontier, complete with an internal BSF communiqué leaked to *The Hindu*, exploring the "operational feasibility of deploying reptiles or crocodiles" in riverine gaps. Yes, crocodiles. Indian North Block apparently concluded that wildlife was the cheaper subcontractor.

The Dhaka-Kolkata corridor that quietly

to take ties in a "new direction." The new direction, as it happened, was both towards Mauritius with Indian foreign minister as a travel partner to attend an Indian Ocean Conference hosted by India Foundation, and northwards on April 8, while he was still in Delhi, when Ali Hossain of Dhabalguri was shot dead by the BSF at Patgram. Goodwill, one supposes, has a body count. The Awami League looked away from such numbers as the price of patronage; I have yet to understand where our post-July 2024 politicians are heading.

Now consider what awaits the BNP that swept to parliament in Bangladesh's 13th general election in February. Adhikari, likely to be chief minister, told reporters in December last year that Bangladesh should be "taught a lesson like Israel taught Gaza." This is the BJP's political efficacy on display and the man with whom Dhaka must now discuss water-sharing, border haats, and economy, not to mention the Indians who may soon find themselves stateless. And the Teesta will flow as electorally convenient as the Ganges.

My honest reading, then? India's posture towards Bangladesh will, as usual, be based on selective amnesia and transactionality. And the BJP's domestic electoral product—the eternally menacing Bangladeshi infiltrator—will continue to be manufactured in West Bengal, Tripura, and Assam regardless of what the Indian foreign office murmurs at bilateral dinners. The Indian Ministry of External Affairs does the laundry that I appreciate, though the BJP picks the wardrobe. We must learn to read both the cycle and the spin.

Which means our parliament must do what it has historically refused to do: build a national consensus on a transactional foreign policy that survives the election cycles. Continuity beyond rhetoric. A doctrine, not an emotional mood. Engage all, align with balance, yes, but engage from a foundation that does not crumble amid changes in governments.

West Bengal's *bhadralok* society, or perhaps the Babu Samaj, has finally decided that 1947 was correct. We should grant them the courtesy of believing them and think accordingly. The story West Bengal now tells is one we have heard before, in other languages, on other borders. I hope Dhaka and Delhi read this caution carefully before the next chapter is written on Bangladesh-India relations.

Who profits from Bangladesh's heritage?



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A weaver in Narayanganj spends months creating a single Jamdani saree. Each motif is placed by hand, each thread carrying generations of knowledge. Thousands of kilometres away, a luxury fashion house releases a collection with strikingly similar patterns and sells them at prices the original artisan could never have imagined. The value travels, while the credit and profit don't. This is no longer just a story of cultural injustice. As Bangladesh awaits graduation from the Least Developed Country (LDC) status, the pertinent economic question is: who owns this country's creative heritage, and who benefits from it?

Jamdani is not an ordinary textile. Recognised by Unesco as part of humanity's intangible cultural heritage, it is one of the most intricate weaving traditions in the world. For centuries, it has been produced—primarily in Rupganj upazila of Narayanganj—by communities whose skills are globally admired but economically undervalued. Variations of these designs circulate in

international markets today with little acknowledgment of their origins. Patterns are adapted, renamed, and resold. A local tradition has become a global commodity, but the artisans remain at the margins of that value chain.

Bangladesh has taken some steps. The Geographical Indication Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 2013, enacted in line with obligations under the World Trade Organization Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS), granted Jamdani the GI status in 2016. But this protection is largely domestic. A GI certificate issued in Dhaka carries little weight in Paris, Milan, or Amsterdam. In the global market, protection that stops at the border is protection in name only. That is precisely why the current moment matters.

A significant shift has taken place in Europe. Under Regulation (EU) 2023/2411, the European Union has introduced a new system to protect craft and industrial products through geographical indications.

For the first time, non-EU countries can apply for protection of textiles, ceramics, and other crafts across all EU member-states through a single registration. Jamdani, Muslin, Nakshi Kantha, and Shital Pati—they all qualify. This is far bigger than an administrative reform; it is a structural opening. A single successful application can secure protection across 27 markets, but Bangladesh has yet to file one.

At the global level, an even more consequential development has emerged. In May 2024, member-states of the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) adopted a treaty on intellectual property, genetic resources, and associated traditional knowledge. For the first time, the international intellectual property system requires patent applicants to disclose the origin of genetic resources and, where applicable, associated traditional knowledge used in their inventions. This introduces a principle long demanded by countries of the Global South: that traditional knowledge is not free for the taking. Disclosure requirements create a legal foothold to challenge misappropriation, whether in patents, designs, or derivative products.

The urgency is sharpened by Bangladesh's upcoming LDC graduation. For decades, the country's export model has relied heavily on preferential market access, particularly in ready-made garment exports under schemes linked to the WTO framework and unilateral preferences such as the EU's "Everything But Arms" initiative. When these preferences

phase out, Bangladesh must reposition itself in a more competitive landscape. Its cultural heritage—crafts, designs, and traditional knowledge—is one of the few assets that cannot be easily replicated unless it is protected, recognised, and monetised on its own terms.

The issue extends far beyond Jamdani. Nakshi Kantha embroidery, Shital Pati weaving, terracotta, brass, and bell metal work—these are not just cultural artefacts but repositories of knowledge and identity. In today's global market, where authenticity is a premium, they should command value. Instead, they are often treated as an open-access resource. Reversing this trend requires prompt action.

First, Bangladesh needs a national digital archive of traditional designs. It can be an authoritative repository of motifs, techniques, and patterns. Without documented proof of origin, claims of ownership are difficult to defend internationally. Countries like India have demonstrated how such databases can be used to successfully challenge wrongful patents and claims.

Second, Bangladesh must internationalise its GI strategy. Filing applications under the EU's new CIGI system should be an immediate priority. Protection is not just about preventing misuse but also about establishing market identity and securing long-term value.

Third, and most importantly, Bangladesh must rethink how it values its craft sector.

Artisans are not merely producers of goods; they are creators of intellectual property. The motifs embedded in Jamdani or Nakshi Kantha are design assets. If properly protected, they can be licensed, not just sold.

This is the shift Bangladesh needs to turn from an exporter of labour-intensive goods into the owner of high-value creative assets. In such a model, a Jamdani weaver is no longer at the bottom of a supply chain but part of a creative economy, one where ideas, heritage, and design generate sustained income.

However, none of this will happen without political will. It requires coordination across ministries, investment in institutions, and a clear strategy that links culture with trade. Too often, intellectual property is treated as a technical legal matter. In reality, it is about power. It determines who benefits from creativity, whose knowledge is recognised, and whose labour is rewarded.

Bangladesh faces a choice: it can either remain a supplier of low-cost production, or it can assert ownership over what is uniquely its own. The answer may lie in something as simple, and as complex, as a piece of cloth. A Jamdani saree is not just a product but a history woven into fabric, a form of knowledge passed down through generations. Properly protected, it is also a source of economic resilience. The loom is in Narayanganj, the luxury houses are all over the world. The question is whether Bangladesh can finally claim its share of the value in between.

CROSSWORD
BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Denali setting
- 7 "Like that'll happen!"
- 11 Soup veggie
- 12 Edit menu choice
- 13 Fries source
- 14 Substandard
- 15 Playground sight
- 17 School member
- 20 Himalayan land
- 23 - Arbor
- 24 Totally trusted
- 26 First número
- 27 Road sealer
- 28 Cut off
- 29 The Empire State
- 31 John, to Ringo
- 32 Shady spot
- 33 Sets the price at
- 34 Lets in
- 37 Car bar
- 39 Philippine peninsula
- 43 Work the land
- 44 Winter dripper
- 45 Fall short of
- 46 Put into piles

DOWN

- 1 Swiss peak
- 2 Summer sign
- 3 Small worker
- 4 Secret supply
- 5 Tailed flier
- 6 Soothing plant
- 7 Nanny's kin
- 8 European flowers
- 9 Altar words
- 10 Gift tag word
- 16 Long-legged bird
- 17 Animal life
- 18 Central
- 19 Projectiles in a winter battle
- 21 Downloadable read
- 22 Printing goofs
- 24 Squall
- 25 Simple card game
- 30 Mountain calls
- 33 Moving about
- 35 Long-plumed bird
- 36 Meal in a shell
- 37 Cash dispenser
- 38 Clock numeral
- 40 Play part
- 41 Pub order
- 42 Homer's neighbor

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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