



THE RURAL VOTE

Must be an inclusive exercise

THE anxiety of the Trinamul Congress to advance the West Bengal panchayat elections before growing urban disenchantment spreads to rural areas has made the rigmarole still more complicated. The latest hurdle is decidedly official, one that the Chief Minister cannot brush off with a characteristically flippant wave of hand. The Election Commission of India has turned down the State's plea that the revision of electoral rolls, an annual ritual that begins in October and concludes in January, be deferred. There is little doubt that the request has been politically driven, if advanced by the administration as a matter of form. Equally is it a party-driven anxiety that seeks to exclude an estimated 20 lakh rural voters from the rolls. In particular, the age-group that has become eligible over the past year and might not be wholly impressed with the perceived *paribartan*. This is plainly undemocratic and the plea to advance the elections to forestall any further erosion in the ruling party's support cannot be accepted. The EC has been firm enough to adopt the right stand, even taking cognizance of the CPI-M and Congress opposition to the Trinamul's manipulative gameplan. The electoral exercise in the quangos must be inclusive to the extent possible, complete with re-demarkation of constituencies and administrative arrangements. The exercise doesn't lend scope for cutting corners. Rural elections are the bedrock of democracy. No less a critical factor is the time-frame of the panchayats, which can still be in operation till May 2013 according to the Panchayat Act. The ruling party's plea, therefore, is not well-grounded even in terms of electoral engagement and the statute that governs the panchayati raj. Even if the government has its way and the polls are advanced, the victorious party in a particular panchayat can only savour its triumph without ascending the saddle till its moment arrives next summer. Given the volatile situation in several districts and sporadic inter-party violence, a period of victory without power ~ which can be lucrative in the panchayats ~ can trigger a bout of restiveness, if not intensify political clashes.