

# The Paradoxical Figure of Mamata

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With the coming assembly elections, West Bengal seems to be poised on the edge of a historic upheaval that will, in all probability, enter the collective memory of its people, much like the momentous 1977 elections. The most palpable moment of this churning will manifest in what looks like an unbelievable denouement – that of the thirty-four year old monolithic rule of the Left Front. Equally stunning might be the image of Mamata Banerjee, bringing the red fortress down – a politician, almost bludgeoned to death by CPI-M cadres on 16<sup>th</sup> August 1990, now transformed into the emblematic face of this extraordinary hour. The 2011 polls may be billed as the great unraveling of West Bengal, its politics and culture – but also, I think, of gender relations. Banerjee is on the verge of acquiring a unique status, becoming the first woman head of a state well known for its misogynist culture, notwithstanding many claims to the contrary.

mamata banerjee

An important aspect of Banerjee's ascendancy may be lost if we fail to locate her persona within this grid of power and gender relations; if we do not contextualize her in Bengal's thriving culture of male chauvinism. The association of West Bengal and its ruling Marxists with the autonomy and radicalization of women – who are supposedly respected in Bengal unlike in other parts of the country – is a well preserved myth. Bengal respects its women, but only if they belong to the hallowed league of 'Mothers and Sisters'. Like elsewhere, 'deviant' women have little place in the land of the Renaissance.

Little wonder then that a senior CPI-M leader said recently that Mamata Banerjee can lay no legitimate claim to her slogan Maa, Mati, Manush, since she herself is not a mother: just one of the many sordid comments being flung at Banerjee with a disturbing regularity, by the respected bhadraloks running the CPI-M. But then should we blanch at these crude attempts to slight Banerjee? After all the CPI-M does have an infamous track record vis-à-vis women, a record that reveals its deeply conservative, patriarchal mindset.

Few would have forgotten the brutal lynching and killings at Bantala in May 1990 – which occurred in broad daylight in a public space – following which Jyoti Basu blithely transferred the culpability for the crime to unidentifiable anti-socials. Two months later that year, following the rapes of three Bangladeshi women in Birati, Shymali Gupta a senior woman leader of the Party and its women's wing described Shanti Das, one of the victims, as the "mistress" of a notorious anti-social element. She accused the women of being involved in "foul professions". Gupta's statement, published in the People's Democracy, was an attempt not only to whitewash the crime, but also to put the victims on the mat, as if they had 'invited' their attackers.

Mamata Banerjee does not fit the frame of the stereotypical respect-worthy 'good, maternal, married' Bengali woman which the CPI-M admires. If anything she is particularly vulnerable on this score. Her lower middle class origins, her abrasive, forthright style and jarring and unpolished language squarely place her outside the club of the genteel 'bhadramahila'. In addition, her status as a single woman makes her an object of salacious ridicule and gossip. Till the Singur and Nandigram movements exploded in the CPI-M's face, Bengal's middle and upper middle classes were distinctly uncomfortable with Banerjee's lack of grace, her colorless dress code, and her subaltern style and syntax of communication.

Initially as an activist of the Youth Congress and later as Trinamool Congress president, Mamata faced countless physical attacks from CPI-M cadres, often abetted by passive spectators among the police. Far from protecting her, as may have been expected in a culture that prides itself on having humanized gender relations, Mamata found herself more and more prone to heightened attacks.

### **But what is Banerjee's own perception of her identity as a woman?**

Her scattered writings on gender in various books she has authored provide some answers. In general she tends to perceive most issues – including those of class, caste, religion – through the binary lens of good and evil. Her analysis is not mediated by any understanding of the complex considerations which constitute political and social processes. Within this framework, Banerjee's negotiation of gender is conventional and clearly non-radical. In her book *Manabik*, the Trinamool Chief justifies the oft-repeated axiom that women themselves are their own enemies; she claims that many upper class women abuse their independence by living recklessly and destroying their families (*Manabik*, P 25, Deys Publishing, Kolkata, September 2010). The large-scale prevalence of domestic violence troubles Mamata deeply, and she expresses her anguish by narrating the experiences of three women she had worked with and known intimately, who lost their lives to violence at home. She pens a highly emotional narrative, but does not have a feminist vocabulary and its attendant analytical tools to decode the nature of the violence by placing it outside the domain of conventional emotions.

At the same time, it is virtually impossible not to perceive in Banerjee's ascendancy a challenge to the existing status-quo: not just the political order, but gender relations too. Undoubtedly it would be naïve to imply that simply having a woman as the head of state would automatically radicalize social equations in the state.

A sense of affront is numbing the CPI-M, who seem to have realized that the hour they have long dreaded might finally have arrived. From a position of weakness, with her back to the wall, Mamata has fought back not just surviving the physical assaults on her, but also creating a distinct – if confusing – cultural space, qualitatively different from the Marxists'.

To this extent while it is important to situate Banerjee in the context of gender, equally significant are the complex political and cultural processes of transformation currently underway in West Bengal. The language Banerjee deploys to communicate her politics is not just peppered with Left imagery, but also has a liberal dose of religious and spiritual content.

In 2006 the Trinamool Congress chief announced in Nandigram that her party was the new heir to the 1946 Tebhaga movement. Songs of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) began to resonate at her rallies. On 8<sup>th</sup> January 2010 at a ceremony laying the foundation stone of a hospital Mamata Banerjee sang 'We shall overcome'. At the public meeting on 21<sup>st</sup> July 2009 the mother of Nurul Islam, martyr of 1966 hunger march, was sitting on the podium. Her new form of politics blends religious and spiritual aphorisms with the rhetoric of land struggles, human rights, justice and development for the poor. Even as she whips up a passion over Tebhaga, she also invokes Ramakrishna and Sarada, Vivekananda, the Puranas and the Gita. This shifting of boundaries between the Right and the Left is leading to the crystallization of a new kind of political culture. Straddling the two opposite sides of a cultural and political spectrum – simplistically put as 'Left and Right' – the mix of idioms seem to catch the imagination of the people, at least for now when her popularity is at an all time high.

On the eve of these crucial elections Banerjee seems to represent the diverse aspirations of the varied sections flocking to her party – from the bhadralok, to the intellectual, the artist and the peasant. She is flanked on one side by Amit Mitra, (captain of industry) and Bratya Basu (an eminent theatre director); on her other side she has economist Abhirup Sarkar and human rights activist Sujato Bhadra. A section of Marxist Leninists (not the Maoists) who had worked closely with the

popular movements in Nandigram and Singur are now among Banerjee's most trusted lieutenants. Some have even joined the Trinamool Congress.

This cultural-political dynamic exceeds an analysis based on gender alone and raises a larger question: How do we explain the 'mystique' of Mamata Banerjee? Author Mahasweta Devi offered me a succinct one-liner: "Mamata is Mamata."

Having known Banerjee for years, she believes that the Trinamool Congress chief cannot be straitjacketed into any one single frame. She is many things rolled into one. If some believe that her surviving and surmounting the patriarchal political system shows her to be a feminist, her many associates perceive Banerjee more as a conformist than a radical – someone who would not challenge existing institutions that keep patriarchy in place.

Within her own party Banerjee functions like a dictator; she evokes awe and even terror among her colleagues. Her dictatorial impulses have come to the fore time and again in her repeated demands both to the NDA and the UPA dispensations, urging them to dismiss the Left Front government. At the same time Banerjee seems to have given many of the diverse groups and individuals who worked with her during the Singur-Nandigram agitations an autonomous space.

In order to unravel the personality of Mamata Banerjee it is perhaps therefore crucial to understand these seemingly irreconcilable contradictions and tensions.

*The author is currently working on a book on Mamata Banerjee*

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