

Mamata Banerjee Faces a Severe Political Crisis Amidst Growing Public Distrust

Vivek Gupta 5 mins read

On August 9, the day Mahatma Gandhi had launched the 'Quit India' movement in 1942 (opposed by the Hindu Right), the entire opposition walked out of the Rajya Sabha in protest against the chairman's ruling that disallowed the Leader of Opposition to speak about the chair's jibe at Samajwadi Party MP Jaya Bachchan, who's in her 20th year in the Rajya Sabha. Little did I know then that this would be the last time I would ever be present in the House as an MP. The chairman sensed the belligerence in the air and quickly adjourned the session three days before the announced date.

On that dreadful night, a junior lady doctor was brutalised, raped and murdered, while she was resting after 36 hours of continuous duty, in a 'seminar room' of the famous government-run R.G. Kar hospital of Kolkata. This horrific incident has changed the course of political history in West Bengal as no other event in living memory has. It was clear from the instant volcanic outburst in the state that 'Abhaya' (as she has been christened) was not just a case of 'one more rape and murder'. No one was willing to listen to official versions or to explanations of what had transpired. It was immediately dubbed as a gang-rape – which, incidentally, has not yet been established – and the media speculated on grotesque details of what was believed to have happened on that night. Doctors went on immediate strike in West Bengal and in most parts of India.

On August 14, lakhs of people were out in all important public places to 'Reclaim the Night' from 11 pm till the dawn of Independence Day. Some carried babies, others held on to little girls and the older women that they had come with them on to the streets. In my 72 years, I have never come across such a spontaneous display of women's power and could feel the sheer energy it radiated. What added to the fury that night were the televised visuals of how lumpen elements were attacking the protest site of the junior doctors at RG Kar hospital and how the police ran away as the mayhem continued.

Over these last eight weeks, [explosive details](#) of the conspiratorial actions taken by the hospital and police to hush up the matter have emerged. The principal of the medical college is portrayed, with some irrefutable evidence, as a thoroughly corrupt mafia boss who ran the establishment with muscle power and the police reportedly helped him. The [SHO has been arrested](#) by the CBI to tamper with or destroy evidence.

The outrage is not only against the delay in punishing the perpetrators but also against corruption and extortion by members of the ruling Trinamool Congress (TMC). The amounts collected may be petty compared to what politicians demand in many other states, but the people of Bengal are furious about it. People's wrath cuts through class, occupation and age groups. After 14 years, the chief minister appears to have lost the plot in round one and her volleys were met with resounding backhand smashes by the media and the masses, who were (strangely) one and indivisible. Chief minister Mamata Banerjee's well earned position as the champion of women's causes was demolished overnight and her 'march of women legislators' in favour of Abhaya was greeted with unequivocal derision. She demanded, like everyone else, that the rapist or rapists be hanged to death, but even this was met with public angst at her own government's role. Every corrective measure taken by her government sunk it even deeper into quagmire. Uncontrollable fury was evident when Banerjee tried to transfer the principal to another medical college, as it appeared she was rewarding a criminal.

First, the Calcutta high court stepped in and then, for reasons best known to it, the Supreme Court then took *suo moto* cognisance of the matter. Despite keen public interest and heightened scrutiny following the Supreme Court hearing, the apex court could not send the state's junior doctors back to work. The gordian knot remains uncut and frustration is welling up as people are unwilling to accept the delays in punishing the guilty.

Even though the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is on an endless mission to make life miserable for the Banerjee government – more so, after she roundly defeated Modi in election after election – her claim that it is all a conspiracy of Ram and Vaam (BJP and the Left) did not sell. Either her advisors and administration are misleading the chief minister, or she believes this to justify such an unprecedented agitation against someone who herself rose to power through agitations. While the involvement of political outfits cannot be outrightly rejected, no one can dare to swing the movement towards any party. In fact, noted political leaders were initially not allowed to join and the BJP leaders were booed out by protesters. That party then organised a *benami* march to the secretariat which did not result in any police firing or the desired 'martyrs' as the forces exercised restraint. The Left, and perhaps some remnants of the Congress, have been more successful, as a few protesters occasionally allow a handful of them to join as a show of solidarity on the condition that they do not raise party slogans or flags. At this stage, even these parties cannot dream of leading or hijacking this spontaneous and largely non-political movement.



With every passing day, both sides hardened their resolve and for one long and torturous month, I waited for the TMC government to take some positive action on my suggestions to purge the corrupt and to reach out to the agitators. On September 8, I decided to quit and join the people in their crusade for justice and a less dishonest government. I had been nominated from 'civil society' three years ago by the chief minister to voice the state's concerns in the Rajya Sabha and to challenge communal forces – which I thought I could do. But I always felt that I was a misfit in the world of party politics and it was too late to learn new tricks to survive and prosper. So, I put in my letter of resignation as Member of Parliament, as the only party that has effectively stopped Modi-Shah now desperately needs a shock therapy.

I pleaded with the chief minister, when she rang up to dissuade me from resigning as MP, to give up her political conspiracy theory and to jump into the fray, to hear what the doctors and the people wanted to tell her. The only satisfaction I have is that within a week of this, she actually did so and after several ups and downs, the doctors resumed work. However, the distrust between the government and the people is too strong even now. Not a day has passed in the last 58 days when people have not been out on the streets, in protest and in processions, at very short notice. It has spurred more literature, poems, songs, street theatre and art than several narrow political movements have, in decades.

As Durga puja, the annual autumnal festival of joy approached, the government [assumed](#) that people would be so busy with festivities that the movement would slow down or fade away. The season has kickstarted with Mahalaya and Navratri has begun. Massive puja pandals are up, but the agitation continues. Protesters swear that they will not rest until those guilty of the crime and corruption are punished in a truly exemplary manner. In fact, the Durga puja period is likely to be utilised to reach out to the mammoth crowds, unless the organisers – most of whom have received assistance from the government – object, or the police prohibit any demonstration. The latter may not cut ice, as West Bengal is not Delhi or UP, where agitations are crushed with overwhelming force and brutality.

The moot point is whether this marks the end of Banerjee's regime which may lead to the [BJP's long-awaited triumph in Bengal](#). The answer to both appears negative even in the TMC's darkest hour, as there is no alternative. Banerjee's prime supporters are mostly outside the urban belts, where the movement is most intense and visible. Her support base among subalterns in the cities, and among women and minorities all over, has surely taken a beating. But time can patch up wounds.

The educated, culturally-inclined *bhadralok* class has always been critical of her but it is furious now. However, when elections came, its larger section also voted for her, just to stop the BJP from mauling a regional culture that prides its values from the Renaissance of the 19th century. Unlike the Hindi belt, this state is largely free of casteism. Of course, a disgusted but less-numerous section of this class also sides with the BJP, which accounts for that party's large vote percentage in West Bengal. But this balance is now being rocked a bit too dangerously. Though the BJP can make no headway with the current unrest, [unless the TMC mends its ways](#), the *bhadralok* class may just vote in anger. The Left is simply unable to harvest this discontent—it is surely trying, ever so discreetly, while the decimated Congress is almost absent from the scene of action. If the present movement tilts to the Left-Congress combine on its own (it cannot be seduced or yanked), Bengal may get a third alternative. But there are too many ifs and buts, as things stand.

The TMC must take a realistic view of the danger it faces and work to cleanse the terrible reputation it has acquired, rather than blaming conspiracies. If Banerjee is to retain her place in the vanguard of the INDIA movement that may finally topple the communal regime in Delhi, she has to take sharp and demonstrative steps in her state. She must be ruthless in the political execution of the mafioso in health and other public sectors while purging the party, administration and the police of problematic elements. Though state elections are scheduled for the summer of 2026, the historic [monsoon thunder of 2024](#) will definitely impact them. Only history will reveal the extent.

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