

# 'Conscious call' of two Trinamool MPs give headache to Mamata

*Sumit Pande, Shemin Joy*

New Delhi: The Ides of August often evoke a strange mix of emotions in our country, especially in territories ripped apart by the Partition 77 years back.

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Though in a different context, there was an outpour of conflicting emotions on the midnight of August 14 this year when crowds on the streets of Kolkata sang the national anthem at the stroke of the midnight hour, only to reel back to the war cry "Reclaim the Streets", mourning the brutal rape and murder of a 31-year-old junior doctor in the City of Joy.

The outrage over the handling of the case by the Kolkata police had been building up for a week. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee had taken an offensive position, returning fire from the escarpments by dubbing the growing unrest a "Left Front-BJP conspiracy".

But that day, when a sitting Trinamool Congress MP broke ranks to join the call given by the protestors, cracks seemed to appear on the fortifications built by the ruling Trinamool Congress. At his residence in south Kolkata's Jodhpur Park, Sukhendu Shekhar Ray stood with a candle as a mark of solidarity with the masses who had hit the streets.

A day before, as a forewarning to the party, Ray had fired the first salvo with a post on X, seeking to know "why there are attempts to shield the beasts".

As the protest gained steam over the week, Ray demanded "custodial interrogation" of the former principal of the medical college and the police commissioner. The post was later deleted after he was asked to appear before the Kolkata police and the matters reached the courts.

The opposition BJP was quick to latch on to the allegations made by the TMC MP. State BJP chief and Union minister Sukanta Majumdar cited Ray's posts to corner the state government, invoking Ray's father and freedom fighter, Shibendu Sekhar Ray who had pleaded before the Radcliffe Commission to retain Malda district in West Bengal at the time of Partition.

Sukhendu Shekhar Ray, a lawyer, started his political career with the Congress and was considered close to former President Pranab Mukherjee. He joined the TMC in 2011 as Mamata Banerjee nominated him to the Rajya Sabha. In 2024, he was given a third term by the party. He has been the deputy leader and chief whip of the party in the Upper House.

After Ray took a strident position on the Kolkata rape and murder case, some MPs and TMC leaders called him to express support, but only a few have aired their views in public.

Ray, however, remains unapologetic. Last week, when the Kolkata protestors called for the second 'Reclaim the Streets' night, he stood in vigil, clad in a black kurta, at the gate of his residence on Mahadev Road in Delhi.

When scribes call, they often want to know from the TMC MP if he has been asked by the 'higher-ups' to explain his stand. "I have made a conscious call," he will reply briefly.

At 75, Ray feels the only 'high command' he shall listen to is the "God above".

Three years younger than Ray, Jawahar Sircar, another TMC MP, joined the rebellion on September 8. He unsettled the party with a two-page letter announcing his plans to resign from the Upper House and a "total" dissociation from politics. The former bureaucrat submitted the papers a few days back saying he was "now free to speak".

The letter from Sircar, who the then prime minister Manmohan Singh had described as the "most distinguished and knowledgeable civil servant", did not shock many as he had the reputation of being a maverick.

But his communication to Mamata was sharp and the message was not lost on leaders, as it was an account of what was wrong with Trinamool Congress.

He had identified the malaise in the TMC in 2022, just a year after he was inducted into the party and made an MP. But he was "heckled" by seniors in the party when he felt "shocked by the open evidence" of corruption by a former minister and spoke about it.

Sircar, who has an MA in History and cleared IAS in 1975, expressed the anguish of an average Bengali when he wrote that he grew up in a middle-class family, travelled in "suffocating" public buses and after 41 years in civil service, he "can still live in a small middle-class flat next to a big slum without embarrassment" and "drive a very ordinary nine-year-old car".

He wanted to resign then but was persuaded by well-wishers to remain as an MP to carry out the battle against an "authoritarian, divisive, discriminatory and anti-federal" regime led by Narendra Modi. He has warned Mamata about the "spontaneous outpouring of public anger" against the "unchecked overbearing attitude of the favoured few and corrupt".

Sircar, who donned many roles like the Union Culture Secretary for a record four years and the CEO of Prasar Bharati, would not mention how the Left lost its government in Bengal. It seems he believes that a hint is more than enough for the intelligent.

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