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Mamata's Handling of the R.G. Kar Hospital Case Could Prove to Be Her Hour of Reckoning



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The canny West Bengal chief minister seems to have lost her touch at grasping the mood on the streets.



Mamata Banerjee. Photo: X/@MamataBanerjee

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For each one of the thousands of us who were out on the midnight of August 14 on the streets of Kolkata, it turned about to be not just about the gut-wrenching, horrific rape and murder of a young medic inside RG Kar Hospital but something more.

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Those who gave a call for women to 'reclaim the night' – feminist and civil society groups – were stunned by the turnout. We all were. It seemed all of Kolkata, if not Bengal, certainly all its women, were out on the streets, literally, at the cusp where August 14 turned into August 15, looking for some kind of liberation. Since then, there has been no abatement in public outrage – campaigns, memes and posters have filled the Bengali social media sphere; fresh citizen coalitions are being formed overnight, apart from rallies and protest marches that are inundating newer corners of the state every day.

On Sunday evening for example, hundreds stood outside the Salt Lake Stadium, where a sold-out Durand Cup derby between Mohun Bagan and East Bengal clubs was scheduled, and then abandoned for 'security reasons'. The supporters of these iconic clubs, along with those of Mohammedan Sporting, stood in the rain, undaunted, against hundreds of policemen – protesting together, holding hands and club flags, one carrying the other on their shoulder, drenched, singing slogans. They were not aggrieved because the derby was dismantled. They were there to send a message, that in hours such as these, old 'rivals' can and will come together – a message which carries substantive symbolic threat to any regime in power.

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Kolkata is not alien to mass gatherings, in fact, it is infamous for it. But even so, there is barely a parallel for either that night of rambunctious reclamation led by women or that of arch footballing rivals standing together in matchless solidarity.

Clearly, the death of the young doctor has touched a raw nerve in all of us.

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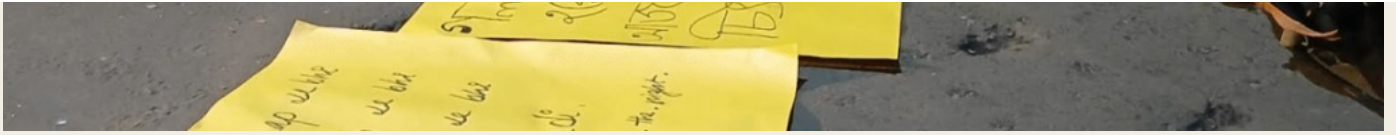
Bengal is genuinely angry and disturbed. And it is not just the nature of crime; it is also not just about how Mamata Banerjee and her government has handled the situation since hour zero. From the hospital authorities to the officials of the state government, it was dealt with a toxic mix of incompetence, insensitivity and misogyny. Banerjee has shown little understanding of the gravity of the situation. And since then, the government have only managed to plough new depths of depravity, including the police letting a riffraff crowd of thousands vandalise the hospital site on the same night when Kolkata was out on the streets.

Also read: RG Kar Brutality: When a Dying State Turns Criminal, It Feeds on Its Own Body

People are out there across social and gender divides, across financial standing, and across neighbourhoods because the idea of 'justice' is now no more about a single case, or even women's safety in general. Safety of women is non-negotiable. But, if that night or everything that has happened afterwards was about reclaiming something, it was that of saving the state from the tentacles of Mamata's 'cartels'. And for her betrayal. That is why this moment in Bengal is unrivalled in the recent history of the state.

I am not loosely using the word 'cartel' here. For it is now well-known how the state functions under Mamata Banerjee's TMC. Over her rule of 13 years as a chief minister, Mamata has let, if not led, *a capite ad calcem* cartelisation of everything from health, education to infrastructure. The rank and file of Mamata's party and officialdom are fully involved. Locally it is called a 'syndicate', an organised and illegitimate network that functions as a quasi-state when it comes to any service or operation in Bengal, including in the hospitals. Speculation is rife on whether the young physician had been exposed to one or more of their illegitimate businesses.





Representative image of a protest for the RG Kar victim on the intervening night of August 14-15.

Two of Banerjee's ministers are in jail for having criminalised what is a regular government work, and several TMC henchmen are facing similar charges. But as this case is in danger of revealing, that has not stymied the cartels or their reach, which is astonishingly well-oiled.

Abject corruption and cartelisation of government services is not unheard of in either Bengal or in other parts of India, but it seems to have reached perverse proportions, becoming the *de facto* template of Mamata's regime. In other words, Bengal is perceived from inside as being on the verge of having become a 'gangster state'. Is that why Mamata's government is so unnerved by the threat of an expose, and why it has been trying, from the beginning, to deflect the case? Speculation runs rife.

One might here ask, if this is known, then why does she keep winning. Just two months ago, TMC trumped BJP a second time in five years in the national elections, not to speak of her victory in the state elections, while the Left has kept bleeding steadily for about a decade now. One of the reasons why Banerjee keeps coming back to power is the 'there is no alternative' factor, which plagues several political landscapes in India. But TMC has also tom-tommed the spectre of Bengal becoming a BJP stronghold and that it is the only one to stop BJP marauding into 'sweet' Bengal. Not only TMC's supporters but much of the urban middle class and former Left voters have, at least since 2019, got sold to this threat. Her welfare schemes, the optics of her populism, and her canny understanding of public mood has also given Mamata heavy political dividends.

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But the violent unseating of Bangladesh prime minister Sheikh Hasina, should offer us some lessons. Hasina, like Banerjee, was the lone liberal face against the Islamist Jamaat, she had her pulse on the mood on the ground, and she apparently gave Bangladesh at least a decade of stability and development. But none of that could save her, and one of the reasons was that she was taking her immunity for granted, making dirty, oppressive use of the 'spectre' of Jamaat. So is Banerjee. She knows too well that many tolerate her because the alternative will be harakiri, and yet Banerjee has too long taken the support base for granted. Many consider this an act of devious betrayal of their trust.

Again, like Hasina, Banerjee has this time been astonishingly deaf to the mood on the street, which by all accounts has been her major strength, if not the only one. She has always managed to foreclose any swelling of antagonism by swinging into action, attended by purposeful theatrics, the pandemic being a good case in point. But this time, she has not understood the scale of public anger, flogging the dead horse of 'a conspiracy' being waged against her, and even taking to the streets to demand 'justice' for the victim. This is when, laughably, she is additionally both the home minister and the health minister, so anything that concerns the case comes directly under her charge. She has done this before, sabotaging a case by the sheer drama of her numbers and noise. This time, no one is buying it.

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Banerjee's deafness and refusal to listen is telling because this is exactly what happened to the Left in power when it let first Singur and then the Nandigram crisis

slip out of their grip. The Left, cushioned in power for over 30 years then was riding on its tallest performance since 1977 in the state elections of 2006 in spite of its abysmal performance. And like Banerjee, it had let its tentacles clog the normal functioning of the state. In less than three years since 2006, it not only bungled left, right and centre, but refused to look into the mirror, took its substantive support for granted, and thought like all those who stay too long in power, that the sun would never set on them. Additionally, Banerjee is beset by constantly quarrelling factions within her own domain.

Banerjee is like Bengal's Left in many poor ways, but there is one difference. Unlike the Left, she *is* the party. The then-mighty Left took another few years to dismember, and become a lame-duck government until it lost to Banerjee in 2011. For all her bluster, Banerjee's 'Ma Mati Manush' government might take much less. This could prove to be her hour of reckoning.

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