

Calcutta Notebook

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PEOPLE ARE WONDERING, IF West Bengal Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee is the same person as she was before 20th May, last year, when she took up the reins of the State from the Left regime through a massive mandate. Not in terms of physique (she looks a little frail, these days), but in mind. Lord Acton said, "Power corrupts etc", but does it also change a person's character beyond recognition? After being elevated to the head of a State, a person, hitherto in the opposition, has to ipso facto change, like a forward soccer player retreating to defence; from having no power, he or she suddenly has plenty of it to wield, to do good, or to do harm. Kolkata's intelligentsia feels, after becoming the State's 11th Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee, these days, is becoming unrecognisable. Some of her remarks and actions, over the last couple of months or so, seem out of her all-too-familiar image.

The change that the intelligentsia perceives in Mamata Banerjee has made her alien too. In politics, she has always been a demagogic 'street fighter' since 1976, when she became the firebrand General Secretary of the Mahila Congress. This altruistic image was tarnished when she rubbished media reports, and the CPI (M)'s complaints, of suicides by some two dozen farmers, mainly in Bardhamaan district, soon after the khariff crop came home. She sounded untrue, when she admitted only one farmer's suicide, as per a CID investigation; others, she said, took their lives under personal stresses, for which the government cannot be blamed. Also out of her character was her impromptu remark when the media reported a gruesome gang rape of a middle-aged Anglo-Indian housewife on Kolkata's Park Street after midnight of 15th February. With the City Police Commissioner's support, she said, the rape did not occur but was 'fabricated' by her enemies to malign her administration. When it was confirmed by a deft Kolkata cop and three of four culprits were nabbed, the Chief Minister summoned the lady officer to the Writers' Buildings and gave her a dressing-down for making her a liar. Days later, she was transferred to a low-profile post outside Kolkata. Ms Banerjee has been a robust feminist all along; in 1993, she sat on dharna-until she was physically removed outside Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu's chamber, demanding immediate arrest of the rapist (apparently a CPI-M cadre whom the police was shielding) of a deaf and dumb girl in a Nadia village. She stood by and brought justice to many other hapless women.

She used to say before the 2011 poll that if her party ever came to power, it won't interfere with, or bend, the police in its own interest, as the Left regimes often did. Sad to say, in several events in these last 12 months, the police did act with bias in favour of her party workers in diverse manner. She did get her nephew arrested for slapping a traffic police, but in many other occasions, the police have been lenient to her party hooligans. Her call for restoring democracy by ending the Left culture of party rule (*dalatantra*), the intelligentsia feels, has been belied. Her party workers are avenging cadres for their past misdeeds. Recently, a TMC minister asked his party men not to mix with CPI(M)'s workers and cadres or forge marital

relations with them, just as the Marxist top brass used to say in 2010, let not people name their daughters as 'Mamata', because she was a ruthless politician.

Her drastic cut hitherto has been a lightning removal of the previous Railway Minister, Dr Dinesh Trivedi, an MP from her party, for proposing a modicum rise in rail fares in the budget for 2012-'13 that he presented in the Lok Sabha on 14th March'12. In a high drama, lasting four days, and to utter public humiliation of Dr Trivedi, she made him resign and forced the Prime Minister to appoint her another senior colleague, Mukul Roy (then a Union Minister of State for Shipping) in his place. Passenger fares had remained static since 1999 when L P Jaday presented his first rail budget. Although the Prime Minister and experts welcomed the hike and commuters did not object to it. The next move that enraged the intelligentsia was her Library Minister's circular to State libraries to unsubscribe certain newspapers for their readers, which they termed 'an axe on democracy' and smacking of vendetta against certain dailies that habitually criticised her. She feels, apart from a few exceptions, the media are unjustly arrayed against her administration and do not notice the good work done. Recently, she even named TV channels that the people should, and should not, watch and newspapers they should not read (implied by their omission in the circular); this is without a precedent in any regime in India or abroad.

Two more events that make her unfamiliar were the arrests of two professors—Partha Sarathi Ray, a molecular biologist of IISER, a Central government outfit, at Mohanpur near Kalyani on 8th April and Ambikesh Mahapatra of Jadavpur University on 12th April. Ray was held on charge of inciting evicted slum-dwellers, near Nonadanga in southeast Kolkata on 4th April, when he was actually 70 kilometres away in the IISER. Prof Mahapatra was charged under five sections of IT Act for e-mailing a collage to his friends and colleagues in a cooperative society, adapting dialogues from Satyajit Ray's 'Sonar Kella' (1974) to lampoon her 'vanishing' of Dr Trivedi, anointing of Mukul Roy in his place and showing 'Mukul' (that was the name of the abducted child in the film too) the 'Golden Fort' from a distance. Protests came from all over the world and even the US Nobel laureate, Noam Chomsky wrote to Prime Minister to release the arrested professors. Politicians generally do not take umbrage at cartoons and caricatures of them, drawn in fun or anger; some even enjoy them. Even during 'press censorship' (1975-'77), Indira Gandhi took no action against a cartoon by Kutty in a big Bengali daily, showing a naked runaway man, covering his pelvis, for fear of castration (vasectomy) at the behest of Sanjay Gandhi. Her police is also arresting persons on unfounded or dubious charges, or allegations. □□□