

MAMATA'S BENGAL

A 'Greece' in the Making?

Bibekananda Ray

MAMATA BANERJEE WAS sworn in as West Bengal's 11th Chief Minister on 20th May, 2011, just a year ago following a massive mandate. Over 48 million people of the state elected 184 nominees of her party; with 42 of the Congress and one of the SUCI, the three-party alliance bagged 227 seats in the 294-seat Assembly, accounting for 77%, or 74 more, than three-fourths, of the House in April-May poll, last year. It was her aggressive dynamism, charisma and a clarion call for *Paribartan*, i.e., 'change' that galvanised people to put her at the helm of the State. She had been making numerous promises to people before every poll since 1st January 1998, when, breaking away from the Congress, she launched a faction, Trinamul Congress. Her promises before the last year's month-long poll, whose outcome gave her a historic opportunity to redeem them, are waiting to be fulfilled. People do not take politicians' promises seriously, but hers they take because for two decades, they have seen her courage, dedication and sincerity and benefited from her splendid performance as Railway Minister in NDC and UPA-II regimes, twice within a decade. On 20th May 2011, she sat on a Royal Bengal tiger, as it were, of over 90 million people's aspirations. After a year, it is not clear, if it will take her to the desired destination, triumphantly, or halfway, ease her from its back and throw her on the wayside.

The successes and shortcomings in the first year of her governance have to be seen in the backdrop of her major snares, paid by the Left regime. The first of these is a grim law and order situation. The CPI (M)'s cadres, activists and hired goons, nicknamed *harmads*, and Maoist guerrillas in jungles of three western districts indulged, almost daily, in senseless mayhems, gun-battle, abduction and mine-blasts that took more tolls of innocent persons than of so-called 'enemies of the people'. Discovery of telltale human skulls, bones and skeletons, dug out from some villages of West and East Midnapur districts, mainly of TMC supporters as well as numerous incidents of killings highlighted their barbarity and political vendetta. These may as well be the tip of the iceberg of some 55 thousand political murders in 3½ decades that the National Crime Bureau recorded, many of which must have been perpetrated by CPI(M) cadres and harmads.

The second was a nearly empty exchequer, pushing the State to the brink of bankruptcy. On 20th May, last year, the State's outstanding internal debt (RBI and market loans together) was at least 2.4 lakh crore, i.e., 2.4 trillion, rupees and an annual interest burden of Rs 26,000 crore, entirely a legacy of the 34-year Left regime. CPM Finance Minister Ashim Dasgupta not only wasted the small surplus, left by Dr Ashok Mitra in his last budget (1986-87), but gradually ruined the State's economy too by his hoodwinking tricks like 'zero and surplus budgeting, which hid the true state of affairs. In his first year (1987-88), he borrowed Rs 643 crore from the Centre and next year, paid annual interest of Rs 394 crore on it. These rose to Rs 6434 crore

and Rs 949 crore in 2000-2001 and to Rs 18734.7 crore and Rs 6074 crore, respectively in 2010-2011. The Central debt went up by 10 times in his first 13 years, and by over 29 times in his last 10. Curiously, when in his first financial year (1987-'88), he needed just Rs 380 crore to make up the budget deficit, he borrowed Rs 263 crore more (Rs 643 crore) from the Centre. Similarly, in his last year (2010-2011), while he needed Rs 21006 crore to close the gap between revenue and expenditure, he actually borrowed Rs 166341 crore (Rs 187347 crore) from the Centre. During the 34-year regime, at least Rs 58254 crore, i.e., over 29% of the then outstanding debt of Rs 200738 crore on 1st April 2011, were borrowed in excess of the regime's cumulative revenue deficit of Rs 142485 crore since 1977. States incur debts generally to make up revenue deficits. The cumulative debt which included a small amount, incurred by the British and Congress regimes up to 21st June 1977, became the proverbial dead albatross around Ms Banerjee's neck and if it was deliberate, it was like a retreating Army's 'scorched-earth policy', destroying the enemy terrain so that people are hard put to reclaim it.

Why did he over-borrow? He neither admitted, nor denied it, but the worms that are falling out of the can of the Left regimes in the new administration, indicate an answer. On 21st December '11, the Chairman of the State PAC, a minister in the Left regime, Anisur Rehman admitted that eight departments of the 6th Left Front regime spent Rs 15780 crore between 2003 and 2006 without any budgetary provisions, or proper accounting. This perhaps implies that this whopping amount might have been swindled, siphoned off, or misappropriated by the regime, across the years. When investigation is complete about diverse financial and other scams of the left regime, a definite answer will perhaps be available.

As revenue receipts cannot go up overnight and the Centre is reluctant to any special assistance, or concession, to the new regime, despite assurance by the Prime Minister, the alliance regime borrowed Rs 25000 crore in October and November 2011 from the market, mainly to disburse pay and pension to about nine lakh serving and retired employees.. Other legacies which plague Mamata regime are inadequate health care and a mess in formal education. Many rural and urban State hospitals are overcrowded, under-staffed and ill-equipped to render minimum health care. In the Left regime, by design or default, this led to rampant growth of private hospitals and nursing homes as well as frantic rush by critical patients to Chennai, Vellore and Bangalore. Although schools, colleges, universities and institutes proliferated, enrolment and pass-out increased and secondary education up to Class VIII was made free, frequent experiments in syllabi and assessment methods, created a mess in formal education. Political intervention in the management, appointments and students' unions downgraded the academic atmosphere and drove wedges among the teachers, non-teachers and the taught by accentuating political loyalties.

What are the 'changes' the new regime has brought in? No doubt, peace has returned to Darjeeling hills, which has been elusive since 1977, because of separatist agitations, led first by Subhas Ghising and later by Bimal Gurung. Turmoil and insecurity in Jangalmahal have also diminished. *Gorkha Jana Mukti Morcha*, the hill people's outfit, demanding a separate State of Gorkhaland has acceded to the State's and the Centre's joint offer of a package of self-rule

under a new autonomous outfit, Gorkha Territorial Authority (GTA), for which election is to be held this year, if and after the conflicting demands for inclusion or exclusion of Terai and Dooars regions of north Bengal are resolved.

The empty coffer has not deterred the new regime from reckless populist expenditure. It is giving compensation to victims of earthquake in north Bengal, of a river bridge collapse in Bijanbari, of a hooch tragedy in a few villages in south 24-Parganas, a series of devastating fires, e.g., in AMRI hospital and a south Kolkata slum etc. The slew of development projects for Jangalmahal will need a fortune. Strangely, the State's bankruptcy is not reflected in any of its policies, or practices. On 30th January, the Chief Minister gave each of the 790 clubs of various kinds in 19 districts two lakh rupees, with promise to give more, next year. Some statutory State payments, usually deferred in the Left regimes, have been streamlined.

Her promise of 'change' meant different things to different people, but one thing was common; it was a clarion call for change from an oppressive Marxist to the native democratic style. Coming from a subaltern background, she talks incessantly of upholding democracy in every sphere of public life. Except an ambience of peace and respite from senseless killings, no great change is felt, or seen, in daily lives of people in urban and rural Bengal. For example, there is no relief from 'load-shedding' all over the State. Highways and other roads, badly damaged by last year's downpours are yet to be fully repaired. Inter- and intra-party clashes diminished, but vengeful attacks by TMC grassroots workers on CPI(M) cadres and vice versa continue. A protest rally by an anti-Mamata faction of the State Congress in Kolkata and its protest against her decision to name Indira Bhavan after rebel poet, Kazi Nazrul in Salt Lake City, resignation of a Congress State minister, protest over farmers' suicides and crib-deaths expose a rift in the alliance. With every passing day the chasm is widening and it can't be otherwise as the all important 3-tier panchayet poll is round the corner.

It has to be admitted, however, that the Mamata regime's performance in the first 200 days, as outlined by the Chief Minister on 6th December, tilted more on the credit side. On the day of her swearing in, the Chief Minister announced her first task to be the return of 400 acres of acquired land to 'unwilling' farmers and owners in Singur. As the process started, Tatas, to whom they were leased, got a stay in Kolkata High Court which upheld the government's move. They have appealed to the Supreme Court which is yet to hear the petition. Other changes, like appointment of 'Mentor Group' to restore the glory of Presidency College (upgraded to a university by the Left regime in 2010), de-politicising educational institutions by an ordinance have been salutary. Her surprise visits to some State hospitals in the first week after take-over and drastic action against some erring doctors have somewhat toned up health care. Entrusting Panchayet administration to the bureaucracy bodes well for their efficiency. Before and after the poll, she met scores of potential investors to disclose her industrial policies, which pricked the Left canard that she was 'anti-industry'. A new airport at Andal, a rail wagon factory in Kanchrapara, a new rail-link with Nandigram, a modern fishing harbour and settlement on Nayachar are on the anvil. The Power Minister, a former Chief Secretary, is

bellying expectations from him, while power-offs in Kolkata and rest of the State continue. There has not been any headway in rural electrification either.

Although her regime is not bound to repay the Rs 24 lakh crore debts; monthly interest burden has to be borne. The accumulated debt across 3½ decades now accounts for 40.8% of the GSDP, the highest in India. Market loans in the last eight months have already exceeded the limit of Rs 18828 crore, set for the current FY under the 2010 FRBM Act. The Union Finance Ministry has permitted the new regime to borrow Rs 2706 crore for having repaid some old loans with interests and additional Rs 6600 crore in the current financial year. On her request, the Ministry has released a grant of Rs 9340 crore under five heads for amelioration of the Jangalmahal. West Bengal will sink further and a political crisis will be precipitated, if New Delhi does not concede to her demands for a three-year debt moratorium (exemption from paying interest) and for restructuring the total debt. After debt-servicing, the State, these days, is left only with about Rs 5000 crore equivalent to six paise in a rupee to spend on development. Unless revenue receipts increase dramatically by widening the tax net, enhancing collection, reducing evasion of taxes and duties and exports bring more foreign exchange, West Bengal's economy will collapse and call for harsh measures like Greece's.

Hope and doubt about the regime's success run parallel in people's minds. □□□