

MAMATA'S ROLLER COASTER RIDE

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As the sun set on 2011, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee waved a report card that amply put into practice a frequently flashed but seldom seen in action slogan of her predecessor Buddhadeb Bhattacharya: "Do it now". It is a motto she has put into practice since the moment of swearing-in putting in long hours at work and making her cabinet do the same. While it is not a report card full of straight A's, it certainly is not one full of failures either.

In May 2011, as Mamata stepped into Writers' Building, she was greeted by empty coffers, a complete lack of infrastructure and work culture, an administrative machinery that was resistant to any change or movement from the status quo of 34 years, an environment of frequent 'cha' and 'muri' breaks, and thousands of files bundled in sacks and abandoned. And from this cobweb-ridden labyrinth the lady had dreams to realise.

She began by kicking out the soporific ambience that had settled over Writers for years by working 16-18 hours and making her ministers follow the suit. She had the illegal tea and snack stalls removed so there could potentially be more work and fewer repeat hours in an government's administrative corridors.

Although she began by offering an olive branch to her opponents and an air of camaraderie, the cracks are beginning to show. Constant tug-of-war between her and her Congress allies, especially on the eve of Panchayat polls is not only creating quick rounds of musical-chairs in the Cabinet, but also leaving the Delhi-based partners a little puzzled, even as state Congress leaders are rebelling, both against Mamata and their own central command to mend fences in the state. The latest is the resignation letter from

Congress minister Manoj Chakraborty, just divested of his portfolios, which accepted the Chief Minister's dare to Congressmen to quit her government. While dissent from allies is a minor thorn, there are other thorns slowly raising their head attacking principles of the students' wing of the Trinamool, which has led to widespread allegations of lax and biased law-and-order where students from the TMC Chhatra Parishad go almost scot-free, while others face non-bailable charges. There are also reports that some of those involved in the incidents of violence and extortions are former CPM cadres who have recently joined the Trinamool and may actually be either continuing their earlier riot runs or deliberately indulging in anti-social activities to discredit the new government. Either way, strong measures from the government can send a message of zero-tolerance of violence, which is necessary, if investment has to be attracted to the state.

Talking of investment,

the recent meeting of the Chief Minister with leaders of industry from all over India as well as abroad showed little inclination for investment in the absence of an industry-friendly land acquisition policy. Having ridden to power on the back of her aggressive opposition to forced acquisition land for industry such as in Singur, it is now difficult for the government to make a complete volte face. Some amount of flexibility is required to find land for potential investors. Another issue likely to pose difficulties is the number of schemes announced that can cost a pretty penny while revenue for these is yet to be generated.

Mamata has the unenviable task of having to tackle multiple chronic maladies she inherited and all on an emergency basis.



Unfortunately, she has not had the luxury of easing into the new rhythm as she is faced with one crisis after another—death of children at state hospitals a shameful occurrence that continues till today, fire at the AMRI hospital killing 93 persons, the hooch tragedy that claimed 180 lives, the Maoist menace, to name a few.

The tragic fire at the AMRI hospital, the hooch tragedy and extortions mirror the gist of the Chief Minister's first 200+ days in government. A catastrophe that occurred during her tenure, but one that was actually the product of lapses accumulated over the years. As Deputy Mayor Farzana Alam said that the big dreams of the TMC were up against an even bigger wall of a corrupt, inefficient and lackadaisical machinery that had accomplished nothing but debts over the years. Despite all this, a no-nonsense business-like approach seems to be Mamata's new mantra, very different from her rally days. Given below are some instances of her approach:

HEALTH

In one of her earliest actions as CM she visited major hospitals on surprise inspections and took stern actions against those found wanting on-the-spot suspension of the Dean of Bangur Institute of Neurology (BIN). She transferred senior doctors to different hospitals across the state to shake out the complacency and inefficiency that had grown out of long cushy postings. When AMRI hospital went up in flames recently killing over 90 persons, Ms Banerjee, who also holds the health portfolio, wasted no time landing in the thick of things, cancelling the licence of the institution and ordering its directors arrested for.

However, a severe shortage of doctors could hinder her plan to upgrade 27 hospitals in 11 backward districts, since close to 2000 doctors' posts lie vacant. The Centre had sanctioned Rs 610 crore to upgrade the hospitals.

MAOIST-HIT AREAS

Mamata made three quick visits to Jangalmahal, Midnapur and Purulia, recently, announcing a range of

development projects that included drinking water and 10,000 police jobs, earning the confidence of the tribals and villagers while gradually stepping up action against the Maoists.

"If you want to pick up guns, do it for the state," she told the Maoists giving a seven-day deadline to surrender arms and asked the locals to form resistance groups for fighting the Maoists at the ground level, urging them not to provide food to the Maoists. Deprived of cooked food from the villagers, the Maoists were forced to cook their own food deep in the jungles thus enabling the forces to trace them.

The killing of Maoist Koteswar Rao 'Kishenji' was a planned outcome of her politically shrewd offer of talks, a call for ceasefire, an effective use of the carrot and stick. Although she had batted noisily for the Maoists from the Opposition side, she knew they could ruin her innings as CM if not tackled early, and wasted no time switching sides. It is noteworthy that the encounter was an outcome of the confidence-building measures of the government in some of the villages that were Maoist strongholds. In the following weeks, as she stepped up the heat on the rebels, more Maoists came over ground and surrendered. This whole exercise can push along her development chariot, provided she uses her gains wisely.

EDUCATION

The state boasts the highest dropout rate and the lowest number of institutions from primary schools to professional colleges. Hence, a range of measures are already on the anvil. Since political parties on campus are another scourge, the government passed the West Bengal University Ordinance, barring MLAs and union representatives from key policy-framing and decision-making bodies. Also vice-chancellors and pro vice-chancellors have been forbidden from holding political posts and can be impeached. Despite her move to depoliticise education through a new regulation, politically-motivated violence on the campus has seen a sharp rise, with Trinamool's Chhatra Parishad actively involved in many of these. Not reining in these will damage her back-breaking

efforts to portray an image of a forward-looking and growth-oriented administration

While the Left Front had stopped after upgrading Presidency College to a university, Mamata took up the mantle to ensure that Budhhdhadeb Bhattacharjee's dream of making it a world-class university was fulfilled. She formed a mentor group consisting of renowned academics to help Presidency University in its formative years, and invited Nobel laureate Amartya Sen as chief mentor of Presidency University.

FINANCE

The Left left the state deep in the red and finance minister Amit Mitra has been burdened with the unenviable task of turning the cashbooks green adhering to populist measures like not raising taxes.

The present borrowing limit makes it difficult for the state to meet its commitments without any special package. In 2010-11, the Left Front government had resorted to overdraft seven times. If repayment involves another loan, it is a grave crisis as an overdraft is the last option to meet temporary cash flows deficits.

EXTORTIONS

The heady intoxication of success at the hustings has spawned a spate of extortions that could prove to be a setback. Despite the Chief Minister's unequivocal directive to businessmen and industrialists not to give in to extortionists, even if they claim to be from the Trinamool, several such incidents have been reported. While exemplary punishment against such harassment has not been significant, the recent arrest of a Trinamool Congress worker under the direction of the Chief Minister for beating up a headmaster and some other teachers is a sign that Mamata is willing to take the broom to her own party. A picture tarnished her image by reportedly storming into Bhowanipore *thana* to free her supporters. There is also the grey area of many of these extortionists being former CPM members in an opportunistic change of loyalties or even suspected of being set up to discredit the new CM.



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Friend or Foe?