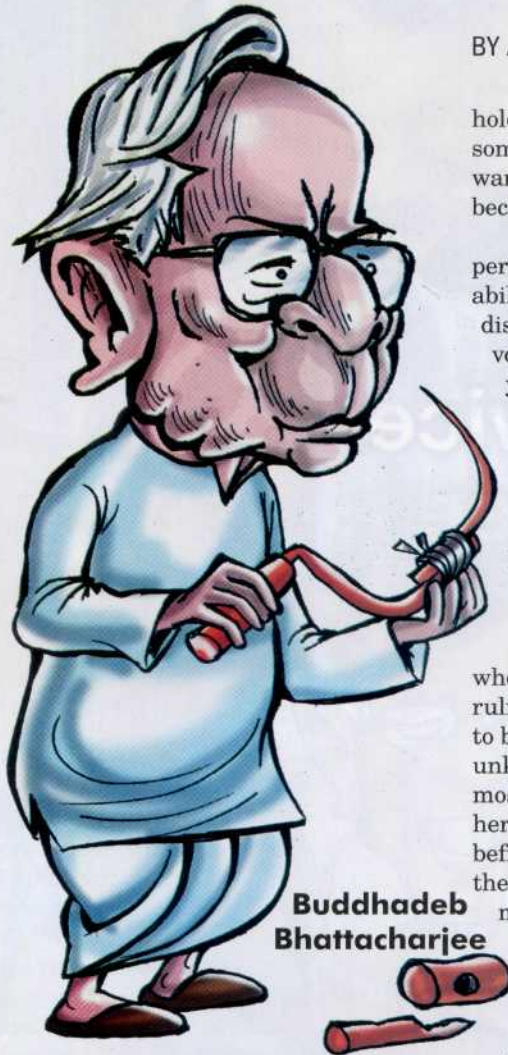


West Bengal

Mamata storms Left bastion

The voters remain unconvinced by the Chief Minister's apology on behalf of his government and CPI (M) cadre. History is hard to forget.

BY ANNAM SURESH



Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee

The Left is staring at an anti-incumbency verdict in West Bengal. The challenger to a 34-year-old status quo is a ragtag army with little to show other than a shrill voice, and an opportunist BJP. The electoral battle in the State is between Mamata Banerjee and everyone in the ruling Left Front, which certainly does not hide its internal squabbles or lack of a powerful leadership. The Trinamool Congress (TC) has only one public face and that is of Mamata. She has decided not to contest now. So she gets to play puppeteer to West Bengal while

holding onto the railways - and have someone keep an Assembly seat warm for her, should she decide to become Chief Minister later.

With no track record of great performance or administrative ability, Mamata is determined to display a difference. She offers the voters the services of tech-savvy youngsters like IIM interns, Sabeer Bhatia's expertise on reaching out, a regularly-updated website, and an additional sports quota in the Railways. The Trinamool has in its fold a motley group ranging from disgruntled ex-Congressmen, Leftists, writers, former bureaucrats, and anyone who has a bone to pick with the ruling coalition. That elections were to be held in 2011 was not something unknown and Mamata made the most of that knowledge through her two Railway Budgets. She befriended the media and mobilized the intellectuals through protest marches against the widespread violence, episode after episode, in rural West Bengal. Against land-grabbing in Rajarhat. Against Singur. Against price rise. Against petrol prices. There was no dearth of causes.

The government, of course, accused the Trinamool of conniving with the Maoists in spreading violence, while simultaneously gloating over the armed conflict in another part saying, "We have driven them (TC) away". Disgusted, former governor Gopalkrishna Gandhi condemned the State's role in Nandigram and Singur. Others have called West Bengal 'the killing fields'. Violence comes easy in the state - from neighbourhood clubs that gang up on young girls and their families that object to sexual harassment and extortion in the

House strength: 294
LDF: 233
TC: 30
Congress: 24
Others: 7

name of Pujas to cold-blooded mass killing of political dissenters and landowners who won't part with their holdings for a miserable pittance. The peasants whom the communists are supposed to represent have not flourished either - they remain as poor as they did pre-1977 while corruption has ensured that some of the Left leaders have gotten obscenely rich.

The just-woken CPI (M) is scrambling in all directions. Close to three-and-a-half decades of occupying the seat of power can certainly cause atrophy in a lethargy-ridden, complacent and short-sighted non-administration. This is why, despite knowing elections were due in 2011, no remedial measures were even initiated. Not even when archival Mamata was making the most of every available opportunity to destroy the base of the Left, expand the Trinamool reach and announce the kind of largess that may be impossible to achieve. The CPI (M) and its partners remained somnolent until the deadline and downfall were staring them in the face.

Now that the Left is staring at imminent defeat, it is making last-ditch efforts to save itself and present a reformed profile. A government machinery, where a file could take months to crawl from one desk to the next barely five feet away, suddenly

finds its senior officers personally visiting the CEO with an average of nearly 100 files a day. They are seeking permission to clear welfare projects that would in the normal course have died of negligence. As an after-thought, the government also announces a sports quota hours before the code of conduct kicks in. Shaken by the Trinamool strategy to usher in change with youthful and tech-friendly processes in keeping with the times, the CPI (M) fields some younger faces and drops some known, tainted names. More than half the names on the list – 149 out of 292 – are new. A total of 46 women and 57 minority candidates have made it to the list, while nine ministers, the Speaker (at his own request), the Deputy Speaker, the Chief Whip and 100 sitting MLAs have been dropped.

Too late in the day, Chief Minister Buddhadev Bhattacharya has taken it upon himself to woo the voters by apologising for his government's excesses and acts of omission and commission. He is making a frantic bid to woo those who feel neglected, offended and violated continuously – women, the backward and minorities. He is now seen on a desperate drive to urge his partymen to shun the arrogance and highhandedness born of all those years of uninterrupted power and to seek the people's votes humbly. Unfortunately, more than three decades have given them time enough to forget humility, as continuing incidents of violence involving the party cadre show. The Chief Minister's own partymen have not taken kindly to his expression of a change of heart. The voters are even less convinced despite the desperate measures. History is hard to forget.

It is surprising that, even when the TC swept the municipal polls, Buddhadev did not see the writing on the wall and get into the damage control mode. Not even when he saw the Trinamool and Congress party workers preparing for 2011.

The Congress right now has the same problem as the CPI (M) viz. Mamata. The Trinamool will allow Congress a one-third partnership once the bickering over the winnability of the seats offered has been sorted out. Although many feel that, while the Trinamool can

go it alone, its partnership with the Congress will stand it in good stead during parliamentary polls. For the Congress, its best option is the tie-up that it is working out with the TC. While Mamata can give her party crowds on the Maidan, Pranab Mukherjee and Company will infuse its image with a shade of political maturity that it lacks. However, the fight over seat-sharing is already threatening to acquire the colour of the disruptive politics that people have begun to expect from Mamata. A squeaky BJP with its allies plans to field candidates in all 294 seats, hoping to benefit from the public's disillusionment with the lead actors. It has already announced 181 candidates – in a State where its presence is invisible and its policies are unwelcome. Although the BJP was the first to announce its candidates, it is unlikely to be taken seriously in West Bengal that has displayed one exemplary quality – not allowing religious or caste politics to take root.

A random survey of voters across all age and socio-economic groups reveals a tone of hopelessness. "For the common man what choice is there? We have 34 years of maladministration that has ruined the state on one hand. On the other, we have a bunch that has no administrative experience, and the record of the Railways and the Municipal Corporation under them does not inspire any confidence. And is there a third option? For us it is going to be just moving from one kind of doom to another" laments Rajib Sarkar who works for a private nursing home.

Safety, efficiency, freedom from bandhs, promotion of new industries, and elimination of corruption – these appear to be the prime demands of people and mostly in that order. And no political group seems capable of delivering that. What the elections do seem to promise is violence (hence the six-phase poll), a drop in urban turnout and a rise in the rural turnout since both key political groups have their cadres working at mobilising each other's strongholds



by all means.

It is very unlikely that the Left combine will receive the kind of support it has all these three-plus decades. Nor is the Trinamool with its allies what the people are looking for. Unfortunately, there is no other alternative coming up – unless the Congress decides to go it alone. But then, the Congress has no broad grassroot base.

There certainly seems to be fear of score-settling when (the question is more about 'when' than about 'if') the Trinamool comes to power. This is evident from the number of senior civil servants, particularly those known to have been close to the 34-year-old regime, seeking postings outside the State. In addition there are also a large number of former government officials, including senior civil servants who have moved to the Trinamool camp.

Irrespective of who comes to power, the common man foresees a continuation of disruption through bandhs and continuation of bloodshed. No one has actually promised him anything better.

There is a whiff of change in the air. But it ain't roses ■

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BALLOT BATTLE

Playing the cards right

INSIDE



POISONED

Endosulfan
victims
of Kerala



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