

BY ANNAM SURESH



Years ago, when I interviewed Congress MP Ms Mamata Banerjee for *Debonair* magazine, I told her that one day I would be back to interview Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee. She laughed. On the way back, my driver said 'yeh madam ko to Mukhya mantri hona chahiye – yeh dilli mein kya kar rahi hai – inki zaroorat yahaan hai.' (this lady should be the Chief Minister in West Bengal, what is she doing in Delhi, we need her here").

Not everyone agreed. Many felt she was just a rabble-rousing disruptive attention seeker with significant nuisance value, but without the political acumen, maturity and wisdom to head a government. But the new Mamata who graciously went to a senior Left leader's funeral, personally invited senior CPM leaders for the swearing-in, sought their cooperation and expertise; she did not waste time in witch-hunting. In fact, even in the face of abusive or cheap comments from some senior Left leaders, she has maintained decorum – earning her not just public admiration, but also the support of some of her opponents.

Noteworthy is that, from day one she has been at work until late and insisting on her team doing so too. Frequent tea and 'muri' breaks have been abolished with these vendors having been removed from the building.

In one of her earliest actions as CM, she visited major hospitals on surprise inspections and took stern action against those found wanting – such as on-the-spot suspension of the Dean of Bangur Institute of Neurology (BIN). She also transferred senior doctors to different hospitals across the state to shake out the complacency and inefficiency that had grown out of long cushy postings. The spate of infant deaths in state hospitals soon after she assumed power has only hastened her reforms in this sector. She has launched a series of measures to improve hospitals, including inviting experts from across the country to fortify the healthcare machinery. But the AMRI hospital which gassed more than 90 patients in early December 2011 may just be the tip of the iceberg for lackadaisical health care norms. Though Ms Banerjee, who also holds the health portfolio did cancel the licence of the institution and ordering its directors arrested for flouting safety norms. We have to wait and see as to how law takes its course.

Mamata's government has 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.

The previous government has left the state deep in the red and Finance Minister Amit Mitra has been burdened with the unenviable task of turning the cashbooks green and also has to stick to populist measures like not enhancing taxes.

Fortunately, the new Ms Banerjee is very different from the one who had been in the opposition just a few months back-- a prime mover of bandhs and protests who had chased Nano out and was partly responsible for the industry-unfriendly work culture that had made West Bengal anathema to investors. Her new anti-bandh leaf avatar and investment-friendly demeanour is wooing industry back. Wipro has already made some commitments for a second unit and others are looking the same way.

Unfortunately, the spate of extortions might 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. Exemplary punishment against such harassment has not been significant.

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Another milestone is the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration Accord with the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) in a region that was plagued by continuous violence, 'bandhs' and blockades, along with a special development package for Darjeeling and surrounding areas, within a month of assuming power.

For the first time, Ms Banerjee, never known for patronising films, marched right into Mr Bhattacharya's turf, hired professional organizers and turned the 17th Kolkata Film Festival into one that had as much mass-appeal as cerebral quotient. The film festival which had been a pet event of the former CM and a forum for intellectuals and art movies was turned into a larger-than-ever-before array of art and popular films.

Yet, there have been disturbing traces of the old Mamata – as in the reported incident of her storming the Bhowanipore police station to free her supporters, and of extortionists from TMC allegedly going scot-free.

Six months is too brief a time to see significant change, but if these early days are any indication of the state of things to come, then one can see a significant number of poll promises being kept. But burdened with a huge debt, a largely inefficient and unused-to-work machinery, it is bound to be an uphill task.

Didi goes slow and steady



Mamata Banerjee on a roll

