

# West Bengal: Mamata Banerjee, Trinamul Congress and the Politics of Rape

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Long before the Nano was even a gleam in Ratan Tata's eye, Mamata Banerjee had emerged as the most determined opponent of the Left Front in West Bengal. Rape and violence on women were important weapons in her arsenal in those days. Her discourse was always totally different from the discourse of the feminists or women's movement activists. But it was clearly an appeal to Bengali middle class sentiments about how under the rule of the CPI(M) women were unsafe, they could be raped so easily. One can point to at least two very well known incident. On 7 January 1993, Ms. Banerjee went to the Writers' Building with a hearing and speech impaired girl, who had been raped, and was pregnant. Ms. Banerjee claimed that the rapist was a CPI(M) man. Mamata Banerjee was then a Union Minister and youth Congress (I) leader in West Bengal. She led a three hour demonstration in front of the Chief Minister's chamber at Writers' Building, the seat of the government in West Bengal. Eventually she was violently thrown out and arrested, some members of the press manhandled, and the Press Corner demolished thereafter. Mamata Banerjee vowed she would never return to the Writers - and she returned only as Chief Minister, eighteen years later. The rape victim gave birth to a child brought up in a Home.

In 1998, Ms. Banerjee asserted that Champala Sardar, a TMC activist, had been raped by CPI(M) men. This was (of course) vigorously denied by the CPI(M), the ruling party of the Left Front and eventually, in 2003, all the accused were acquitted. Not that that means much. In India, most rape cases are not reported to the police. And that minority of rape cases actually reported to the police see progress among only a handful. Convictions are very few. There have been numerous reasons for this. The law on evidence for one. Till very recently the victim's words amounted to little unless a forensic test backed her up. The difficulty in ensuring immediate forensic test for another. This is a complex thing and one which many victims are not prepared to undergo immediately after a rape. Sexism of the administration and sections of the judiciary for a third. Ever since the Mathura Rape Case, now close to four decades old, the women's movement in India has seen how courts, particularly though not solely lower courts, have dealt with rapes. In the Bhanwari Devi case, the court simply ruled that middle aged upper caste men do not rape lower caste women. That sexual violence and women's bodies are routine weapons in political battles in India require little proving. So with a party deeply entrenched in power for decades, getting police compliance was often not very difficult, and proving rape charges very difficult indeed. What remains true is that one woman, Champala Sardar, risked her reputation to come out into the open and state that she had been raped. Ms. Banerjee made much of this, and it was part of the 2001 TMC election campaign.

But now that she and her party are in power, it seems that West Bengal has already attained Nirvana, or has become Paradise. From 2009, the slogan of change was what brought her to power. But just what are the changes for women? When any problem is mentioned, she treats it either as a legacy of the CPI(M), or as a false charge manufactured by the CPI(M) or some other political opponent.

When babies die, Ms. Banerjee is heard remarking that those babies were conceived while the Left Front was still in power. In other words, instead of investigating whether child care is being done properly, she is trying to find some utterly illogical plea by which to shrug off the responsibility of

the Government health department. When farmers commit suicide she declares it has nothing to do with indebtedness. And when a woman was raped in Park Street, she commented that the incident was contrived and intended to malign her government. It is therefore hardly surprising that her Minister for Transport as well as Sports, Mr. Madan Mitra, accused the women of using the accusation of rape as a blackmail bid. As he told Star Ananda on 16 February, "She has two children and so far as I know she is separated from her husband. What was she doing at a night club so late in the night?" Thus, he asserted all over again that in a patriarchal society, it is the woman who is always accountable. It is she who must answer why she had not followed an unwritten code (as though even that keeps women safe).

From Ms. Banarjee, little more is to be expected. This is the person who a short while back, during the Calcutta Book Fair, said in public that books and wives (boi aar gharer bou) should not be lent out as they will be used before being returned. Yet, with the large adoring middle class fans she has gathered, there are few voices being raised against her. Her callous and potentially damaging comment over the Park street case indicates that for her, rape was an issue vital only as a stepping stone to power. Now that it is her government, she has no time for sensitive approach to rape victims. Since there were discrepancies in the testimony, the woman must be viewed as part of a conspiracy.

It is unfortunate that far too many even of social movement activists are seeing things in binaries, suggesting that too strong a criticism of the TMC government would mean their being viewed as CPI(M) supporters. This is the logic that has led to calling a halt to secular laws for fear of being branded as BJP (e.g., an adoption law that does not require any specific religious identity). This logic would silence or minimize all protest movements for fear of being accused that the movement is sponsored by one opposition party or another.

Given that the arrests on 18<sup>th</sup> February have conclusively proved that Ms. Banerjee and Madan Mitra were the ones playing fast and loose with the truth, one wonders what is going to happen. Will the rights movements demand at least the resignation of Mr. Mitra, who alleged that a woman was using a rape charge to simply blackmail someone? Will Ms. Banerjee apologise publicly, not only to this particular woman, but to all women, since her utterance has made it unlikely that in future raped women will dare to go to the police with a complaint? Or will she tell the media again that this is now a 15 day old case so she has no time to comment on any aspect of it, including the sexism and flagrant falsehood displayed both by herself and her minister?

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