

# Class, culture, and politics: The making of Mamata Banerjee

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As West Bengal's Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee makes headlines for quitting the UPA-II government, LSE's Sumantra Bose explains the origins of her distinctive politics.

In May 2011, the most durable political regime in the annals of India's democracy came to an end. The Left Front, dominated by the Communist Party of India (Marxist), was defeated after 34 continuous years in power in West Bengal, during which period it won seven consecutive elections in the eastern state, India's fourth-most populous with over 91 million citizens as of the national census of March 2011.

As I [wrote at that time](#), this was no less than the end of an era in Indian politics. The longevity of the CPI(M)-led Left Front regime is unparalleled in India's political history, and had become a seemingly permanent fact of life for West Bengal's people. Like other Kolkata natives of my generation, I have no memory of any state government prior to June 1977, when the CPI(M) and its allies came to power.



The driving force of the near-historic *paribartan* ('change' in Bengali) in West Bengal in May 2011 was the Trinamool Congress, the party founded and led by Mamata Banerjee, who became the state's first woman chief minister.

The Trinamool Congress — 'trina' means grass and 'mool' means root — observes its foundation day as January 1, 1998. The party was however launched three days earlier, at a rally in Kolkata on 29 December 1997, a fortnight after Mamata Banerjee's expulsion from the Congress on charges of insubordination.

The rally was held at the Shyambazar five-point junction in north Kolkata, a well-known city landmark. The atmosphere, which I remember very clearly almost 15 years later, could be summed up in one word: electric. All the roads leading to the junction and side-streets in the area were jammed by masses of people. The turnout was probably about 100,000—not a mega-sized rally by Kolkata standards. What made the rally memorable was the atmosphere. The crowds were comprised almost entirely of Congress activists from across West Bengal. They came in the tens of thousands to show solidarity with their *didi* ('older sister', as Banerjee is commonly referred to in West Bengal by her supporters of all ages) in her hour of crisis.

The mood alternated between excitement in anticipation of the declaration of the new party and outrage at her treatment by the Congress leadership in New Delhi. The fledgling Trinamool had few, if any, resources to bring

people to the rally. They came spontaneously—men and women, Hindus and Muslims, the young, the middle-aged, and the elderly. Young men were particularly numerous, a result in part of Banerjee's leadership of the Congress party's youth wing in West Bengal through the 1990s.

Banerjee is one of India's most talked-about politicians. The word perhaps used most frequently to describe her is 'unpredictable'. I would not go to the other extreme and call her predictable; that would make her sound boring, which she is emphatically not. She is one of the most interesting people I know or have ever met. But Banerjee is not 'unpredictable' in the manner the commentary on her suggests. She is shaped by her lived experiences of class, culture, and politics, and her attitudes, strategies, and decisions are rooted in those lived experiences.

Mamata Banerjee was born into a lower middle-class family in a somewhat run-down neighborhood of south Kolkata, a 10-minute drive from my own family home in the city. Her family was pushed into poverty by her father's early death, which happened when Banerjee was in her mid-teens. The large family, consisting of the widowed mother, six brothers, and two sisters, subsequently faced much hardship. Unlike many others in a similar situation, she forged ahead with her education and between the mid-1970s and the early 1980s she earned bachelor's and master's degrees from Calcutta University, a law diploma, and a qualification to be a schoolteacher. But Banerjee's lived experience of acute privation during her formative years as a person and as a political activist is at the root of her identification with the poor and the vulnerable (when she speaks of her life as being one of 'struggle', this formative phase is what she fundamentally means).



Unlike many other politicians in India, this is not an affectation but genuine empathy born of lived experience. To this day she retains a mild but definite aversion to visiting the luxury hotels and members-only private clubs frequented by the affluent stratum of India's society and its established or aspiring politicians. Until the dramatic expansion of the Trinamool Congress's rural base in West Bengal starting in 2007, her core support consisted predominantly of poor people from the struggling working class of Kolkata and its adjacent districts and of middle- and lower middle-class people from traditionally Congress-supporting backgrounds in the state's small towns.

Banerjee's personality is equally defined by a strongly held sense of cultural identity. She is proudly and passionately Bengali. This deep attachment to Bengal's culture — the region's history, language, and traditions — underpins her politics and manifests itself in many ways.

Since she assumed office, a new ritual has been instituted in the 'Writers' Buildings', the colonial-era name of the state's administrative headquarters in central Kolkata. The iconic figures in Bengal's modern history — ranging from inspirational leaders and martyrs of the struggle for freedom from colonial rule to famous litterateurs and much-loved movie actors of yesteryears — are remembered there on their birth anniversaries. Banerjee begins her day in the office by offering flowers to a portrait of the famous Bengali whose birthday it is. The ceremony is brief and on a modest scale, unaccompanied by fanfare.

Another, more private manifestation is Banerjee's personal immersion in the arts, music, and literary heritage of Bengal, in a manner very typical of educated middle-class Bengalis. Her cultural tastes and aesthetic sensibilities are squarely within a traditional Bengali framework, which non-Bengalis might find hard to understand and those of cosmopolitan tastes to appreciate. She likes to sing Rabindranath Tagore's songs and recite his poetry — in public and private — but her main hobby is painting and sketching. She does this prolifically, partly as a stress-relieving activity. Her elegantly spartan office in the Writers' Buildings has a small studio attached to it, cluttered with easels and other artists' paraphernalia.

The themes of her paintings — people, landscapes, etc. — are almost always derived from motifs particular to Bengal. In 2005, at a time when she was very diffident about the quality of her artwork and did not want too many people to see her output, I acquired one of her relatively few paintings on an overtly political theme, which is now on a wall in my London home. Titled ‘Agony in Amlashole’, it was inspired by deaths from starvation in 2004 among *adivasis* (tribals) in Amlashole, a village in a remote part of West Bengal. It captures the tragedy of hunger in twenty-first-century India with understated yet remarkable power.

A more public example of the marriage of Banerjee’s aesthetics and politics is the election symbol of the Trinamool Congress since its formation in early 1998: two flowers sprouting from a bed of grass. Her design was inspired by a line from a poem by Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976), a famous political poet of Bengal: *ek brintay dui kusum, Hindu-Mussalman* (‘one stem’ — meaning the Bengali people — ‘from which two buds blossom, Hindu and Muslim’).

Banerjee’s verbal statement in Kolkata to the media withdrawing her party from the Congress-led UPA-II government on 18 September 2012 was delivered in Bengali (with a few choice phrases in English thrown in). Of course, this was because Bengali is the language she is most comfortable speaking, and also because of the mass audience in West Bengal. But that was not the whole reason. India’s numerous English and Hindi television channels — all broadcasting her live — had to scramble to find, within minutes, people who could translate her as she spoke (at the end, she volunteered a brief summary in less than fluent Hindi).

Banerjee’s non-elite, ordinary social background and her cultural authenticity go a long way towards explaining her mass appeal in India’s fourth-most populous state, and consequently her weight as one of the most important figures in [India’s regionalised polity](#) of the early twenty-first century. But understanding her lived experience as a politician is also essential to making sense of her as a leader.

She has literally risen from the grassroots of politics. Banerjee began her political life as an activist of the Congress party’s student wing in West Bengal in the mid-1970s (her parents were staunch Congress supporters). I recall meeting her for the first time in 1982. At the time, she was a local party worker, almost unknown even in her home turf of south Kolkata. I was a child then, but remember her personal simplicity, her strength of conviction, and her enthusiasm for politics. She spent the first two decades of her political life as a loyal organiser of the Congress party, the sole significant opposition to the CPI(M)-led regime in West Bengal.

Starting in 1990, she rose rapidly to become by far the most popular opposition leader in West Bengal. By the mid-1990s she had developed a mass following in the state, which enabled her to not just survive the exit from the Congress but strike out on her own.

When Banerjee finally ousted West Bengal’s entrenched regime from power, it was the culmination of two decades of ‘struggle’ resembling a personal and political crusade. The struggle met demoralising setbacks on the way, notably in state elections in 2001 and 2006 and the national election of 2004. At times she felt discouraged, but she picked herself up and persevered, convinced of the rightness of her cause, and she waged her campaigns in her characteristic combative style. She relishes ‘struggle’.

India’s other two top women politicians, Mayawati of Uttar Pradesh and Jayalalitha of Tamil Nadu, have also earned their credentials over decades in the rough-and-tumble of politics. However, Mayawati was mentored since her entry into politics in the late 1970s by Kanshi Ram, the Dalit leader who founded the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) in 1984 and later designated Mayawati as his successor. Similarly, Jayalalitha was mentored in her early years in politics by M.G. Ramachandran (‘MGR’), who was Tamil Nadu’s most popular politician through the 1970s and 1980s, and after his death she won control of the AIADMK party he had founded in 1972. Banerjee is a completely self-made leader—she never had a comparable mentor-figure, let alone any advantages of birth or political lineage to call upon.

In July 2012 Mamata Banerjee wrote in a letter to a longtime political colleague and personal friend (a woman considerably older than her): “I have given my commitment to the people of [West] Bengal to do my utmost for the state. In this difficult journey, I am sustained by my mother’s blessings [Banerjee’s mother passed away in

December 2011] and your goodwill” (translated from Bengali).

She will pursue this challenge — and play her larger role in national politics — in her own, distinctive way.

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