

# What Mamata Banerjee knows about power

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The English word “know” does not have the same virtuosity as the Sanskrit “gyan”, but it has agency. Think about it: what Delilah knew, what Samson divulged in a moment of weakness; what Achilles knew and perhaps forgot; what Yudhishtir knew and only by knowing could dissemble — Ashwatthama is dead etc., etc.

On February 4, when national television channels were indignant either with reports of the PM being “blocked in Parliament” by Opposition MPs or Rahul Gandhi’s affront to Ravneet Bittu, channels in Bengal were airing footage of Mamata Banerjee in the Supreme Court. TV squares debated the point of the move but the usual belligerence of even the non-Trinamool spokespersons seemed a little muted, some sting missing from their diatribes. The next day, it was easy to miss the occasional expert column applauding the chief minister’s “fighter spirit”, given the rash of reports on the legalities of her appearance and the BJP’s reaction to the “flopshow”. But those on the streets of Calcutta will tell you something had shifted.

Since the Trinamool government came to power a third time in 2021, there has been a scam or controversy every year, sometimes more. 2022: School Service Commission Recruitment Scam. 2023: Public Distribution System Scam. 2024: R.G. Kar case. 2025: South Calcutta Law College rape, Messi debacle. And these are just the ones that remained in the headlines. But that day, surrounded by black gowns, when the heron-like figure stirred the air inside the apex court with her bony fingers and said animatedly, “Bengal is targeted, Sir. Sir, you tell me why not Assam. Why not Assam?” it appeared that for a brief shining moment all controversies were neither forgiven, nor forgotten, but set aside.

## **Antics, myths and ideals**

Mamata Banerjee has been the chief minister of West Bengal since 2011. The puzzle is that she continues to be personally popular despite dissatisfaction with her rule.” That is the opening of the abstract of a research paper by a professor of South Asian studies in faraway Oslo, Norway. Comfortable in his outsider’s identity, Arild Engelsen Ruud writes, “In this contribution, I read popularly told stories about Mamata in the way of reading myths and argue that they create and sustain an image of her as someone fighting a just cause, against giant adversaries — including her own party.”

Ruud’s 2025 paper is titled *The Mamata Stories: Tall Tales, Myths, and Ideals*. Was the February 4 Supreme Court appearance an idealist politician’s overture for her harassed people or the myth-making machinery at work?

Biman Bose of the CPM, who has known Banerjee through her many political avatars, drags his cup of *lal cha* on the table in curious circular movements. When he finally stops, it is to say this: “She was not dressed in an advocate’s attire. She spoke as a petitioner. It seems some of her well-wishers had advised her to appear. They might have said ‘this move will accrue mileage for the Trinamool and for you’.”

Throughout her political career, Banerjee has been known to do the unexpected. Her biographer Monobina Gupta recalls how she had thrown a shawl at Speaker Purno Sangma in Parliament and, in a separate incident resigned from the central ministry quite dramatically. Sandeep Shastri, a political analyst based in Bangalore, remembers her style of “posturing” on the floor of the house against communist leaders. Those days, she was a junior minister in the Narasimha Rao government. Shastri adds, “Even in the last Assembly elections, we saw her sporting an

injury,” and goes quiet.

## **Binaries**

Retired bureaucrat and former Rajya Sabha MP Jawhar Sircar, who has known Banerjee from the time he was a magistrate and she a youth leader, says, “Kejriwal too was prone to such dramatics but he didn’t rise from the grassroots. He was gifted to the nation by Anna Hazare. Remember the Delhi riots? He never went out onto the streets for the people, not even for a day. Banerjee is not like that.”

Banerjee certainly did not appear on the Indian political scene one fine day; she powered through scenarios and crises. It is part of vote lore how she defeated the formidable Somnath Chatterjee in 1984 and won her first Lok Sabha election. It is also a fact that no sooner did she take oath as a minister in Rao’s government in the 1990s than she threatened to resign if she couldn’t do anything for Bengal in the long run. An editorial in the *Anandabazar Patrika* from that time reads: “From the Congress camp, she is the only MP who has tabled West Bengal’s concerns in Parliament in the last five years, sometimes going against her own party in doing so. Land for the refugees, loans for the unemployed, it was she who went on a fast unto death to prevent further denotification of industry in Bengal. It is because of her efforts that the Centre declared Tagore’s 125th birthday a national holiday and it was she who mooted the proposal to name the Calcutta airport after Subhas Bose.” The signed piece is titled *Mamata Banerjee, lone man among Congress MPs from Bengal*.

Banerjee’s long-time associate Madan Mitra uses a cricket analogy. “She plays the same ball differently.” He paints her as a footsoldier of democratic ideals and says, “Even when she had her differences with Somen Mitra she did not break ranks, neither did she allow her supporters to make trouble for him.”

In her 2012 biography of Banerjee, Monobina Gupta says she will avoid “the easy temptation to straitjacket Mamata Banerjee within a grid of binaries — mature/immature, emotional/pragmatic, rational/irrational”. She urges the reader to understand the politician as a product of all that shaped her. “Without these, one might conflate Mamata with her histrionics,” she writes.

A decade and a half later, with greater power, great authority and a slew of transgressions emboldened by both, a nuanced reading such as the one Gupta urges is impossible. Adversaries and voters alike must be forgiven for regarding the 71-year-old CM less as an enigma and more as a missile with a mind of its own. And before they grudgingly concede to her efficacy in situations, they cannot help but poke fun at her manner. The BJP’s Sayantan Basu says her style is reminiscent of Lalu Prasad’s. “And I am not talking about the comical image alone but also the political mess both have caused in their respective states.”

RJD MP Manoj Jha is not willing to call the Supreme Court episode a “political manouevre”. He tells **The Telegraph**, “Before the Bihar polls we approached the Supreme Court in good faith. What relief did the people of Bihar get? Did the court sense the urgency of the moment?” Dilip Ghosh of the Bengal BJP says, “It is a publicity stunt. How will this help the people of Bengal? The CM believes in creating chaos, *jhogra korben*. Think of Singur. What good has she achieved by sending away the Tatas?” But he also says, “Come elections and she will find ways of making her presence felt. *Onar onek roop*. She is trying to establish that she is the Opposition.”

## **‘Gorment’**

Biman Bose takes it up by a notch. “She deliberately says ‘gorment’, not government. Why? Because the less educated people say ‘gorment’. To give an impression that she is like them.” He adds, “She can set incidents to her advantage.”

Political analyst Ajoy Bose, who is Mayawati’s biographer, points out, “Mayawati’s handicap is that she is identified with one caste. I wrote in my book that she could be prime minister one day if she could invert the social pyramid... But Mamata has managed to

consolidate her base. She has managed to snatch back some of the Matua support that the BJP had. The Left support too and some of the tribal support.”

Sircar says Banerjee typically jumps in where angels fear to tread. “She is guided by instinct. She has learnt who to befriend and who not to. When no one in Bengal paid any attention to the BJP, she warmed up to them. Little things like they are Left, they are Right have never worried her.” Sircar invokes Ashutosh Law, who too won his first Lok Sabha election for the Congress in 1984. Sircar says, “He was more qualified, aristocratic but he faded from the political horizon. He was not given to dramatics or risk-taking.”

Mitra will have you take note of Banerjee’s “confidence”, how she has no inhibitions addressing the UN and global leaders alike with her “Bengali-medium English”. He will tell you that “from street-fighter she has become statesman”.

Political analyst Subhamoy Maitra gently but emphatically agrees to disagree. His take — Banerjee has indeed learnt a lot of things along the way but only to serve her interests. He talks about how she “promoted the lumpenisation of politics”, something she picked up from politicians such as Subhas Chakraborty and eventually patented. He talks about her “lack of ideology, depth and focus”. He says, “She has done very little for the Bengali middle class if you look beyond the temples and token gestures. But she had every opportunity.”

Nearly everyone **The Telegraph** spoke to for this story pointed out Banerjee’s utter disregard for processes and propriety. Biman Bose said, “She breaks all rules. The federal polity is ignored. As a result, there is no bonhomie between the state and the Centre.”

So what endears her to the masses? “Unlike Kejriwal, she is not just cunning, she is daring,” says Sircar. “She can read her people,” says Mitra. The last word goes to Maitra: “The middle classes cling to her to keep the BJP at bay. And who says she is the exact sum of all her parts? Something endears her to the masses. *Manusher bhalobasha* is an irrational thing.”

## **Postscript**

In October 2025, The New Yorker ran a piece called What Zohran Mamdani Knows About Power. Our title is inspired by it. In one of his debates against Andrew Cuomo, 68, the 33-year-old Mamdani said, “What I don’t have in experience, I make up for in integrity — and what you don’t have in integrity, you could never make up for in experience.” Forever the street fighter, Mamata Banerjee believes she makes an adroit display of both integrity and experience. Whether the people think so too will become clear in a few months.