

ISAS Brief

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A Brief Intertwining of the Two Bengals

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Not too many Grecian analogies can be drawn with regard to the tumultuous on-going turmoil in Bangladesh which passes for politics. However, one expression, borrowed from the ancient classics, could be apt while describing the ‘battle of the two Begums’ (Sheikh Hasina, the Prime Minister who heads the Awami League, and Khaleda Zia, leader of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party, which is the principal political opposition, operating not within but outside the Parliament having boycotted the elections of 5 January 2014). It is: ‘When Greek meets Greek, then comes the tug of war’. In the seemingly irresolvable tugging of the rope between the two leaders, neither appears inclined to give in an inch. Holed up in her city office in Dhaka, Khaleda is bent on bringing the government down from the streets with agitation that grows more violent by the day. The government is equally unrelenting, using force to the maximum, and incarcerating innumerable activists, with or without due process. It is a feud that does not make the blindest bit of sense to any observer, domestic or foreign, except to confirm the received wisdom that politics is all about the acquisition of power, by means both fair and foul.

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Into the cauldron of chaotic simmer and ferment, a third Bengali-speaking lady-leader threw herself in, from the state of West Bengal in India, just across the border: the irrepressible Chief Minister from Kolkata, Mamata Banerjee. She chose this moment, in the third week of February 2015, to make a three-day trip to Dhaka, obviously with a bit of thought. Previously, her popularity in Bangladesh had been at its nadir, particularly when in 2011, she prevented Manmohan Singh, India's then Prime Minister, from signing the Teesta water-sharing pact with Bangladesh, which Dhaka badly wanted and needed. She has also been instrumental in blocking the Land Boundary Agreement between India and Bangladesh, as also the exchange of enclaves that has been hanging fire for decades. In 2005 she once hurled a sheaf of papers at her legislative chair in protest against the enrolment of alleged 'illegal migrants' from Bangladesh in the Indian voters' list. Recently she has been uncharacteristically chummy with the *Jamaat*, a right-wing Muslim party that is viewed suspiciously in Muslim-majority Bangladesh but could help swing the Muslim vote-bank in Hindu-majority West Bengal. Mamata, perhaps sagaciously assessed that now was the time to go to Bangladesh, where the polity was too divided to confront her substantively, and when she hoped her presence would provide a welcome interlude in the violence marring the entire socio-political system of the host country, and when she could actually respond without responsibility, without having to walk the talk. Also, she wanted to poke Narendra Modi, India's current Prime Minister, in the eye by widening her own regional acceptance, which would be adding salt to Modi's wounds after his massive discomfiture in the Delhi elections, a prospect that warmed the cockles of her heart, given her deep ambivalence towards the new Indian Prime Minister.

For maximum effect, she timed it to be able to participate in the observance of 'Ekushey February' ('Twenty-first February'), the day when Bangladesh reverently remembers the martyrs who laid down their lives to make Bengali the national language of then Pakistan six decades ago. This is a deeply sentimental day for the Bengali psyche and sentiment, a watershed point in their national consciousness; to stand shoulder to shoulder with the fellow-Bengali speakers on such an occasion was an enormously powerful and rewarding tactic. The cultural affinity was underscored by Mamata's choice of her travelling companions, who were not dour diplomats, but singers and screen celebrities. They included Munmun Sen, a parliamentarian in her own right, but more importantly for Bangladeshis, the daughter of the legendary Suchitra Sen, the eternal, though recently deceased, heroine of the heart of all Bengali cine-goers. Almost bored by the constant focus on gory nature of recent happenings,

the Bangladeshi media turned its full attention on Mamata and the visit, and the public ecstatically responded. At a dinner at the Indian High Commissioner's residence, Mamata literally sang for her supper by bursting into a Bangladeshi patriotic tune, to the cheer of a rare joint get-together of all shades of Bangladeshi politicians.

But what was the substance in terms of the outcome? Here, when the dust raised by the storm of enthusiasm for the visit settles down, the score card will be seen to be unimpressive. There was no forward movement on any issue that divides the two sides. It was only that in a gush of emotive sentimentality, the two Bengals were only momentarily intertwined. Soon reality will dawn on the media, and the public, as it is already happening, and then the great danger is that all will be back to square one! In all fairness to her, Mamata could not engage in actual Indo-Bangladesh bilateral diplomacy. Foreign relations is an area where normally Delhi should call the shots; but through her verbal commitments, Mamata may have, both by design and default, queered the pitch for Modi. Foreign policy is clearly a central responsibility, and it could become an enormous issue for Delhi if states in India are allowed to run away with it. So, in theory, Mamata's commitments are neither fish, flesh, fowl, nor good red herring, as far as Modi is concerned. But it could get awkward for him if these are accorded credibility in Dhaka. All these would render his despatch of the Indian Foreign Secretary, which is on the cards, to Bangladesh both urgent and important.

Modi had earlier feared to rush in to the Bangladeshi situation where, he may have surmised, angels would fear to tread, though Mamata obviously had not. In Dhaka, Mamata asked for patience on Teesta, and may have been able to buy sometime, even for Modi on this and other issues, but in broad South Asian politics, patience is traditionally in short supply! At a meal for Mamata, Hasina served up some delectable 'hilsa' fish that the visitor relished. Thereupon, in a remark reflecting both wit and wisdom, Hasina suggested the exchange of 'hilsa' for water, which might make amusing sense to the fish-loving Kolkata Bengalis, though it might not tempt the austere vegetarians who rule from Delhi!

With the visit over, so was the pleasant optical and verbal diversion that for a short time brought relief to the Bangladeshis, otherwise in torment over the way the tide of their politics was flowing. For them it was back to bluster, bombs, and blockades. This, despite the fact that the people are now exhausted. And history is replete with examples, all over the world, of how political exhaustion can produce unsavoury consequences that no protagonist really

wants. But politicians do have the uncanny capacity to persuade themselves that history never repeats itself, and often against the grain of logic, are unwilling to take lessons from it.

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