



International Dance Day: Celebrating Movement and Expression

Observed on April 29 each year, International Dance Day honours the universal language of movement that connects cultures across the world. Established by the International Theatre Institute, the day celebrates dance as an art form, a form of storytelling and a powerful way to promote health and creativity. From classical traditions to contemporary styles, dance reflects heritage, emotion and community. It also highlights the physical and mental benefits of staying active through movement. International Dance Day encourages people of all ages to embrace dance, celebrate cultural diversity and recognise the role of performing arts in enriching everyday life.



Anjali Sharma
Senior Journalist & Wildlife Enthusiast

Mamata Banerjee began her political career in the Congress (I) party as a young woman in the 1970s. In 1975, she gained attention in the press media when she danced on the car of socialist activist and politician Jayaprakash Narayan as a protest against him, during the Emergency. She quickly rose in the ranks of the local Congress group and remained the general secretary of Mahila Congress (Indira), West Bengal, from 1976 to 1980. In the 1984 general election, Banerjee became one of India's youngest parliamentarians ever, defeating veteran Communist politician Somnath Chatterjee, to win the Jadavpur parliamentary Constituency in West Bengal.

Over all this, Banerjee's personal history looms large. In the years of her ascendancy, bloodshed on the streets was the norm, and Banerjee herself was frequently beaten and physically humiliated by her communist rivals. Her victimhood became the foundation of her role as leader of the opposition.

On 16 August 1990, Kolkata was tense in the aftermath of a police shooting that had killed three people. A bandh was called, and was observed citywide as an unofficial public holiday. Banerjee was leading a Congress party march in south Kolkata's Hazra neighbourhood when supporters of the ruling communists met the group head-on, and attacked it with sticks, iron rods and chains.

"I was prepared for it, so when they came for me, I wasn't nervous," Banerjee wrote in her memoir *Paribartan* (Change), published in 2012. "I just started back at them." Banerjee was hit on the head with an iron rod by a communist party worker, Lalu Alam. Then, she was struck on the head again, and again on her elbow. "My head was bleeding profusely, my saree had turned red, but somehow, I did not feel any pain," she wrote.

Under Jyoti Basu, canny chiefs had developed a particularly brutal reputation in this respect. Mamata swept polls, and the now rudderless and out of job left cadre, who were the mainstay of politics in Bengal, ensuring violence, 'persuasion', or punishment, as per need, quickly transferred their allegiance to Mamata. She inherited them. Then, in early 2012, mere months into Banerjee's reign as chief minister of West Bengal, another case of sexual violence indicated that the acquisition of power had changed her attitude. On 6 February, Suzette Jordan, a thirty-seven-year-old woman, was on her way home after an evening out on Kolkata's Park Street, the bright thoroughfare of shops and restaurants that has long held pride of place in the city's cultural life. She accepted the offer of a lift home from a man she had befriended at a bar that night. He, along with three other men, allegedly held her down and raped her inside the car.



In 2000, in her first Railway Budget, she introduced a lot of new express trains in West Bengal.

"Pagol Mohila" "Authoritarian" "Slumbitch Millionaire" "Mumtaz" Didi She's Been There... Done It All....

"For all its evils, the Left was not as corrupt as Mamata's people," a business magnate said on oath of secrecy, wistfully. Dressed in spotless white dhoti-kurta, incredibly rich and refined, a self-confessed child of Macaulay, a globe-trotter and lover of good wine, he is the paragon of the Bengali *bhadralok*. He is also the antithesis of Banerjee, the coarse leader of Bengal's hooch-drinking underclass.



In 1993, Banerjee was physically hauled and thrown out of state secretariat Writers' Buildings by the police for protesting in front of the then chief minister Jyoti Basu's office.



In 1991, Banerjee fractured her head in an attack by a CPI-M Goon Lalu Alam. The incident took place at Hazra crossing in southern part of Kolkata when Banerjee was leading a Congress rally.

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When news of the Park Street rape broke, public anger spread quickly. But Banerjee's response took many by surprise. "It's a cooked-up story," said Banerjee. The Trinamool government's reputation on women's security took a beating in the media, and never recovered.

When a former media advisor to Banerjee was asked informally why the chief minister had responded as she did to the Park Street case, "She had been told that a CPI(M) leader's son was helping the victim," he said, unconvincingly. Was all this not very similar to what the communists did in the years they were in power? "Please don't ask me any further questions on this," he said, further discomfited. "I can get into trouble."

She announced her arrival on the big stage in the 1984 parliamentary elections, held in the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination. The polls returned the Congress to power with a massive mandate through most of India. In West Bengal, the party swiped six seats out from under the otherwise unassailable Left. (Incidentally, Banerjee was accompanying the entourage of the future prime minister Rajiv Gandhi at a political meeting in West Midnapore district on 31 October 1984, when news arrived of his mother's death.)

Only twenty-nine years old, Banerjee was so little known before the polls that the nomination papers filed by the Congress only listed her first name. But she defeated Somnath Chatterjee in Jadavpur by nearly twenty thousand votes, then promptly touched his feet in respect when they met. Chatterjee was so crushed after the defeat, that for many years, he refused to mention Banerjee by name.

Banerjee's incredible victory did not help her popularity with the Left. Soon after the election, an unseemly controversy emerged: In her nomination papers, Banerjee

had claimed to have a PhD from a non-existent "East Georgia University," Rajiv Gandhi, with whom Banerjee had quickly developed an excellent rapport, brushed the matter aside. But Left leaders such as Jyoti Basu tore into her, once the falsehood came to light. Basu repeatedly called her a liar at public meetings, and the issue struck a chord with the public, particularly those sections of Bengali society that have traditionally placed a high value on educational accomplishment. In his speeches, Basu derided Banerjee as a "pagol mohila" (mad woman) for the drama with which she conducted herself in public.

But her support from the Congress in Delhi came to a sudden end with Rajiv's assassination in May 1991. "For the second time, since my father's death, I felt orphaned," she wrote. "For seven days, I could not speak to anyone, could not eat. I shut myself up in a room and cried." She would never again have such a cordial relationship with a national leader.

Banerjee's survival in Bengal became increasingly incompatible with the party's national agenda after Rajiv's death. (She nicknamed the moderates 'watermelons,' Congress green outside, communist red inside.) In November 1992, Banerjee surprised the prime minister, PV Narasimha Rao, by announcing her resignation from his government, in his presence at a rally in Kolkata's Brigade Parade Ground. After the 1996 Lok Sabha election, the Congress and they were in power? "Please don't ask me any further questions on this," he said, further discomfited. "I can get into trouble."

In her memoir, Banerjee writes about a meeting at this time with the "Queen Mother," as she called Sonia Gandhi, who was then beginning to make her first, tentative moves in national politics. Sonia, Banerjee claimed, sympathised with her predicament, but urged her to stay on in the party. Banerjee asked Sonia to take over the Congress's central leadership from Sitaram Kesri, who was then the party president.

Between March 2001 and August 2003, Banerjee resigned from the BJP-led government three times, first to protest a petroleum price hike, then over a defence ministry corruption scandal that implicated then defence minister George Fernandes, and finally to protest the bifurcation of the Eastern Railways under railway minister Nitish Kumar, whom she accused of taking jobs away from Bengal to benefit his native Bihar.

The next few years began a steep decline in the party's electoral success. In 2001, during one of its off periods with the BJP, the Trinamool fought the state legislative elections alongside the Congress, and won a mere eighty-six seats in West Bengal's 294-member assembly. In 2004, Banerjee allied with the BJP for Lok Sabha

#PERSONALITY

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elections, but this also turned out to be disastrous, only Banerjee kept her constituency in south Kolkata. The party's parliamentary unpopularity was reinforced in the 2006 state elections, which it fought without allies.

Between 1998 and 2006, Banerjee's party had gone from an impressive debut showing to being a non-entity in Delhi, where it had only a single MP. In Kolkata, Banerjee's penchant for vacillation only underscored her failures. A former Trinamool MLA, Dipak Ghosh, said that he had tried to counsel Banerjee to be more strategic at the time, but was given the cold shoulder. "Why do you talk so much?" Banerjee asked Ghosh after he had spoken in favour of the Trinamool's remaining in the NDA in 2001. Ghosh piped down and started writing letters to her. Banerjee asked him: "Why do you write so much?"

However, the Left made its biggest mistake. In 2006, it ignored a group of farmers who began protesting against a plan to set up a car factory about forty kilometers north-west of Kolkata, in the town of Singur. Tata had been offered other locations for its plant, but made the fundamental mistake of choosing a district which contains some of Bengal's most fertile farmland. While the company had, in the past, used its own officials to persuade local communities to give up land for its projects, in Singur, they left the entire acquisition process in the hands of a highly politicised and allegedly corrupt state administration.

Late in the evening on 25 September 2006, Banerjee arrived in Singur from Kolkata. Earlier in the day, the district administration had started to distribute cheques to those locals who had sold their land to Tata, and hundreds of people who were against the project gathered to protest. Once again, Banerjee's presence courted danger. At around 1 am, with many protestors asleep where they were camping, without any prior warning, the police turned out the lights and attacked the gathering. Banerjee was injured, her sari torn, and she was whisked back to Kolkata by her supporters.

The success of Singur and Nandigram would have a major impact on Banerjee's policy thinking as chief minister. When the Trinamool Congress came to power in 2011, it completely avoided land acquisition for industry, a move that warded off investment, and created hurdles for businesses. In Kolkata, it was easy to find businessmen to criticise Banerjee's government, although none would do so on the record.

Coming in quick succession, Singur and Nandigram firmly established Banerjee's popularity in rural Bengal. For the first time in her career she was making inroads into voter bases that had supported the communists for decades: peasants; and urban, left-leaning intellectuals who helped shape opinions in the media. She had transformed from city scrapper to radical agitator, and nowhere did her pro-poor, pro-people rhetoric seem to embarrass the Left more than in the Trinamool Congress's support of the Lalgarh agitation in 2009.

The Trinamool Congress rallied behind the political organiser Chhatradhar Mahato, a leader with considerable popular support among the Naxalbari Bengal's Jangalmahal's advisis, who was leading the protests. Banerjee's



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public support of Mahato did not last when she came to power. Mahato's supporters now accuse Banerjee of having hijacked the Lalgarh movement for political gain. "When she needed him to win elections, she called him 'brother,' but after coming to power, she said she doesn't even know him," Mahato's mother, Bedona, told me in Lalgarh. "Power makes people forget everything else."

By now, the Left's raison d'être had been well and truly hijacked. In the most decisive evidence of Banerjee's psychological victory over her rivals, she finally began to find support from Bengal's influential 'buddhijibis' (literally, those who live off their intellect). "When I learnt that the buddhijibis of Kolkata had deserted the Left," the sociologist Dipankar Gupta said famously, "I knew it was curtains for them."

Much as the Left had done, the Trinamool Congress reciprocated the support of Bengal's intellectuals with power and favours. The theatre director Bratya Basu, who had staged an anti-communist play based on George Orwell's *Animal Farm* in 2009, became education minister. The popular singer Kabir Suman, who styles himself as Bengal's Bob Dylan, won a Trinamool Lok Sabha ticket and

the party came under scrutiny too; in 2011, a second Trinamool youth front, called Trinamool Yuva, was created, with Abhishek at its head. The Trinamool's original youth wing was headed by MP Suwendu Adhikary, whose supporters claimed Abhishek was given charge of Yuva to dilute Adhikary's growing clout among young party workers.

But all these accusations paled in the face of a scandal that arose in October 2012, when the Serious Fraud Investigation Office began to look into the workings of several of Bengal's chit funds and collective investment schemes, and uncovered a scam, the size of which was unprecedented in the history of the Trinamool Congress. In early 2012, the Trinamool MP Kunal Ghosh was made the CEO of Saradha's media group, which then consisted of five newspapers and three television channels. Under Ghosh, who was drawing a monthly salary of Rs. 15 lakh from Saradha...

became an MP in 2009. He had accompanied Banerjee in Singur and Nandigram, and wrote a book about the experience. Banerjee and her associates may not have foreseen that this newly accumulated social capital would begin to evaporate almost immediately after the Trinamool Congress came to power in Bengal. Suman would soon turn rebel, quitting the party and becoming a fierce critic of what he claimed were Banerjee's authoritarian ways, and her insidious control over the media.

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"One central minister calls her the Slumbitch Millionaire," the magnate told. (The upper-class male disdain for "the basti woman") in every report accusing people connected to Banerjee of corruption, the sums involved are small change compared to those in other scams across India. But in a stagnant state economy, the quick upward mobility of those who have allegedly benefited from malfeasance sticks out. In 2012, Dipak Ghosh, the former Trinamool Congress MLA who fell out with the party, published a book, *Mamata- As I Have Known Her*, which contained a number of allegations about how the Banerjee family came by its newfound wealth. "Ajit Banerjee, Mamata's elder brother, runs a small hardware store," Ghosh explained, by way of example. "So, how did he come to own the Sonar Tori hotel in Puri, worth Rs. 6 crore?"

Within the Trinamool Congress, the most troubling controversy was the meteoric rise of Banerjee's twenty-six-year-old nephew, Abhishek Banerjee. Last year, the former CPI(M) MLA Goutam Deb accused Abhishek's company, *Leaps and Bounds*, of running a Ponzi scheme, a claim that was widely reported in the media. Abhishek's influence within

pay off a Trinamool member of parliament, their MLA comes later and asks for more money." The Bengal arm of the BJP has regularly protested overtures made by Banerjee to the Muslim community. In 2011, when she decided to recognise ten thousand madrassas across the state, BJP leaders alleged that many of these institutions were cover for "anti-national activities." BJP members filed a public-interest litigation against the West Bengal government's April 2012 decision to disburse a stipend to nearly thirty thousand imams and muezzins. (The Kolkata High Court ruled that the stipend was unconstitutional in September 2013.) One BJP leader called Banerjee "Mumtaz" after she made public appearances wearing a burqa and appeared to recite the namaz.

Banerjee is herself the most famous survivor of this blood-soaked political culture, but has shown little sign of trying to change it after her victory. In a small, two-room apartment in Kolkata, sat Sumita Sengupta, the sister of Sudipta Gupta, a twenty-three-year-old student leader of the Left, who died in police custody in April 2013 after he and other students were arrested for protesting the postponement of college elections in the state. "I expected the chief minister to come and speak to me that evening," Sengupta said, holding back tears as she recounted the tragedy. "But she completely avoided me, and never even bothered to call later." Gupta's family

to see her in her element. "Comrades, you have put cotton in your ears and stopped on your backside," she taunted the communists at a rally in Howrah last June, as the crowd, gathered on a football field beside the Hooghly, cheered in approval. "The communists left the state with debts of Rs. 2 lakh crore, so, we hardly had money to pay salaries to government employees. They even tried to steal official files to sabotage the new government," she said. Then, her voice rising in pitch, finger wagging defiantly, she said, "Like you, I have been beaten up by those communists, and I promise you today that I will never let them return to power, to destroy Bengal."

Several people in Kolkata's business community complain of their discontent over extortion rackets, allegedly run by prominent Trinamool leaders. "The communists also extort," said the senior Tata executive who spoke to me, "but with them, there was a clear chain of command. Now, if we

account) is the version dubbed in English. Basically, she is threatening Hindus that if you don't elect TMC, there will be Hindu Genocide similar to direct action day announced by Jimmah. "She is banking on the rock-solid support from the 30% to stay in power perpetually. The 70% need to unite and vote this monster out." "If this does not call off President Rule, nothing ever will and we will lose Bengal."

"When leaders start threatening people instead of protecting them, it shows their chair is already shaking. If Mamata Banerjee has to rely on fear instead of trust, the people of Bengal will understand everything. Bengal wants peace, not threats."

"Last few poisonous speeches of her political career. She is finished this election, and so are the anti-national forces of Bengal."

"The Special Intensive Revision (SIR) is widely perceived to have triggered the record turnout in the first phase of the West Bengal Assembly election, making the moment appropriate to ask a counterfactual question: what if the BJP is unable to improve upon the 77 seats it won in 2021, and fails to bag even 100 seats? The figure 100 is a significant threshold, as no principal Opposition party has ever managed to get this many seats. The ruling formation has always, in fact, commanded a two-thirds majority in the Assembly.

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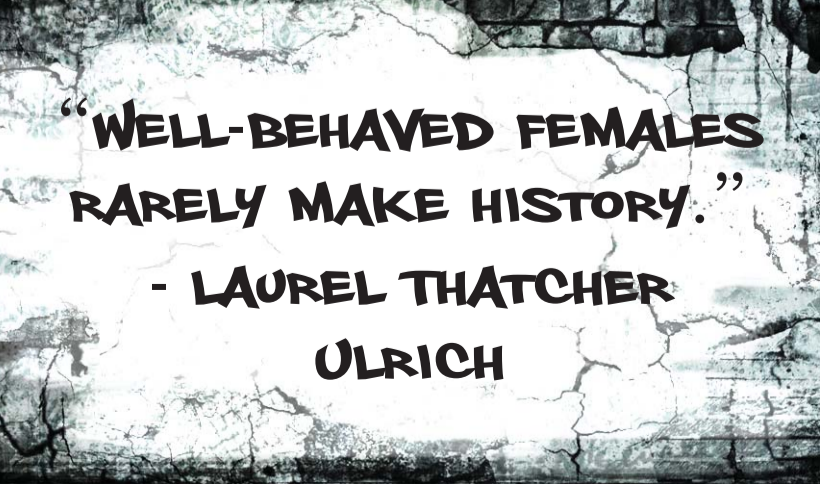
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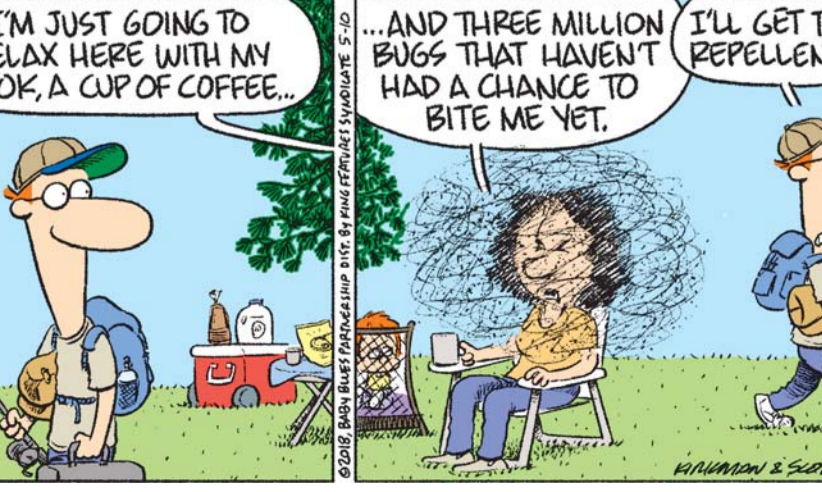
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