

Mamata Banerjee's victory in West Bengal and its impact on Bangladesh

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The power shift that has taken place on 13th May in West Bengal will have impact on Indo-Bangladesh issues. The landslide victory of Ms. Mamata Banerjee (56), the leader of Trinamool Congress (TNC) in West Bengal legislative election, will soon make her the Chief Minister of West Bengal, a neighbouring Indian state of Bangladesh.

For years the face of the Opposition in West Bengal Mamata Banerjee, known to her supporters as 'Didi' (sister), has been the nemesis of the ruling CPI(M)-led Left Front over the last 23 years and has earned the reputation of being a street-fighting politician.

Her nondescript residence — a tiled single-storey house in a dingy lane close to the Kalighat temple — and equally simple attire comprising cotton saris, jhola bags and cheap hawai chappals, endeared her to the masses.

Ms. Banerjee and Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina know each other very well and they respect each other for their political role in their respective countries.

It is reported that Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina was the first foreign head of the government to congratulate Ms. Mamata Banerjee when it became clear on 13 May that TNC was heading for a landslide victory ousting the 34-year rule of the Left Front in West Bengal.

When Mamata Banerjee spoke to the media in Kolkata soon after her party's victory, she made it a point to recall the traditional ties between West Bengal and Bangladesh.

Mamata Banerjee visited Dhaka in 1997 to attend Awami League's golden jubilee celebrations when Sheikh Hasina was the Prime Minister and the two leaders met for the first time. Mamata Banerjee visited Dhaka again in 1998.

When Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina visited New Delhi in January last year, Mamata, the Union Railways Minister, called on her in a one-to-one meeting and reportedly presented a sari and some books.

All these interactions lead to believe that personal relationships between the two leaders are excellent.

Impact on Bangladesh:

Many of the difficult Indo-Bangladesh issues fall within the territory of West Bengal and naturally West Bengal government's views are given weight as India works out agreement with Bangladesh.

The issues primarily are:

- Exchange of Enclaves under the 1974 Indo-Bangladesh Border Agreement
- Teesta Water Agreement
- Transit to Bhutan and Nepal from Bangladesh

Some of the important issues of Bangladesh with India fall within the territory of West Bengal. Out of 4,096 km border with India, 2,216.7 km is with West Bengal.

The delay in implementing the Tin Bigha corridor to Bangladesh enclave Dhahagram and Angopota was reportedly partly due to the opposition of the Left Front member of the West Bengal Assembly of that constituency.

Under the 1974 Mujib-Indira Border Agreement, the enclaves inside the two countries are yet to be exchanged. There are 111 Indian enclaves with 17,158 acres inside four northern Bangladeshi districts with a population of 200,000 people, while there are 51 Bangladesh enclaves with 7,110 acres inside Koochbehar district in West Bengal of India with more than 100,000 people.

Dashiar Chara is one of the biggest Indian enclaves with an area of 12 square kilometers and 1,750 acres of cultivable land situated inside Fulbari upazila (sub-district) of Kurigram district of Bangladesh. Its present population was 7,000 as of 2003.

Because of the non-implementation, the sufferings of people know no bounds as they have no medicare facilities, schools, sanitation, legal access and relief facilities, job facility and safe drinking water. It was reported that one of the inhabitants said to a local newspaper reporter: *“We want to be Bangladeshis as early as possible through the implementation of the Mujib- Indira Accord. We cannot express in words about the sufferings we tolerate from the India Border Security Force (BSF)”*

Under the 1974 Agreement, all enclaves are to be exchanged between the two countries. The exchange has not taken place and the process has started between the two countries so as to implement the exchange of enclaves.

Second, the 15-year interim accord on sharing water primarily during the dry season of the 315-long km Teesta River (219-km inside Bangladesh) which originates from Sikkim and flows through northern of West Bengal was held up because of the West Bengal elections. To sign the agreement the views of the West Bengal government would be required because it affect the farmlands of West Bengal.

Furthermore the two countries have discussed a working plan of other common rivers such as Dudhkumar and Dharla flowing from northern West Bengal and the government of West Bengal will be involved at some stage in the process of finanlising the water sharing agreements.

It may be recalled that the Indo-Bangladesh 30-year Ganges Water Treaty of 1996 was possible because of the active participation of the Chief Minister late Jyoti Basu. The Treaty calls for review at five years' interval or earlier by either party for adjustment in

sharing of water. In doing so, again the views of the West Bengal government will be sought.

Thirdly, Bangladesh wants to establish road and rail links with Nepal and Bhutan transiting through the land territory of West Bengal. Although the New Delhi will have to work out with Bangladesh the route of connectivity to Bhutan and Nepal, West Bengal gets involved.

New Delhi cannot force the West Bengal State to do what it wants. The attitude of the West Bengal government toward the above issues with Bangladesh plays a major part in implementing whatever decisions New Delhi agrees with Bangladesh.

Now that TMC, a partner of the Union Congress-led government in New Delhi, will be in power in West Bengal with the Congress, the West Bengal-New Delhi relations are to be cooperative.

Whatever New Delhi decides, they may not face bottlenecks in West Bengal given the fact that Mamata Banerjee attitude towards Bangladesh is supportive. It is hoped that the issues with Bangladesh that involves West Bengal may likely to be resolved in the days ahead,