

EVA STALIN IAS ACADEMY

12/24, Muthuranga Mudali St, next to Deepam Hospital,
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Sandeshkhali, the untold story

There are two routes to Sandeshkhali in West Bengal. One takes you through a Hindu-Muslim divide. The other through the acquisition-deprivation divide. Both stories are compelling and powerful.

In the first story, the name of the villain is Trinamool leader Sheikh Shahjahan, and the victims are the Hindu women. The story fits into the long tale of Muslim attacks on the hapless Hindu whenever and wherever the Hindu is weak or in a minority, be it in Bangladesh, Pakistan or places such as Sandeshkhali. The strength of this story reinforces a sweeping narrative that has gained traction in West Bengal in recent years, restoring the festering wounds of Partition. The problem is that in Sandeshkhali the story is not only partial but also false. The immediate perpetrators of alleged crimes against women here are Uttam Sardar and Shiba Prasad Hazra, both non-Muslims. The third is Ajit Maity, whom the villagers of Sandeshkhali attacked last week.

Under public pressure, Mamata Banerjee's police arrested all three men, though Sheikh was absconding. That he had been spared for so long helped to feed the allegation of Ms. Banerjee's Muslim 'appeasement' with an eye to the forthcoming elections. Hindus are all but in 'minority' in both Sandeshkhali blocks: 70% in one and 77% in the other, mostly belonging to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

A crisis of governance

Rather than a Hindu-Muslim strife, Sandeshkhali quintessentially reflects the crisis of Mamata Banerjee's model of governance. Unlike in many other States where people form collectives around caste, tribal, linguistic or religious identities, in West Bengal's post-Partition strife for life and livelihood, people cling to different political parties for both protection and provisions.

During the long rule of the Left Front, due to the well-coordinated structure of the hegemonic CPI(M), partisan affiliations of individuals and groups got further reinforced in offering the master key to enter public life. Party affiliation gave people an identity which, in turn, created a fusion called party-society. In the twilight years of the Left Front, the educated middle class party leaders were slowly but steadily getting replaced at the grassroots by enterprising individuals representing either relatively well-off farmers or those running small trade and businesses. With the Left Front's defeat, the most ambitious of these local political managers changed sides and



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Sandeshkhali is
an apt example
of franchisee
politics, told
through two
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narratives

joined the Trinamool Congress (TMC).

Ms. Banerjee realised early on that although she had to work with party society, she could not run a government the CPI(M) way. In her party, she alone drew universal authority without any stable hierarchy of command. She compensated for this in a three-pronged manner. She brought some key bureaucrats and police officers, irrespective of their rankings, under her direct command and placed her faith in them over party workers. She befriended ethnic, caste and religious community leaders, and inducted them in the party. Moreover, she extended protection to the local party chieftains to expand their dubious businesses in lieu of complete personal loyalty. These enterprising political managers were quick to leverage their political power – in cahoots with the local administration and police – for usurping as much profit as possible from legal and illegal businesses involving land, forest, sand, coal, fisheries, foodgrains and siphoning off cash from various government schemes and contracts. Most of these people are from relatively rich peasant households who earlier lost land due to the Left Front's land reforms but eventually were positioned in places of power – first in the CPI(M) and thereafter in the TMC.

With West Bengal's steady industrial decline, these enterprising individuals are now the main employers in the informal economy. Such a combination of power and profit has created cronyism of small capital in West Bengal's vast swaths of rural and semi-urban settlements. These micro-appropriators and also political leaders cash in on Ms. Banerjee's popularity for running personal fiefdoms. They eliminate all possible challenges to their local power and prosperity, routinely forcing Opposition parties to withdraw their candidates in the panchayat elections.

The TMC embodies such a two-way flow of might and money spread over 'leased out' zones of control and command to its key players. Note, the structure primarily stands on absolute material gains and uses people's vague faith in Didi's 'good intentions' as its moral hinge. In a long essay, I have called it 'franchisee politics' ('Of Collaboration and Conflict: Mamata Banerjee and the Making of 'Franchisee Politics' in West Bengal', *Economic & Political Weekly (EPW)*, September 9, 2023).

The essence of Sandeshkhali

Sandeshkhali is an apt example of franchisee politics. The crisis sparked off when the

Enforcement Directorate (ED) officers went to Sheikh Shahjahan's house. They were attacked by the locals. Even journalists were not spared. For the locals, Sheikh is a patron-provider of their livelihood. Sheikh's name surfaced during an investigation of a Public Distribution System (PDS) scam in which a large amount of foodgrains was allegedly siphoned off to the open market. In October, the ED arrested Jyotipriya Mallick, former Minister of Food and Supplies in Ms. Banerjee's government. Sheikh reported to him. While Mallick ran his fiefdom over North 24 Parganas district, he 'sub let' the two blocks of Sandeshkhali to his deputy Sheikh, who, in turn, 'sub let' Sandeshkhali Block-II to Shibu Hazra. Hazra 'sub let' Sandeshkhali Gram Panchayat to Uttam Sardar. A clear chain of profit and power was drawn, which constitutes the lifeblood of the TMC.

When the chain snapped

Why did the chain snap? It snapped because the equation flipped with Mallick's arrest and Sheikh's absence from the scene. As the media focused on Sandeshkhali, the locals found enough courage to open their mouths. They made two specific allegations: that the TMC leaders like Hazra and Sardar illegally seized their farmland and turned them into private fisheries without any compensation. And the TMC workers routinely called women from the village to the party office late in the night and sexually abused them. The first is a classic case of the reversal of land reforms in which the Left Front in the late 1970s and early 1980s had distributed privately held agricultural land above a fixed amount among the landless and the land-poor peasants. The second is a typical demonstration of monstrous masculine power by activists of a political party bereft of any binding ideological-moral discipline.

Predictably, the TMC now attempts to distance itself from the Sheikh, Hazra and Sardar. And the Bharatiya Janata Party is on an overdrive to paint it as exploitation of Hindu women by Muslim goons. With the party's massive occupation of the Opposition space in Bengal today, it may find fertile ground to further polarise the turf in the days ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. Yet, the untold story of Sandeshkhali is one of the usurpation of absolute power to misappropriate property from the poor in a reversal of land reforms and rejection of local democracy by an emergent class of rural rich, pampered and promoted by the Trinamool Congress.

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The quick transformation of Russia-North Korea ties

In the middle of a series of actions that are fuelling tensions in the Korean peninsula, including the abandoning of the decades-long unification goal with Seoul, Pyongyang is quickly deepening its ties with Russia. The pace and the depth appear to have gained momentum since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 which led to a strain in most of Moscow's international ties. It gathered further fuel during the visit, in July 2023, of a delegation from Russia led by Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu to Pyongyang, which was followed soon after by North Korean leader Kim Jong-un's subsequent visit to Moscow in September 2023.

The Russian President, Vladimir Putin, is expected to visit Pyongyang once again in 2024, with both countries preparing for a summit between the two leaders where "very good" deals are expected to be signed. With 2023 having been a year in which bilateral ties were fast-tracked, Russia's Ambassador to North Korea, Alexander Matsegora, anticipates 2024 to be a breakthrough year for the two countries. Just last month, Mr. Putin gifted the North Korean leader a luxury Russian-made car, a type that is used by Mr. Putin himself.

Warming ties, greater collaboration

While historically, the two nations maintained diplomatic ties during the Cold War era, largely driven by shared ideological affinities as communist states, relations between Moscow and Pyongyang experienced fluctuations as the geopolitical landscape shifted. In recent years, there has been a noticeable warming of ties between Russia and North Korea, manifesting itself in diplomatic engagements and strategic collaborations, with Pyongyang emerging as a key arms, munitions, artillery shells and another conventional weaponry supplier to Moscow during the ongoing Ukraine crisis.



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This is a partnership that has been forged amid common challenges and shared strategic objectives

Reports also suggest that the two countries are discussing cooperation in sensitive areas that cannot be disclosed, with Mr. Putin also offering technical support for the development of spy satellites (a feat that North Korea has been aiming for some time now). There are also talks of trilateral naval exercises with Beijing although these are unconfirmed. In February 2024, Pyongyang also welcomed the first group of tourists from Russia since the COVID-19 pandemic.

For Russia, as a country that is an outcaste in world politics and yet a nuclear power, North Korea is a useful neighbour to cultivate. For North Korea, grappling with economic challenges and international sanctions, Russia has emerged as a potential saviour for development in sectors such as energy and transportation, and even in addressing Pyongyang's chronic food shortages. Earlier, infrastructure projects such as the Rajin-Khasan railway linking Russia to North Korea's Rajin port, underscored the tangible efforts to bolster economic cooperation.

The energy link

Energy collaboration has also formed another crucial aspect of the partnership. Russia has been a key supplier of fuel to North Korea, and discussions have been under way to explore further cooperation in the energy sector. The mainstay of bilateral cooperation is, however, a food-for-arms agreement, evidence of which surfaced during August 2023, although both countries have not confirmed the existence of such an agreement. The utility of a deal such as this is undeniable though, as Moscow needs arms to sustain its invasion of Ukraine while Pyongyang is in dire need of commodities and food. Satellite images in October 2023 tracked a significant increase in freight railcar traffic at the Tumangang rail facility located near the North

Korea-Russia border, pointing to North Korea's transfers of ammunition to Russia.

The American factor

Among other factors contributing to this rapprochement is the shared challenge posed by the United States and its allies in the region. North Korea and Russia have faced varying degrees of strain in their relations with the West, prompting a pragmatic recalibration of their foreign policy priorities. Moscow perceives engagement with North Korea as a means to influence the broader security landscape in northeast Asia.

The diplomatic initiatives undertaken by Russia, often in collaboration with China, underscore a desire to shape regional security architecture independently of western influence. The North Korean Foreign Minister, Choe Son-hui, observed in October 2023 that powerful ties between Moscow and Pyongyang could potentially offset the U.S.-led efforts of a strong alliance between Washington, Tokyo and Seoul.

Developments in 2023, and indications thus far in 2024, point to the 'solidification' of bilateral ties between Russia and North Korea, with both countries having found instinctive collaborators in each other. This partnership, forged amid common challenges and shared strategic objectives, has far-reaching implications for regional stability and global geopolitics. As both nations deepen their engagement and cooperation across various sectors, their relationship is likely to exert a significant influence on the dynamics of the Korean Peninsula and the broader northeast Asian region. As such, Russia-North Korea ties represent a notable development in the geopolitical landscape, with ramifications that extend beyond the immediate bilateral relationship.