

TRAGEDY

Trial by fire

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Mamata targets hospital board members close to the CPI(M)



Mamata Banerjee outside the AMRI Hospital/ photo: Salil Bera

Soon after she assumed charge as chief minister, Mamata Banerjee took up as priority one of the most ailing sectors of the state—health. Her surprise visits exposed the pathetic condition of government hospitals. Shocked by the filthy environs and the irresponsible behaviour of the doctors, who went on unauthorised leave, she sacked the doctors and the bureaucrats in charge of the health department and transferred rural development secretary (health) M.N. Roy.

Didi's punitive measures irked the medical fraternity, which voiced its protest, forcing Mamata to halt her whirlwind tours of hospitals and tone down the attack on doctors. The change was visible when, in October, 29 infants died at the B.C. Roy Hospital in three days. Instead of blaming the doctors, Mamata said the “children died because they were brought to the hospital in a critical state”. According to sources, the medical fraternity had pressured Mamata to protect the doctors if she wanted their service in the government hospitals.

She sprang a surprise by sparing the doctors when 98 people were killed in a fire that broke out at the AMRI Hospital in Kolkata on December 9. Avoiding the doctors, many of whom fled the scene, she trained the gun at the management.

“This was very unfortunate. The hospital authorities fled from the site of the incident. Even if we consider it an accident, they should have been there to protect the patients,” said Public Health Engineering Minister Subrata Mukherjee.

“A group of youths first noticed smoke billowing out of the windows of the hospital and rushed to help. But they faced stiff resistance from the security staff of the hospital,” said a police officer. “We overpowered them and got inside the hospital. We then called others,” said Ajay Pal, one of the youths who helped in the rescue operation.

“Being a doctor, I hang my head in shame knowing that the doctors at AMRI fled, shirking their duty. Stringent action should be taken against them,” said Kunal Saha, an HIV specialist who is based in Ohio, USA. After a decade-long fight, a consumer court recently ordered that Saha, who lost his wife because of medical negligence, should be paid ₹1.5 crore as compensation.

While Saha blamed the lackadaisical attitude of the hospital for the mishap, the hospital authorities denied the allegations. “Sorry, I can't accept it,” said S. Upadhyaya, vice-president of AMRI Hospital. “Our staff, along with local youths and fire service personnel, saved 70 per cent of the patients. But our efforts went in vain as more than 90 patients died. But don't forget, two of our nursing staff from Kerala also died while performing their duty.”

The chief minister ordered the arrest of seven members of the board of directors, including S.K. Todi, who heads the ₹1,000-crore Shrachi Group, and his son Ravi. According to observers, Todi's arrest smacks of a political vendetta as he is close to the CPI(M). When Jyoti Basu was the chief minister, Todi was in the party's list of most trusted businessmen. Insiders say he had even received party membership but it was discontinued later.

One of the first public-private partnership models attempted by Basu, the hospital came into existence when Todi joined hands with R.S. Goenka and R.S. Agarwal of the Emami Group. Initially, the government had more than 10 per cent share in the hospital. At present, it holds a little more than 1 per cent. The government also has a representative on its board. The question is, if all seven arrested are guilty, how can the government evade its responsibility as it is also party to the board's decision?

“Small issues like electrical and fire equipment [the reasons stated by the government behind the mishap] are not discussed in the board meeting,” said an insider in Shrachi Group. “But we were astonished to see the government take such a drastic decision of arresting senior industrialists. We want to hear from the government whether the board of directors is really responsible for the mishap. This is ridiculous.”

Health activist Malay Ganguly is not ready to give the government a clean chit. “Whether the government is also a party to the negligence is debatable,” he said. “But the hospital never followed the Clinical Establishment Act. The board was required to inform the government about measures taken to ensure

the safety of the people. Licence is given to a private hospital on the condition that it would adhere to such rules. The cancellation of the hospital's licence validates the allegation that they had flouted the safety norms. But how could the government remain on the hospital's board and turn a blind eye to the negligence?"

Health officials ducked the allegations saying "a judicial commission has been set up by the chief minister to probe the matter".

Saha, however, is not impressed by the action taken by the government. "Hospitals are mainly administered by the doctors. The arrest of some board members would not mean anything as the case against them would not stand. They have money and power to walk out free," he said. "The government should take stringent action against the doctors and cancel their medical licence. Also, the ₹5 lakh compensation is too little. The hospital should be asked to pay at least ₹50 lakh each to the victims' families."

Avoiding the question of Todi's involvement with the CPI(M), party secretary Biman Bose said, "We want the guilty to be punished at any cost."

The industrialists have been remanded to police custody till December 20 and have been charged with culpable homicide not amounting to murder. Preliminary investigation has revealed that the hospital's location and the expansion work that it had undertaken after getting permission from the previous government had put the hospital at risk.