

Pranab Mukherjee: A Mentor for Mass Leaders

PALLAB BHATTACHARYA

A major disappointment in the public life of India's first Bengali President Pranab Mukherjee, who died on August 31, 2020, was that he could never contest and win direct elections to parliament, which would have helped him shed the tag his critics gave him: "a politician without a mass base and following." He won his first and only Lok Sabha poll in 2004 from the Jangipur constituency in West Bengal and that too with covert help from the state's then ruling CPI(M) whose top leadership, including late Chief Minister Jyoti Basu, had a strong rapport with Mukherjee.

Mukherjee's stint as a lawmaker mostly consisted of his membership of Rajya Sabha, whose electors, unlike that of the Lok Sabha, are not the people. But Mukherjee's success as a politician makes him a rare example of a person whose steady rise never depended on mass politics. He was always a key backroom strategist and the chief trouble-shooter of the Congress, riding on the back of his photographic memory and thorough knowledge of history, the Constitution, and the rules of administration. Indira Gandhi got a glimpse of these qualities in Mukherjee when she spotted him at a public rally in Medinipur in 1969 and wanted him to be drafted into the Congress. His preoccupation with national politics and parliamentary system and governance hardly allowed him to devote his time to the rough and tumble of grassroots politics.

Mukherjee was a mentor for politicians with mass base. These qualities have always ensured that Mukherjee—or "Poltu Da" to a coterie of Congressmen—remained at the centre of attention and action during the decade-long rule of Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) since 2004, heading an unprecedented number of committees dealing with various key issues facing the country. Every time the Congress or the Congress-led UPA government faced a crisis triggered by the quicksand of coalition politics in India, Mukherjee had to play the role of a crisis manager. Yet, he remained the

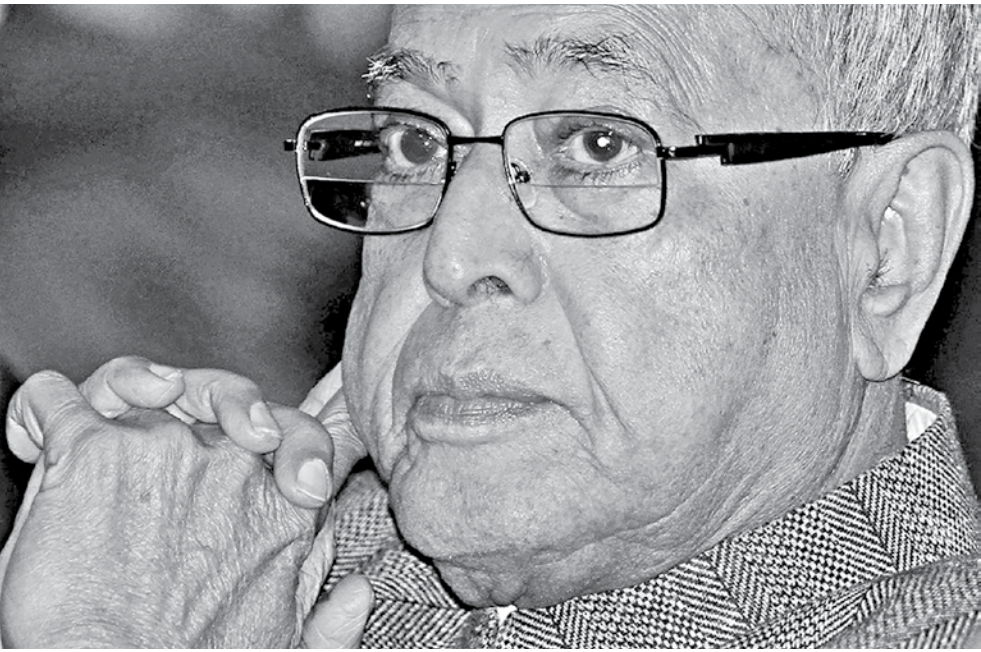
"best" prime minister India never had, mainly due to the trust deficit with the Gandhi family. It was this deficit that saw him being ignored for the top job thrice—first after Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984, second when Sonia Gandhi declined to become PM in 2004, and then again in 2009 when Manmohan Singh was the undisputed choice of Sonia to head the Indian government.

Though handpicked by Indira Gandhi to enter the Congress, the seeds of cold vibes between Mukherjee and the Gandhi family emerged when the Congress was forced to choose a successor to Indira in October 1984. Indira's son Rajiv Gandhi not only became the PM but he saw to it that Mukherjee was shunted out of the Congress Working Committee, the party's top decision-making forum, the Congress Parliamentary Board, and finally out of the party in 1986. The political grapevine has it that Rajiv was convinced by some of his Doon School friends like Arun Nehru about Mukherjee's prime ministerial ambitions and that he could pose a leadership threat.

But Mukherjee was too important to be kept out of the Congress for long. He returned to the party six years later and once again proved his mettle as a reliable Sherpa for the Gandhi family after Sonia emerged from a long-secluded life following Rajiv's assassination, plunged into politics, and made her debut in parliament in 1999. The Congress could not do without Mukherjee's help as a political manager par excellence, having excellent networking across the political spectrum and the business world.

Mukherjee served the Gandhi family for three generations from Indira to Sonia. But the family decided to ignore him when the crunch time came to make him India's first Bengali PM. Ironically, it was Mukherjee whose ingenious interpretation of a clause in the Congress Party's constitution helped Sonia Gandhi pip her nearest challenger Sitaram Kesri in the race for the post of party president in 1998—a journey that ended with Rajiv's wife becoming the longest-serving chief of the Congress till 2017.

There was always an undercurrent of



Pranab Mukherjee (1935-2020).

PHOTO: REUTERS/B MATHUR

unease between Mukherjee and the Gandhi clan in the years after Indira's assassination, and it never went away. In fact, that unease almost prevented Mukherjee from missing out on moving into the Rashtrapati Bhavan as Sonia was not willing to spare his services as a strategist of the Congress. But Mukherjee's brilliant political acumen, particularly his wide acceptability among all opposition parties, saw the Samajwadi Party and Mamata Banerjee-led Trinamool Congress change their stand on supporting him, forcing Sonia's hand on backing him as the consensus presidential choice in July 2012.

Mukherjee had grabbed with both hands the opportunity of working with Indira Gandhi as her trusted lieutenant. Indira shaped his evolution into an enlightened and accomplished modern backroom politician. He not only became the Indira government's finance minister but also the second man in her cabinet, ahead of veterans like P.V.

Narasimha Rao and R. Venkataraman who went on to become India's prime minister and president respectively. Mukherjee did not stop at that. He reinvented himself as a man for all seasons as far as the Congress was concerned. With his sharp mind and vast knowledge, he emerged as an eloquent parliamentarian with exemplary poise and absolute familiarity with the nitty-gritty of the functioning of the government, parliament and India's political system. His strong grasp of intricate power politics within the Congress helped him create an aura of indispensability in the party.

Bangladesh always held a special place in his heart not just because his wife Suvera Mukherjee was from the Bhadrabila village in Narail, but also because of the close bond his family built and nurtured with Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina and her sister Sheikh Rehana and their children. During the darkest phase of Hasina's life after the brutal

assassination of her family on August 15, 1975, Mukherjee and his wife were guardian angels to them in New Delhi where the two sisters had taken asylum. Mukherjee's close relations with Jyoti Basu, developed during the latter's stint as West Bengal's deputy chief minister in a coalition in late 1960s, helped work out the Ganges water-sharing treaty with Bangladesh in 1996.

Mukherjee had been the quintessential Congressman till the last day of his life being on the left-of-centre ideological trajectory of the party. He was a strident critic of communalism, a stand he never deviated from. But that did not prevent him from pursuing what he thought was an inclusive political philosophy that includes all shades of opinion not only within the Congress but also in national politics in a diverse country like India. It was pragmatism so typical of Mukherjee, pragmatism that was born out of his association with Ajoy Mukherjee, the first non-Congress chief minister of West Bengal, under the aegis of Bangla Congress, a breakaway group of the Congress. Breakaway Congress leaders Ajoy Mukherjee and Jyoti Basu were part of the same government.

It is in this light that one needs to see Pranab Mukherjee's controversial visit to the RSS headquarters after his departure from the Rashtrapati Bhavan. The visit had split the Congress down the middle but Mukherjee stuck to his gun and just recalled how Jyoti Basu, Vishwanath Pratap Singh and Atal Bihari Vajpayee had shared the dais at a rally in Kolkata in June 1988, driving home the point that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was no longer politically untouchable.

Pranab Mukherjee belongs to a vanishing tribe of politicians who live their life on their own terms when it comes to matters of conviction, never hesitating to do blunt-talking both within the party or government and reminding the RSS in its den about the need for rising above a monolithic worldview and acknowledging the religious, ethnic and linguistic plurality of India.

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Air travel in the time of corona is surreal



I don't know why I was expecting that I would not be fazed at embarking on a journey across the Atlantic at a time when just stepping out of my bedroom had the potential to kill me. It could be irrational bravado or the complete blocking out of reality as a poor coping mechanism. Or perhaps, it was just the thrilling prospect of actually getting to see my child after many anxious months, thousands of miles away, which threw all caution to the wind.

Whatever it was, I was not prepared at all for the strange, dystopian reality show I was about to become a part of.

By now, a mask is an essential accessory and part of one's regular wardrobe, like shoes or eyeglasses or a belt that keeps it all together. So it wasn't really weird that everyone was wearing masks and that nobody asked me at Dhaka airport to remove them. But then I started to muse: how could they know if it was indeed me checking in my luggage and going through the gate to immigration? I couldn't help thinking of all the unsavoury possibilities. It could be, after all, my evil twin trying to escape the law, my kidnapper who was stealing my identity while I lay, gagged and bounded in some ditch in Gazipur; it could be a member of a drug network or a terrorist organisation... sometimes I wish my brain would just shut up.

So I was practically euphoric when the immigration officer told me to take off the mask for a picture. Finally, someone with some guts to follow regular security protocol. I must have grimaced badly at the tiny camera as he almost instantly "sign-linguaged" me to put it back on.

In the lounge where I went mainly because the bathrooms are cleaner, waiters in masks walked silently like ghosts to serve nonexistent passengers, save for one young lady who had the full PPE on as well as the head gear (like a blue shower cap) and

surgical gloves. She might have had shoe covers too but I forget. I was going to ask for tea but the thought of all the hands that had touched the teacups and spoons made me quickly decline, while bathing the little water bottle they gave me with hand sanitiser.

I realised these two items, masks and hand sanitiser, have become the most crucial and precious items one can have at all times these days—more precious than the diamond ring that apparently guarantees faithful monogamy forever. *Next Feb, instead*



"To say my journey had been unusual would be the grossest understatement."

PHOTO: REUTERS

of chocolates and flowers or silly stuffed animals, be a real man and show her a basket full of hand sanitiser, Dettol soap, disinfectant spray and a PPE—they come in pink too.

But it was at the boarding gate that I realised I was now part of the new normal of travel, the parallel reality that lay beyond my cocoon, my bedroom from where, for the last four months, I had been working, socialising virtually, binging on Netflix, and spending more time with my better half than all our 27 years together. The reason for this epiphany? Well, the airlines I was flying was

giving protective visors to each and every passenger and telling us that we had to wear it throughout the flight. Were they serious? Did they expect us to wear this futuristic face shield for the next five hours and then another 14 hours in the connecting flight? How were we supposed to eat our much-anticipated plane breakfasts at dinner time and lunches at bedtime—considered the best perks of air travel?

Oh well, how bad could it be, I thought, and so like a good sport I put on the Darth

through the swarm of fellow soldiers in their masks and shields trying to locate a relative who was supposed to be on the same flight, but how could I figure out from the sea of masked, shielded masses?

I called her and finally realised that the person whose face was covered by a mask and shield and hair with a protective cap, frantically waving at me, was her. We made muffled conversation before proceeding to our seats.

Inside the plane another surprise awaited us. Instead of the good-looking stewards and stewardesses in impeccable uniforms were these ethereal figures in full protective armour—masks, gloves, hair cap, flowing PPE—all in pearly white. Like a team getting ready for open heart surgery, they ushered us into our seats.

The flight itself was uneventful apart from the fact that it was long and lonely enough to drive me crazy thinking of all the ways I could have caught the virus while just sitting in my seat. I vigorously wiped everything with sanitising gel—the hand rest, the tray table, screen, buttons on the screen, remote. Then I put my seat belt on only to realise that I had left out that crucial piece of metal from the disinfecting ritual.

Even while watching reruns of *Friends* (easiest way to escape any kind of unpleasant reality), I managed to work myself into semi-paralysis with anxiety over the impossible task of avoiding exposure on a plane.

Going to the restroom in a plane is always semi-traumatic, but during a pandemic, it is like being the protagonist of a psychological horror movie where "it" is that dreadful, invisible, diabolical "thing" that is just waiting to get you. This is because there are so many points of contact that you must be cautious of. You must push the door open, nimbly get inside, sanitise your hand, place the toilet seat cover before using the toilet, wash your hands and use the hand tissue to press the flush button, and then throw the tissue into the bin which is of course stuffed to the brim and requires some shoving resulting in contact with the surface of the disposal shoot, and demands sanitising your hand again and pushing the door with a tissue in one quick movement so as to avoid

your body touching the walls or door. The problem is, when you come out sweating and panting with a small tissue in your hand, which may be a disturbing sight for other passengers, how do you get rid of it? This is why you need some forethought and should have a plastic bag in your seat to use as a trash bag.

The good news is that by the 9th time of this ritual you will have mastered the whole process, managing to get into your seat apparently unscathed. Until, of course, you realise the soles of your shoes have walked to all sorts of nasty corners including the sticky floor of the restroom.

Sleep, therefore, was quite redundant amidst such disturbing realisations.

Finally, as I reached Logan airport, Boston, my final destination, I wondered what lay ahead. In the plane they had announced that we needed to fill out a travel form online and also show our Covid-19 negative results.

At the airport, it seemed we were the only passengers and we almost immediately found our respective immigration officer, who didn't even ask if I had a test result or whether I would be self-quarantining. After asking me some basic questions, I was done. Unbelievable. I tried to smile through my mask but I don't think he noticed.

I was almost sprinting towards the greeting area when a security officer stopped me and scanned my luggage to see if I had brought any "meat"! It was a struggle getting the two suitcases with unnecessary clothes onto the scanner and then offloading them onto my trolley. I felt like a failed weight lifter as I tried to lift the second suitcase and heave it on the first. After three attempts and with a giant leap, I got it on top of the first one and I walked away, sweating and panting, but feeling like Xena the warrior princess.

To say my journey had been unusual would be the grossest understatement. It was not just surreal but also extraordinarily stressful. But at the greeting area, all I felt was intense joy and gratitude at the sight of a lanky girl in a mask calling out "Ma", making me forget all those bizarre hours of panic and unease.

Aasha Mehreen Amin is Senior Deputy Editor, Editorial and Opinion, *The Daily Star*.

B R AMBEDKAR
(1891-1956)
Indian jurist, economist, politician and social reformer.

I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS	32 Firm focus	7 "That's it!"
1 Fuel sources	33 Infant, derisively	8 Mandrill, e.g.
6 Storybook elephant	35 Diminished	9 Game settings
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12 Chicago airport	39 Lower in esteem	16 Painter's need
13 Witch trial town	40 Circus worker	20 Spot for cutting a film
14 Newborns	41 Pithy	21 Setting item
15 Brio	42 Abrasive powder	24 Clamor
17 Early hour		25 Buster of serials
18 Try out	DOWN	26 Easy standard to achieve
19 Nanny	1 American marsupial	27 Steep-roofed home
22 Dr's field	2 Go by	28 Kitchen tool
23 Makes broader	3 In cahoots	29 Place for a meal
24 Jeans material	4 Stadium section	30 Flock sound
25 Firm customer	5 Like some chocolate	34 Mass unit
27 Period	6 Short cut	36 Snaky shape
30 Trio of writing sisters		37 Ruby of films
31 Monk's title		

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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

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