

BAND OF LADIES

The power women — the Madam, Behenji, Didi and Amma — called the shots in their respective spheres of influence

By Uttam Sengupta

ALL four of them are feisty women, each heading a political party in power. Three are chief ministers while the fourth could have been the Prime Minister but opted out. While one of them loves to flaunt her diamonds, another has a bizarre dress sense, hiding her ample girth beneath a cape. Only one of them can be said to be elegant while another has made a virtue of crumpled cotton and hawai chappals. Figuratively, all of them wear pants. They are ruthless and autocratic. Three spinners and a widow.

Each has kept her flock together with an iron hand and the future of their parties look pretty bleak without them. The Congress appeared rudderless when Sonia Gandhi was away in the United States earlier this year, undergoing surgery for an ailment that remains undisclosed. All decision-making in the respective political parties is concentrated in their hands and none of them forgives dissent or criticism. While Mamata Banerjee is called elder sister or 'didi', Mayawati is addressed as just 'Behenji' or sister while Jayalalithaa has been 'Amma' or a mother-figure for her supporters. Sonia is of course 'Madam' or 'Madam Prime Minister' as foreign correspondents call her.

Similarities do not end there. All four are enigmatic and are loved and hated in equal measure. Jokes about them abound and all four of them have a love-hate relationship with the media. Barring one, the other three do not seem to care much about the media and are rarely heard giving sound bites. Mamata Banerjee, on the other hand, thinks nothing of holding meetings with Union Ministers in television studios, where she loves giving interviews that can extend to several hours.

Mamata is arguably the most powerful of the four. Her 19 MPs in the Lok Sabha have time and again held the Government to ransom. Politically, a mid-term poll for the Lok Sabha would suit her because she would then be sure to substantially improve the tally of her party in the Lok Sabha. By refusing to accompany the Prime Minister to Bangladesh, forcing a



WOMANPOWER: (Clockwise) Mayawati, Mamata Didi and Jaya Amma continued to rule the roost



re-think on the Teesta river treaty, prodding oil companies to reduce petrol prices for the first time and by her rigid stand on FDI in retail, Mamata has demonstrated how badly the UPA needs her. In Jayalalithaa, like the other three ladies, has enormous faith in populist schemes. Brushing aside criticism for pursuing poor economics, the lady in Chennai has merrily splunged on doling out food grains and even gold to the poor. Like Mamata and Mayawati, she also expects the Centre to reimburse her generosity. Irrked by New Delhi's refusal to humour her, she inched closer to the BJP and brought in a controversial ordinance to make 'forcible conversion' a cognisable offence. She is reaping the harvest of populism though as she struggles to deal with an empty exchequer and cases related to her allegedly disproportionate assets.

Mayawati spent much of her time and energy to blunt the onslaught of Rahul Gandhi. No matter what the 'Yuvraj', as she prefers to address him, did, she invariably reacted with an acerbic statement, ridiculing Rahul and his scathing criticism of her governance. It wasn't too difficult either because all that she did was to cite governance issues in Congress-ruled states. Forced to dump five of her ministers indicted by the

Lokayukta, she has had a roller coaster relationship with the courts, which allowed her to inaugurate the grandiose Ambedkar Park in Greater Noida but set aside land acquired and handed over to real estate companies.

The Congress president remained as aloof and enigmatic as ever. Dignified and ice-cold, even when under fire, she has relentlessly pushed the Government to implement reforms, the Food Security Bill and the Lokpal Bill, indicating for good measure that she is always ready for a fight. While her unknown and undisclosed illness has caused consternation in the Congress, she has been cool. She has also been fiercely protective of her son, Rahul, seeing to it that he does not get singled by the swirling charges of corruption against the government.

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