

‘Atomic Plague’

Pradip Datta

In Hiroshima, thirty days after the first atomic bomb destroyed the city and shocked the world, people are still dying, mysteriously and horribly—people who were uninjured in the cataclysm from an unknown something which I can only describe as the atomic plague.

Hiroshima does not look like a bombed city. It looks as if a monster steamroller has passed over it and squashed it out of existence. I write these facts as dispassionately as I can in the hope that they will act as a warning to the world.

When you arrive in Hiroshima you can look around for twenty-five and perhaps thirty square miles you can see hardly a building. It gives you an empty feeling in the stomach to see such man-made destruction.”

That was “*Daily Express*” of London dated 5th September, 1945, reporting on Hiroshima bombing.

The horrifying story titled ‘Warning to the World’ by the celebrated correspondent Wilfred Burchett shook the world.

The risks taken by Burchett to witness the aftermath of the bombing and the ordeal he had to face during his horrendous journey were no less horrifying.

Back to Tokyo railway station after a dangerous trek from Hiroshima Burchett got completely exhausted. For the last five days during his stay he overworked and shuttled between Hiroshima and Tokyo without a proper sleep. Unwashed, clothes became stiff with sweat and eyes red. While he was walking away from Tokyo Station one of his colleagues identified him and hailed him loudly:

—“You have made it. Come with me to the Imperail Hotel. The top brass are giving special briefing on Hiroshima.

—I only need a bath and deep sleep.

—Mind it, the briefing is to especially deny your story on radiation sickness in Hiroshima.”

Only then Burchett came to know that the *Daily Express* had printed his story with special importance and that made the American nuclear big shots furious, provoking a press conference to downplay the Hiroshima event. People did not even hear about radiation exposure before. What all they learnt from American propaganda that destructive power of atom bomb was colossal.

When he reached the venue—the Imperial Hotel—the conference was almost over. A scientist in brigadier General's uniform was explaining that there was no question of atomic radiation or residual radiation, arising out of atomic explosion. So what Wilfred Burchett had written in the *Daily Express* was wrong.

At this point Burchett stood up and wanted to know whether the officer had been in Hiroshima. The angry American never really visited Hiroshima. Burchett described what he had seen—the plight of the victims of the blast and burn, the helpless doctors who lacked competence to face such an unprecedented situation and absence of proper medication.

The officer refused to accept Burchett's contention that the persons who had not been in the city at the time of explosion were later affected. Ultimately the exchange between Burchett and the American officer narrowed down. He asked the officer to explain the phenomenon of fish dying in a stream running through the centre of the city.

Officer : surely out of blast or overheated water.

Burchett : That too a month later?

Officer : It is a rivulet, so they could be washed back and forth as a result of tidal wave.

Burchett : But in the outskirts of the city live fish turning their bellies upward and they were dead within a second in a spot.

Officer : It seems that you have fallen victim to Japanese propaganda.

And the conference and exchange ended there without any thanks to anybody.

Though Burchett's radiation story was rejected by the US military establishment, he was subsequently whisked away to a US Army Hospital for medical tests. Blood tests showed abnormal reduction in blood corpuscles count. But the medicos were too eager to relate it to his knee infection which had been treated with antibiotics. But actually it should have happened the other way—the knee infection should have increased the number of white blood corpuscles count. Low white blood corpuscles count is a typical phenomenon of radiation sickness.

Interestingly, when he left hospital he found his unwashed negative films containing historic pictures from Hiroshima were missing. He also came to know that General MacArthur had withdrawn his press accreditation and soon he would be thrown out of Japan because he had gone to Hiroshima (beyond the boundaries of the occupation zone) without permission.

In truth restriction was imposed on all allied journalists as a result of his reporting in the *Daily Express*. 'Henceforth news would be supplied entirely by Japanese news agency 'Damei'. American and other foreign correspondents were forced to stay in a press ghetto, a mile outside the city. The correspondents

received English translation of the Japanese press handouts that were carefully selected and edited. Thus the allied newsmen were made dependent on Japanese source 'Damei' for all news coverage on the fate of A-bomb survivors in Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

One month after the Hiroshima explosion a group of hand picked American journalists (occupation press corps) were flown out from Washington to report on devastating power of A-bomb. This was a grand conspiracy to present information as the US wanted. So selection of the journalists was important, main yardstick was loyalty to the US military establishment. They were assured that they would be the first foreign journalists to Hiroshima after the bomb blast. But the reality was otherwise. American newsmen were astonished to see an Australian journalist wandering around the rubble in Hiroshima. Majority of the journalists were being rewarded for their faithful rewritings of the Washington communique.

The team was headed by the deputy Commander of the Manhattan Project, Brigadier General Thomas D Farrell. Besides Farrell the most important member of the team was William L Laurence, a reputed science writer for the *New York Times*. He was also a member of the inner circle of the Government's nuclear weapons directorate. He was recruited by General Leslie Groves, in charge of Manhattan Project three months before the Hiroshima bombing, as a super public relations officer and news manager.

His story of the awesome beauty of atomic genocide published in the *New York Times* was syndicated worldwide.

The leaders of the team treated Burchett with suspicion and hostility. They could not imagine that an independent reporter could find means to reach the 'atomic grave' that too ahead of the US War Department's party.

Burchett's journey to Hiroshima was dangerous. A request for a lift back to Tokyo in the special US Army plane was denied. Request to deliver a copy of his report to newspaper colleagues at press headquarters in Tokyo was also refused, (Later Burchett came to know that some of the newsmen protested against the unceremonious treatment meted out to him).

Reporting of Laurence in the *New York Times* and that of Burchett in the *Daily Express*, London are the two stories of the two opposite poles. Headline of the Hiroshima story in the *Daily Express* was : "The Atomic Plague". At that time atomic radiation was unknown to Burchett, as most of the people of the world were ignorant about it. But he was sure that the survivors of Hiroshima would envy the dead. He visited the sick in hospitals. Burchett's observation :

"In these hospitals I found people who, when the bomb fell suffered absolutely no injuries, but now are dying from uncanny aftereffects".

On the other hand the headline of the *New York Times* story by W H Laurence, published on 13th September, that year was : “No Radioactivity in the Hiroshima Ruin”, and Laurence informed the World the American version of HIROSHIMA :

“Brig. Gen. T F Farell denied categorically that it (atomic bomb) produced a dangerous, lingering radioactivity in the ruins of the town (Hiroshima), caused a form of poison gas at the moment of explosion...

He said his group of scientists found no evidence of continuing radioactivity in the blasted area on Sept 9,... it was his opinion that there was no danger to be encountered by living in the area at present...”

Thus Laurence tried his best to prove that “atomic plague” or radiation did not exist in devastated Hiroshima at all. Although he visited the city in early September he did not utter a word or two about his own experience or observation on radiation. For these great services Laurence was later rewarded with Pulitzer Prize. While Laurence is a forgotten chapter in history the world still remembers Burchett. *~~~~~*