

Nandigram Diary-I

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I felt like going to a battlefield when a student insisted on putting a sticker on the windscreen describing us as a relief team and another student thrust a copy of a high court order in my hand which will presumably prevent us from being held up or at worse being beaten up. It was a three and a half hours journey, most of it over good and well maintained road. Up to and including Nandigram you do not see or feel anything out of the way; life is going on as it always goes in its own rhythm. The picture changes in Maheshpur. We sit in a roadside tea stall and one by one people trickle in. Spontaneously they tell us about their travails: how they were beaten up by police and cadres (the name *harmad* has gained currency here) on March 10. Apparently there was an altercation between the Pradhan and the villagers about the school being closed for so long. The Pradhan went back and sent in his henchmen together with the police who did not discriminate between men and women or between people in the streets, shops or in their homes in meting out chastisement. The stall owner, a middle aged village woman had her share of the beatings as did several others in the group. Since then the peace is gone and every night they hear sounds of gunfire and exploding bombs. Their defence consists in their determination in not parting with their land and surprisingly a multinational product: mobile technology. Just then a message came on the air wave informing the assembly of a thousand men with motorcycles at Tekhali and an impending attack at 3 pm that very afternoon. I felt apprehensive but the calm resignation with which the news was received by the people around was a morale booster. The women in my group were interested in visiting some of the affected village women in their homes. They did so in a nearby place called Parulbari while we waited on the road and got to hear essentially the same story from the assembled men. An old widow with quite a dignified appearance narrated the state of affairs with surprising detachment. She had a bit of land which fell within the notified zone. It was she who pointed out to me a peasant woman with a splinter wound in the arm. The victim was participating in the Gourangapuja held in Bhangabera during the infamous 14th March incident.

Time was passing and we hurried on to Sonachura. The road took a sharp turn before Tekhali bridge and from then on it was a red moram affair but quite motorable. Tekhali is enemy territory and therefore a no go area for us. Only two days back a woman went to the bazaar in Tekhali to buy kerosene and was so severely beaten up that she had to be admitted to hospital. There is a school in Sonachura and a NGO has opened a clinic there. I asked the doctor about the number of wounded he has attended and the kind of problems involved. He said that in two days he treated about a hundred patients and that most had eye problems. He was suspicious about the nature of the gas shells as effects of tear gas do not normally persist after a day or two. A villager with a wound in the foot insisted on showing us the carnage site that is the Bhangabera bridge. It was a straight metalled road with a deep trench cutting it in half. Elsewhere we had driven over culverts which were cut and then crudely repaired. But this trench takes the cake; not even a tank could cross it. The field on one side was strewn with paper plates and the road itself bore distinctive marks for some distance. According to the villager they were blood marks from the fleeing crowd and the paper plates bore testimony to a victory feast.

The bridge was full of high power activity. A posse of high ranking police officers with jeeps and pilot cars and of course their gun toting protectors had come on some investigation (we met them again near Tekhali bridge while returning). The Khejuri side

of the bridge was deserted but for an old man and a peasant woman. They were not very communicative. It took some questioning from us to extract that they were being persecuted for supporting land acquisition. Since there was nothing more to do we recrossed the bridge after counting the bullet marks on a wall (encircled and coded HI to HI 8). Evidence of the bloody affair were still lying around. A small boy showed us a fence with smears of blood on it, a ball of hair at the site of the Gourangapuja, torn gloves used probably by the forensic experts etc. He also pointed out a house and said that a girl was raped there. He had witnessed the unsavory side of life at too early an age and for him the innocence of childhood is over. Here the people were more voluble and readily came out with stories of their sufferings. Living on the frontier so to say I could see that they had a precarious existence.

Back to Sonachura and we are led to the next hamlet called Gangra to visit the house of a victim of the firings of March 6. Rinku Mandal, wife of the murdered Bharat Mandal has three small children, a thached house and no land as Bharat was a daily labour. We inquired at the local relief centre and they readily explained their mode of operation. How much rice, lentils, money and other necessities were given to each family of the victims, how the books were maintained and so on. It was heartening to know that the distribution was done efficiently and equitably. Meanwhile our relief team had not yet finished their task. They had a hard day, buying a mountain of foodstuff at the Nandigram bazaar and transporting it on a hired vehicle to the relief centres in different villages. Siddiqullah had come and his harangue attracted villagers from all around. We decided to leave immediately as otherwise his meeting might block the only road out of Sonachura.

It was a long day and while driving back I was trying to shift through the volumes of information about so many people killed, wounded and missing. It would take a long time to ascertain the facts but who will do it? The administration is nonexistent, it dares not show its face without armed escorts as we had already witnessed and besides it is not trusted. The people are united for their land and are resigned to sacrifice more blood if necessary. The economy of development needs cheap land and the cheapest land belongs to the poorest people. A community will be obliterated, the people will go into oblivion so that the share market can boom. □□□