

"My Vision of India: 2047 A.D."

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[Following is the 9th D. S. Borker Memorial Lecture delivered by the author on 24 August, 2007 in New Delhi.]

In the beginning I submit my apologies, as I think I shouldn't have accepted it. I have been too busy chasing the wild geese. I admit, that I shouldn't have come, yet I have. So at my age and my preoccupations I am trying to atone.

That "My Vision of India: 2047 A.D." lecture series was started by Shekhar and Suhas was great. That D. S. Borker was a civil servant and a civil administrator makes me feel at home. I always tell the people, you have to get justice from the system. Be it in Palamau in 1980s, or in tribal death cases in West Bengal in Purulia in 1990s. I have told my people: "Your movement is about your demands, you have to tell the government, what you are promising on paper, give us in reality". When the list of the Rights of the BPL People of India was published, I circulated those to all the organizations that were close to me. I know that in 1998 and 1999, two sabar tribals were killed in Purulia as "they" supposedly belonged to the ex-criminal tribes", later known as Denotified ones. They were very close to me. And through our organization, we circulated, in bold letters, the details about the panchayat rights. The same I did for the other organizations I was close to. I am proud to say that those grassroots level people are carrying the posters to people, (handwritten on old newspapers), and trying to force the panchayat office to cough up realities. In West Bengal, the State Government machinery, the panchayats blocks-sub-divisional officers, district magistrates, in fact our state government office bearers agitate for better salaries but have forgotten "to deliver". 30 years of CPM-led left front rule has done this. Starvation deaths are rampant.

Literacy, childcare, violence against women, land oriented issues, police matters. West Bengal State Government never attempted to meet people's just demands. And now SEZ has become the prime issue. Our State Government has failed to concretize its promises. My experience is different. From the bureaucracy, results for the people have to be obtained. It is the first clause or duty of a truly independent country.

In order to do it, we, the literate and privileged section of the people, including the younger generation, have to reorient ourselves, and work hard. Like we. Indians of today, must know what our rights are. One has to know, very correctly, what the Government promises.

Then, we have to educate ourselves. We have to learn to go to the people of India to see with our own eyes, where lie the deficiencies amongst the people, and the system. Then, we have to work hard, very hard to bridge the gulf and put in all our efforts.

Our joint effort will make 2047 an Independent Year, of which India will be proud. But we too, will have to work hard. I am working 18-19 hours a day so that others can be justly proud of 2047.

Now I come to this year's lecture.

2007! The 60th year of India's Independence. I write what it means to me. I am no great scholar and I can only write about my reactions, my beliefs. Writing is my profession. Of course I am a creative writer but writing is my only source of earning. My language is Bengali, and my first book, *Jhansir Rani*, came out in 1956. Since then, I have been surviving by writing alone. I have been writing novels, stories, children's books from 1956 and I have been writing newspaper columns from 1975. Sometimes for the English newspapers but mainly for the Bengali dailies. Through my visits to the villages, the surveys I carried out, my interactions with the tribal and non-tribal people in West Bengal, Palamau, Singbhum, Ranchi and other such places, I was introduced to India and her people. I wrote stories and novels about them, I wrote newspaper columns about these people, their lives, the places I visited, the flora and fauna and the forests. All this, long after 15 August 1947. Of course I read a lot, being a bookworm from childhood. I read historical books, books on folklore, folk proverbs; and whatnot. Reaching the end of my journey, I find, from revisiting my newspaper columns, that I have always insisted upon the necessity of a firsthand knowledge of the people. One needs to go to the villages, one needs to meet the villagers. Perhaps that is how I started knowing India. Now, even at 82, I am still doing so through my visits to Nandigram.

In Nandigram, I see an India that is truly independent. The people in my state are taking steps on their own, thinking on their own and working hard to translate their dreams into reality. Yes, dreams! Last year, during the World Book Fair at Frankfurt, I had said in my speech, 'The right to dream is the first fundamental human right of any human being.' It is certainly true for the people in Nandigram and in many other places I have known and seen over the years. I am talking of the people I know firsthand. Someone, somewhere is working hard to make real, make palpable, the concept of independence in my state, in West Bengal, which has been under a CPI (M)-led Left government for the last 30 years and where, I confess, where very little has been achieved.

I have been to Gujarat many times, especially during the 2002 communal killings. West Bengal condemned Gujarat and this protest was perhaps justified. In West Bengal, Hindus and Muslims have learnt to live in harmony and continue to do so. But I was deeply impressed to see how strong the work-culture is in Gujarat. The city and village roads are well-built, even the remotest villages have electricity and drinking-water. I was especially impressed with the medical facilities in the panchayats and local-level health centres. Not at all like West Bengal where, even now, villages and panchayat areas have hardly any electricity. And where the government's so-called 'swasthya pariseva' is totally non-existent.

The way in which the Kolkata hospitals function is beyond description. Many 'government' doctors shamelessly neglect their patients. Child mortality is rampant. Our Chief Minister inaugurates only those hospitals which the very rich can afford. I have been living in Kolkata since 1947. I well remember the years when patients from Bihar, Orissa and other states would come to Kolkata Medical College. There were less snake-bite deaths and death from rabies in those days. Anti-snake venom and anti-rabies injections were supplied free of cost from government hospitals. Now, during the monsoons, snake-bite deaths take place all the time and the televisions channels have started asking in innocent wonder, 'Why do villagers go to village quacks?' Isn't this farce deliberate? Decrying 60 years of our country's Independence?

In West Bengal, 700-800 tribals in the North Bengal tea-gardens have died. 100 more in a tribal village in West Medinipur. They died, too. Although the Central government spent so much publicizing die people's right to food. Right to Food for the BPL people. Right to 100 days' work at a declared minimum wage. Indira Housing Scheme for the BPL people. The Right to Information Act has failed totally. Despite 60 years of Independence.

These are not failures of the West Bengal government alone. SEZ areas are being handed over to national and multinational corporates in many other states. Fertile multi-crop agricultural land is being usurped by the Chief Ministers in many other states. But I will stick to my own state, as I am, at this age, seeing it happen with my own eyes. What the illiterate, semi-literate and low-literacy men, women and children are doing to realize 'independence' is very hard work. But they are doing it in their way. Let me tell you about Nandigram.

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Nandigram is a very large block. It is divided into parts 1, 2 and 3. Opposite Nandigram is Khejuri. The Tepati Canal, a swift flowing canal, flows between Nandigram and Khejuri.

Nandigram Block No. 1 is divided into 37-38 villages. The most interesting point to note is that in both Khejuri and Nandigram, most of the panchayat villagers were supporters of the CPM. Laxman Seth, the CPM MP from adjacent Haldia, publicly declared that vast tracts of agricultural land would be acquisitioned in Nandigram Block No 1. The farmers, sharecropper and khetmajdoors, all Hindus and Muslims, protested. Then followed the government's notice regarding land acquisition. Then came the police and CPM cadres. Then came their joint firing upon the crowd. That was the beginning. Then came the mass killings or genocide of 14 March 2007. Many were killed, women were raped and brutalized, even infants were not spared. I will not enter into the details. I want to speak about what I have personally seen in Nandigram. How the people, all 'children of the soil', are fighting to vindicate the truth about the word 'independence'. I am going to Nandigram and I tell you, for the first time in my life, I am seeing the real people of India who are fighting for our real independence.

Passing Acts alone is not enough. I have seen the bonded labourers, or 'debt-bonded labour', for the first time in Palamau. Then in Bihar. The year was 1980. I saw them despite the fact that the Bonded Labour System was officially abolished in 1976, 4 years earlier. India passes many such Acts but these are seldom implemented. The same can be said about many Acts regarding women, regarding children. Many children are forced to begin earning for their families by the age of eight. What about them? What about the Acts that exist to protect them? I meet women fighting battles in court for maintenance. 'There is a law' is no consolation for them.

Nothing will reach the poor of India until there are social movements. Until we, the privileged sector, the educated ones with some sense of social commitment, fight fearlessly to get them their rights. It is hard task, very, very hard. What has happened in Nandigram is bad enough but, somewhere, somebody has to make a beginning. One point has been made brutally clear. After the 14th March 2007 genocide, the State government has done nothing. The Nandigram Health Centre had only one doctor and 1 or 2 nurses. Despite the efforts of that doctor, nothing could be done to help the wounded, injured persons and the severely raped and brutalized women who were no more than living corpses.

The Nandigram Health Centre is a farce, an apology for medical treatment. Tamluk is the nearest town. Contai is a bit distant. Even then, some of the wounded and injured ones were shifted there. Our Governor, Gopalkrishna Gandhi, went to Tamluk Hospital and then issued a press statement about the horrors he had witnessed. Only then did the West Bengal government order the wounded and the injured to be removed to SSKM hospital in Kolkata where, of course, they were then subjected to negligence, apathy and more brutality.

I am speaking of Nandigram's fight for 'independence'. Many doctors understood the truth of my words when I said that their presence was sorely needed in the afflicted areas. Only the selfless ones can listen to the call of the moment and join the battle at a moment's notice. Our doctors did just that, especially one whose name I will not utter. Sick of the State government's total apathy, and at the unforgivable crime of not arresting the criminals who killed, raped and looted, the doctors began a systematic series of visits. I had also requested the doctors to give health-worker training to boys and girls so that they too could serve the villagers. This training continues.

I had written about building 'A Hospital to the Memory of Martyrs of Nandigram'. The local Land Acquisition Eviction Resistance Organization took over the responsibility of collecting money, acquiring land and building it. Doctors going to Maheshpur, treating patients, giving training, realized themselves that a health centre was desperately needed in villages like Sonachura, Bhangabera, Tekhhali, Gokulnagar, all located on the banks of the

canal. These villages, from 14 March 2007 till today, are attacked every night with bombs and guns from Khejuri.

Sonachura village volunteered to start a health centre. No, the villagers did not ask for money. The target villages are 20-25 km distant from Nandigram. The roads are bad and, after 14 March 2007, the villagers have dug ditches across them in order to stop the enemy. Police, CPM cadres, hired goons, all are enemies to them. I cannot criticize them, as the nightly attacks continue even today. I have heard for myself the sounds of bombs and guns on the two different nights I spent there.

The villagers formed a committee. They are farmers, sharecroppers and khetmajdors but none of them are illiterate. Nandigram is in Purba Medinipur which is also the district of Kshudiram Bose, the first freedom fighter, a lad of 19, hanged by the British on 11 August 1908.

Nearby, Contai town publishes 5 Bengali dailies, 2 evening dailies. I attended the District Book Fair held there in 2006. So many, many people buying books. I visited a boy's school in Contai on the occasion of its 150-year celebrations. Nandigram and the villages are all the same. Sonachura too has a primary school, a high school, a library. The percentage of literacy in the entire area is very high. Even the peasant men and women can and do read the Bengali dailies.

Sonachura is one of the target villages. All its people wanted was a village health centre. They rented the first floor of the local U.B.I. bank. Their committee arranged to build an improvised first storey on its terrace. Walls were raised, a room for the doctors and patients.

Finally, we went there on 19 July 2007, making our way through torrential rains. Despite the downpour, thousands of men, women and children had gathered. To see me, to listen to me. Why? Because I was to inaugurate the Sonachura Martyrs' Memorial Health Centre that was working, giving training to the health-workers, giving midwifery and childcare training to elderly, low-literate women like Narmada Sheet.

Members of the martyrs' families came too, giving whatever money they could. Shahid Biswajit Maity's mother, Sheikh Selim's father, Bharat Mandal's wife. The total collection that evening was 2 lakhs. Who says this independence is not true? To me, this is independence.

I made it clear that at some point in time, a pucca-centre would be built, that too with Sonachura people's labour. A man came forward and donated 5 acres of land. The Sonachura people were exuberant. Yes, they could do it.

Why 5 acres of rich agricultural land? One villager explained: there would be a children's park. Benches where old men and women could sit, a spacious room with toilets, electricity, etc, where relatives of patients could stay. A marble slab

inscribed with the names of the martyrs of the January and March genocides would bear witness to the July and August meetings.

Who dares challenge this independence?

Everyone who accompanied me could feel it in their veins. For the first time in India, the people of the soil were vindicating the word "independence".

I have also inaugurated the Sonachura Jeevak Udyan, near the market. I had written in my column that 'A medical herb garden, a Jeevak Udyan must be built.' One gentleman, M. Giri, donated 1/3 acre of land in the heart of the Sonachura market. He could easily have sold it for 5 lakhs, but he did not. And on that rainy afternoon, the members of the martyrs' families came and planted trees. One father said, haltingly, 'No, my son, won't come back. But this tree will live.'

That night, sleeping in the Sonachura Health Centre, I could here the bombs and guns being fired at the village.

Do you know what the villages, Sonachura, Gangra, Bhangabera, Gokul Nagar, Garh Chakraberia, want?

They want to sleep. Narmada Sheet told me, 'Just stop those attacks so that we can sleep.'

Who robs them of sleep? The CPM goons. Nandigram has refused entry to them. To the State government, Nandigram is self-condemned for they have refused to let government machinery enter.

Yes, they have. Not a single police diary has been made against the killers and rapists, though die women themselves wanted to record their grievances against the culprits whom they identified.

No steps have been taken against the health minister for not taking proper care of the patients at SSKM Hospital.

No steps have been taken against a senior party leader, Benoy Konar, who continues to abuse the women in the worst possible language. Whether it was Medha Patkar or Mamata Banerjee.

But the people in Nandigram don't care. They have work to do.

I have talked of Sonachura. I have talked of Nandigram. I have tried to make you understand how people there are working in a positive manner to make true the word 'independence'.

The doctors took the first step when they started treating the sick, training the boys and girls, giving medicines in Maheshpur. Then they shifted to

SONACHURA, one of the target villages, and the first place to offer to start a health centre.

One ambulance we needed badly. I am proud to tell you that we have purchased one. Why an ambulance? Because one ambulance would help all the affected villages.

On 11 August 2007, in the evening, I went to Garh Chakraberia, one of the suffering villages. I travelled through total darkness (no electricity) and over broken, non-existent roads (an usual experience inside and outside Kolkata) and blinding rain.

An aged Muslim peasant woman came forward and told the crowd, 'This ambulance is for all of us. Now we are no longer helpless.'

That is how they speak. Who says this independence is not the true one?

Of course, other villages too, want health centres. The doctor said, 'Here in Sonachura, the doctors are coming by rotation. All of you who want health centres, follow this example. Just arrange a space where doctors can go, examine patients. I will see that that for 3-4 days a week, doctors come to you for 2-4 hours.' The villages are content. Now Gokul Nagar, Gangra and other villages are all arranging places for the part-time service of the doctors.

Behind all this are the doctors. Also others. But the villagers are coming up for themselves, working for the health centre, keeping nightly vigils, taking care of their daily affairs.

On our way back to Kolkata on 12 August, our car was stopped by a crowd at a place called Bhutar Mor, a predominantly Muslim village of sharecroppers and agricultural labourers. The women declared that they had gone to Sonachura some 12-15 km away for the 11 August meeting. Bhutar Mor, on 01 January 2007 had fought the police and chased them away. It is under Gar Chakraberia No.1.

The words of a young married Muslim girl shook me up terribly. She said, 'We are ready, if necessary, to give our blood, sacrifice our husbands and sons, but we won't surrender one fistful of soil. Not our land.'

Land! Cultivable Land! People of India, my people from Singur, Nandigram, Baruipur, North 24 Parganas, Haldia, Cooch Behar, North Bengal and many other places-they know what 'land' is! We do not. We are city-dwellers. We buy our food. They GROW our food.

They say, 'We will not sell our mother. This earth is our mother.'

It is true. The Earth is our mother. The geologists say that our planet, in the depth of her womb, labours for a few thousand years to create 2 inches of cultivable surface soil.

We, non-cultivators, know nothing.

The last electrifying revelation came from a group of teenaged students. They said, 'We have done it. We have arranged a place, got some doctors. They are part-timers, but regulars. They will come to listen to the patients. Prescribe medicine.'

I felt so relieved. They had indeed done it. They had defeated the system, arranged part-time health centres for the people. Their way, the Sonachura way, is the only way. To continue to work for the people, selflessly. This too, is a project. I have christened it 'ANTARLEENA PROJECT'. Antarleena was born on 13 November 1995 and died on 20 August 2004. Her father, a doctor, is giving his all for Sonachura and many other people.

This is all. Antarleena Prakalpa is the only project we can take up. It does not require big funds and hi-fi meet! We have to go to the people, study their surroundings and start working for the them. The people of India tell me all the time the true meaning of INDEPENDENCE.

This word has taught us to continue to serve the land and her people.

Gandhi knew it. Baba Amte, Narayan Bhai Desai, Medha Patkar and others knew it. I know it.

Do you?

Now I come to my prayer. We have managed to purchase the ambulance for which we owe Rs 1,33,000 (one lakh, thirty-three thousand). I want funds from donors. Please send your cheques to :

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