

Nandigram Diary-II

Surasri Chaudhuri

After that fateful day at Nandigram, 14th of March, many medical support teams as well as human rights organizations visited the area. From their reports, as well as some media reports, we came to know of the severe trauma, both physical and psychological, suffered by the people of Nandigram, especially women. Some friends of mine, mainly psychiatrists, psychologists and psychiatric social workers, felt an urge to reach out and they decided to go to Nandigram on 25th March to hold a psychological trauma-management camp. I, in spite of being an uninitiated person, decided to accompany them, because I wanted to be a witness to the whole affair.

The day before our scheduled visit, some local organizers informed us that a big rally was to take place on 25th March, and any medical camp on that day would not attract many patients. So we postponed our camp till March 31st. But I could slip into another relief team to make a reconnaissance trip on 25th March.

When Golap Dasgupta and I went to a farmer's house at Parulbari village near Maheshpur, (which is about 4 km before Tekhali bridge) several women surrounded us and talked endlessly about their plight. Their house was near the main road and hence, easily accessible by anyone who would come by road. They were afraid of attack by Police as well as CPM men, and the news of sexual violence on women on 14th and 15th March have added amply to that fear. Some of them have experienced verbal abuse and threat, while some have been beaten up on different occasions. "We voted them into power. Why did they betray us like this?"—they said. They have become so frightened that any news of apprehended attack is enough to put everyday work into jeopardy. Most of them were not sleeping well at night, a clear sign of anxiety. One woman said "But our fight will continue. Remember that this is the land of Matangini Hazra, her blood is running in our veins too". Everyone else nodded in affirmation.

Another moving incident was a conversation that took place between me and some women and children at the village Bhangabera, in front of a house barely 20 meters away from the "battlefield"—the bridge over Talpati canal that leads to Khejuri. All of them were present on that fateful day, and have escaped by running away and jumping into ponds, before which, some of them were mercilessly beaten up and molested by policemen and CPM men in khakis. Every night they hear the sound of gunfire and bombs. "They would come again. Any day. You might not see us on your next visit" -they said. The children peeped at me hiding themselves behind their mothers. I could not hold back my tears as these women and children seemed to be on a death row, calmly waiting for the end to come. A thin middle-aged woman told me that they were proud of sacrificing everything to defend their "mother" - this land. "Come what may, we will not submit to the land-grabbers" - she said.

The next visit, on 31st March, was with the trauma-relief team that I have mentioned before. We reached the village Sonachura at about 10.30 and started the camp within half an hour. The primary school at Sonachura bazar was the venue of our clinic.

Two psychiatrists received patients in two different chambers. Two or more psychologists and psychiatric social workers helped them in writing the case histories

and other related work. Large number of women gathered, may be because of the “lady doctors” present in our team. There was a previous announcement that a psychological trauma-relief team would visit, and we expected to see a number of patients with severe anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder. In fact, another medical team that visited that area on 25th March, referred many patients to our camp. Only one of them showed up. Here we learned our first lesson: Perhaps in villages mental trauma is not considered a problem worth being treated medically. However, we did receive some patients with trauma-related symptoms. It was interesting to note that nearly all of them have come to report physical problems. While talking to them, we found out that most of their problems were of psychological origin.

Apart from this, the doctors addressed the usual physical problems reported by all these people, namely, Pain in different parts of the body as a result of either beating or falling while running to escape irritation in the eyes as a result of exposure to tear gas and/or lack of sleep.

One patient, a middle aged woman, was suffering from lack of sleep and appetite, and back-pain. She did not go to the “battlefield” (the word they have coined to describe the “Gaurangapuja” site near the bridge at Bhangabera) because she was a meek person, mortally afraid of such confrontations. But after the incident took place, she saw people running to save themselves, injured men and women being carried to hospitals and also heard of the “other” kind of violence that was inflicted on women on that day. Her symptoms took off soon after that.

Apart from her, there were other patients who were present at the “battlefield” and were suffering from anxiety and lack of sleep apart from other physical problems.

Our team distributed medicine to most of the patients. When it was time to return, there were a number of patients thronging outside the clinic. As we didn’t come prepared to stay overnight we were compelled to stop at some point and refer the remaining patients to the next camp, to be held two days later by Sramajibi Swasthyo Udyog.

In the afternoon, after a lunch-break, we visited Bharat Mandal and Pushpendu Mandal’s house at the village Gangra, not too far from Sonachura bazar. Bharat Mondal, killed on 7th January, survived by his mother, wife and three children, was a marginal farmer with no land of his own. Pushpendu, his cousin, was killed on 14th March. Pushpendu’s mother was in a state of severe shock and bereavement. Nobody dared to console her. She was given some tranquilizing medicine.

While returning to the clinic for the second session, I was suddenly surrounded by some women and children of the village Gangra. I knew that they wanted to tell their story to me. In fact, anyone who would visit Nandigram these days would experience such burst of words such anxious faces., such resilience and spirit...

They narrated the same story to me. The same as you all have seen and read in the media. But I wanted to listen to all of them. Each story. The same and yet so different. When I said I must go now, they asked me to come back and stay for one night with them. “If you can run fast, and swim a little, you will survive in case there is an attack again. But you must stay to understand the difference between the day and the night at Sonachura”.

While returning to Kolkata we exchanged our experiences and came to the conclusion that such separate psychological trauma-relief camps would not be very useful in the present situation. It would be much more meaningful to have a psychiatrist and a clinical psychologist/psychiatric social worker with a general medical team. Apart from that, a door-to-door visit to some specific areas might help (like Adhikaripara, Gokulnagar, where a number of women were tortured on 14th and 15th March).

Another feeling is that the traumatized community as a whole is slowly working up a survival mechanism to cope with the stressful situation. The sense of glory., the pride in sacrificing everything for “mother” —the land ... all these are perhaps necessary for keeping them steady. All that common people like us can do is, listen to their story, tell the world about them, and tell them that the world salutes the spirit of their resistance.

□□□