

Tour Report

Visit to Bihar and West Bengal by Smt. Syeda Imam and Smt. Spalzes Angmo, Hon'ble Members from 17th May, 2010 to 22nd May, 2010

In order to assess the situation and monitor the rehabilitation measures taken by the State Government in the storm affected minority dominated areas of Bihar and West Bengal. A team consisting Smt. Syeda Imam, Hon'ble Member and myself went on a tour to Bihar and West Bengal from 17th May, 2010 to 22nd May, 2010 and were received at the Airport by Mr. Jagga Shankar, Assistant Protocol Officer who left us at the State Guest House and vanished. After that there was no sign of any protocol or Laison Officer during the entire tour.

Though information regarding our visit was sent to the State Government of Bihar well in advance by our Secretariat still it was a matter of great concern that no meeting was fixed with the state officials to monitor schemes regarding welfare minorities or to review the Prime Minister's 15 Point Programme.

The Chairman, State Commission and Home Secretary, Bihar did show their presence on personal intervention by Hon'ble Member Syeda Imam, so though some issues were discussed regarding minority welfare the essence of a formal meeting was very much missing.

This is the second time that the Chief Secretary of Bihar has failed to meet, the Members of the NCM. This time we were told that he was in Delhi and may be that was another reason as why the meeting with him and the state officials could not take place. This happened in spite of the fact that Secretary, NCM wrote 10 days in advance to the State of Bihar.

Meeting with Governor of Bihar:-

Luckily at around 1.00 p.m. we had a meeting with the Shri Devanand Konwar, Governor of Bihar and discussed various issues regarding the minorities in the state. The issue of Bodhgaya Temple Management Act was discussed and also the fact that there was no Buddhist Member in the State Commission. Another serious issue which we brought forth before the Governor disgraceful incident of rape of a Japanese girl on 16th April, 2010 by five men in the holy city of Bodhgaya.

We categorically expressed deep resentment and shock over this heinous crime and impressed upon the governor that the perpetrators of this crime should be seriously punished under law and next day while on tour to Nalanda the governor present called me up to say that the culprits had been sentenced to life imprisonment. Another important issue discussed with the governor was the storm which afflicted Arariya a Muslim dominated area on the Bihar / Nepal Border, and whether adequate relief measures were taken up.

Meeting with Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee at 7.00 p.m. on 17.5.2010.

Though Mr. Sanjay Kumar, Chairman, Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee (on virtue of his being the District Magistrate of Gaya) and Mr. Dorje, Secretary were absent, it was attended by Mr. Rajiv Singh, ADM Gaya, Dr. Arvind Kumar Singh, Member and Ven. Bhikku Chalinda ,Chief Monk were among others who were present.

We pressed upon the Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee that it was their duty to secure the safety of pilgrims to Bodhgaya.

The Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee having the District Magistrate (Gaya) as Chairman and other local leaders as its members by virtue of the call it was their prime duty to ensure that the Bodhgaya remains a peaceful, safe pilgrimage site for thousands of pilgrims who visit it from throughout the world. We pressed upon them to convene meetings and interact with all stakeholders like travel agent hotel taxi associations and civil society so that each could contribute in maintaining the peace and tranquility of this holy place.

Nalanda and Rajgir

Thereafter early next morning we proceeded to Rajgir and Nalanda. At Rajgir we visited the Shariff accompanied by the District Magistrate. At Nalanda we went to visit the ruins of the ancient Nalanda University which was a great centre of Buddhist learning during the 5th BC. We were escorted by a experienced and excellent guide, the ruins and the site of this had a thorough knowledge of the history of Nalanda University. The ruins of the ancient Nalanda University bears testimony to the fact that such a magnificent Buddhist culture flourished with rich literatures but unfortunately most of ancient texts and were destroyed still some of it arrived in Tibet and since then has been translated into the holy Tangyu and Skangyu in the Bodhi Language.

Around 4.30 p.m. we had a meeting with Members of the Minority Community along with the District Magistrate of Nalanda. It was an interactive session where mostly Muslim community representatives were present. Education and employment generated schemes were discussed and awareness generated among them about the schemes available with study. From Nalanda we came back to Patna Railway Station to board the train for the storm affected area Arariya.

Unfortunately, throughout our journey from Patna – Bodhgayag and Nalanda and back to Patna we had no Liaison Officer with us. Ever for security we had to personally visit each police station since that day a bandh was called for by the Maoists and it was not safe to travel, without protocol and security. The callous attitude of the Bihar Government can be gauged by the fact that there was no one at the Railway station and one Protocol officer finally came after we made numerous calls from the station. Our train tickets to Arariya were not confirmed and due to some unforeseen reason we had to travel by second class sleeper all the way to Arariya and that too without any security; though a letter had gone specifically from Secretary to National Commission for Minorities to the Bihar government that we should be provided security on the train.

There was a lack of cooperation from the Chief Secretary of the Bihar Government.

Arariya :- A Muslim dominated storm affected border area

Meeting with state officials in Araria Court at 10.30 a.m. on 19.5.2010. The following were attended:

1. Mr. Sarvanan, DM, Arariya
2. Mr. Udai Kumar, District Dev. Commissioner
3. Mr. Narender Kumar Singh, Dist. Welfare Officer
4. Mr. Binod Kumar, SDM, Araria

On 13th April 2010 at around 11.00 p.m. a terrible storm was affected and damaged many houses and few people died. Govt. had declared to pay Rs. 60,000/ for fully affected people and 50,000/- for partly affected. Most of the houses in that area are made of bamboo and palm leaves and therefore are vulnerable to strong winds and storm.

At around 11.30 a.m. we along with State officials visited the storm affected villages of Domana and Chilhaniya which are Muslim dominated areas. The total damage is irreparable since both houses and crops were destroyed and life had come to complete standstill for these people.

Meeting with Vice –Chancellor, Nava Nalanda Mahavihara:-

Hon'ble Members had a meeting with the Vice Chancellor, Nava Nalanda Mahavihara on 18th May, 2010 at 6.00 p.m. Nava Nalanda Mahavihara was established in 1951. Ven Bhikhu Jagadish Kashyap was the founder Director of Mahavihara. The inspiration behind the establishments of this Mahavihara was to develop a center of higher studies in Pali and Buddhism along the lines of ancient Nalanda Mahavihara.

Siliguri:- Meeting with representatives of minority communities , Waqf Board. The District Magistrate, Additional District Magistrate, Minority Officers of Siliguri was also present for the meeting along with Members of Minority Community belonging to Muslims, Buddhists, Christians and Sikhs.

The Muslims wanted put forth the appeal that in Bengal, it isto know Bengali even for students who had opted for Urdu as the medium of instructions.

The Buddhists put forth their grievances that no schemes were reaching out to them and they were not aware of the beneficiary schemes of the government for minorities. They also wanted that Ministry of Culture should sanction more funds to the Monasteries of Darjeeling, Siliguri and Jalpaiguri.

Visit to Mirik Monastery on 21st May, 2010.

We visited the Mirik Monastery such was the auspicious period preceding Buddha Jayanti. There we received the news of the death of the Gorkhas header Madan Tamang and hence was advised by the District officials in Darjeeling to proceed from Mirik to Siliguri, instead of coming back to Darjeeling in view of the tense situation which prevailed falling the murder to the oppose leader, so we the representatives of the Tamang Buddhists came and met us at the monastery and put forward their grievances. Since the meeting was to be in Darjeeling we spoke to the minority officer Mr. Sonam to hold an awareness camp for the Buddhist community, so that they could avail of the schemes.

Visit to Damdim Institute on 22nd May, 2010

Thereafter we visited the Buddhist institute at Damdim, the construction which was stopped that vide order of District Magistrate Jalpaiguri through the Block and Land Reforms Officers of (BLRO) Mal Sub-Division of Jalpaiguri district, vide Memorandum No. 40 dated 18.2.2009. It was alleged to be an unauthorized construction, though as per rules a sum of Rs. 10,685/- was deposited on 1.3.2007 before the district land and Reforms officer along with the application for conversion of 5.34 land for the said purpose was made.

It was under the directions of the Home Ministry that the construction of the said monastery was stopped. A letter from Mr. Madhukar Gupta, Home Secretary to the then Chief Secretary of West Bengal categorically stated that the activities of Shambhala Charitable Trust which was constructing the Institute should be scrutinized. Thereafter, instructions were issued and the construction stopped.

It seems some monasteries in Darjeeling were suspected of getting Chinese funds via media reports and hence the apprehension.

On the visit of the Commission Hon'ble Members, Mrs. Syeda Imam and Mrs. Spalzes Angmo to West Bengal from 20th May to 22nd May, 2010 and in particular the on spot visit to Damdim Institute in Jalpaiguri, it found that the Institute if allowed to be completed would serve as a centre of Buddhism learning, where monks would learn philosophy along with modern academic education. According to the Buddhist school of thought, Buddhism can be termed not only as a religion but as a science and philosophy. Buddhist science is further diversified into Astrology and metaphysics.

In the above context, District Magistrate of Jalpaiguri has given a detailed report to the state of West Bengal that nothing illegal has been found in the activities of the Trust and that there is no information about the involvement of other countries for illegal activities.

The report of the District Magistrate should be taken into consideration that the trust is not engaged in any illegal activities and due instruction may be given for resuming work at the institute where an unfinished statue of Lord Buddha (which according to Buddhist tradition is a bad omen) has been causing great concern among the Buddhist community.

Point to be included *

- * 1 This is the second time that the Chief Secretary of Bihar has failed to meet, the Members of the NCM. This time we were told that he was in Delhi and may be that was another reason as why the meeting with him and the state officials could not take place. This happened in spite of the fact that Secretary, NCM wrote 10 days in advance to the State of Bihar.
- * 2 Duty and responsibility of the Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee to ensure the safety of pilgrims in Bodhgaya.
- * 3 The ruins of the ancient Nalanda University bears testimony to the fact that such a magnificent Buddhist culture flourished with rich literature but unfortunately most of ancient texts were destroyed still some of it arrived in Tibet and since then has been translated into the holy Tangyur and Skangyur in the Bodhi Language.
- * 4 The callous attitude of the Bihar Government can be gauged by the fact that there was no one at the Railway station and one Protocol officer finally came after we made numerous calls from the station. Out train tickets to Arariya were not confirmed and due to some unforeseen reason we had to travel by second class sleeper all the way to Arariya and that too without any security; though a letter had gone specifically from Secretary to National Commission for Minorities to the Bihar government that we should be provided security on the train.
- * 5 The construction was stopped even though all formalities were completed as per rules a sum of Rs. 10,685/- was deposited on 1.3.2007 along with the application for conversion for the said land.

RECOMMENDATIONS:-

1. Inclusion of a Buddhist Member in the State Commission in order to put forth the Buddhist.

2. Due direction to be sent as Instructions to District Magistrate (Gaya) that strong measures for safety of the pilgrims in the holy city in view of the recent rape incident of a Japanese pilgrim in Bodhgaya.
3. The report of the District Magistrate, Jalpaiguri should be taken into consideration that nothing illegal has been found in the activities of the Shambhala Charitable Trust and that there is no information about the involvement of other countries for illegal activities. The construction of the institute should be allowed to be resumed soon so that the sentiments of the Buddhist Community may be assuaged.
4. Implementation of rehabilitation measures for storm affected victims in Arariya should be reviewed periodically by the State Government to ensure that all the victims of the disaster may be duly compensated so that they could resume their normal life.
5. After the inclusion of Tamangs as Buddhists in the State, the percentage of Buddhist population is more than 25% in Darjeeling district. Therefore, Darjeeling should be declared as a minority centre area whereby it be able to avail of all the opportunities and schemes which are available to areas having a minority population of more than 25% in the state of West Bengal.