

Departure-eve Message  
of  
Gopalkrishna Gandhi  
Governor of West Bengal  
13 December, 2009

Friends,

It has been the practice of Governors to share some thoughts with the people of the State on the eve of their departure.

I would like to continue that practice, with reverential gratitude.

The affection and the understanding that has been shown to me, and the good wishes that have been showered on me, are a treasure that I never expected. I pray that I may deserve it.

It has been my privilege to receive the sustained kindness of India's elder statesman, Shri Jyoti Basu. His wisdom and his subtle humour have made a difference to my time in West Bengal. Knowing Shri Siddhartha Shankar Ray has, likewise, been a most valued and enriching experience for me. I convey to both my grateful namaskar.

To the Government of West Bengal and, in particular, to its Chief Minister, the Hon'ble Shri Buddhadeb Bhattacharjee, I convey my sincere appreciation for all the cooperation and courtesies extended to me. I would like to place on record my sincere appreciation of the officers of the Government of West Bengal in all its ranks, for their able assistance to me.

To the political parties in the Opposition, and their leaders, too, I owe cordial thanks. To Smt. Mamata Bandyopadhyay I extend my appreciation for the warmth she has shown to me. Likewise, to Shri Pranab Mukherji for enlightening me by his astonishing grasp of history and, equally, by his perception of current issues.

In how many places can one find a bibliophile Chief Minister who also writes poetry with sensitivity, an Opposition leader who sings and paints with feeling, and an expert in finance whose knowledge of political science and history has become a national asset?

Countless people outside of politics have enriched my knowledge of the life-rhythms of our State. Of these I must mention Professor Amartya Sen who I had the privilege of accompanying to the archaeological site at Chandraketugarh site, Shri Biman Basu whose knowledge of the topography of our State has amazed me, Shri Tushar Kanjilal, who introduced me to the Sunderban, Smt. Mahasweta Devi whose original sensibility is a wonder and Sister Cyril of Loreto, Sealdah who is the very symbol of hope – triumphing.

To West Bengal's talented professionals, its skilled medical fraternity, its scientists, academics, teachers and subject matter specialists in fields as varied as music and museology, art and architecture, engineering and the law, I offer my tribute and my thanks.

To several individuals, each in her or his own right, I owe a deep personal debt of gratitude for their insights. I would like to mention, in particular,

Shri Justice Chittatosh Mookherji whose wise counsel has been of immense benefit to me. Two men of extraordinary intelligence and sensitivity – Shri Ashok Mitra and Shri Amlan Datta have, likewise, been of great help to me in understanding contemporary issues.

To all the Vice-Chancellors of the Universities I was privileged to serve as the Chancellor, and to my colleagues on the Boards that I had the honour to head ex-officio, I express my best wishes. As Governor, I have been Patron of various non-governmental organizations that are serving the people of the State with devotion in diverse fields. To all of them I offer my appreciation. The State's administrative structure, including that of the extraordinarily diligent personnel at Governor's establishments at Kolkata, Barrackpore and Darjeeling at all levels have given of their time and attention to me in a manner that I will cherish always.

I offer my admiration to the three wings of India's Armed Forces working in our region under exceptional officers, and to the para-military wings. Their vigil and quick reflexes, as that of the State Police, are something we should be thankful and proud about.

To those police personnel who provide the Governor personal security at headquarters and on his journeys I owe a word of the sincerest appreciation. Serving with devotion and hard work, combined with great courtesy to the public, is an experience something I will remember with pride.

To the vibrant media in West Bengal I offer a hug of appreciation for not just keeping me well-informed but also for being both friendly and also

frank. Sunanda K. Datta-Ray has recently drawn attention to a comment made by West Bengal's first Governor, C. Rajagopalachari, to the then Editor of 'The Statesman'. Rajaji said : 'A Government is protected by the vigilant care of the press. But who can look after the press except the conscience of the editor?'

My experience of Life would have been one-sided had my tenure not received the dart of criticism from personalities in our public life. I shall assume that I have deserved such criticism. But I would like to say that I bear no resentment whatsoever about it.

It is a matter of great regret that distrust between different political entities and personalities, as also within institutions such as our universities is disfiguring life in our State. We have to rectify this situation by changing our conditioned mind-sets. The State has known healthy political debates which sparkle but do not ignite. That tradition needs to be maintained.

Our State, which has given the country its national anthem and its national song, almost all its Nobel Laureates, and a galaxy of Bharat Ratnas, is not meant to be anywhere other than in the vanguard of India's greatness. It must confound the worst skeptics. Balancing its intellectual with its cultural heritage, its collective strengths with its individualisms, cannot expend emotional energy on invectives.

The choice before West Bengal should not be between the wrong-doing of one and the counter wrong-doing of another. The choice should not be

between the vengeance of one and the return vendetta of another. The choice has to be between chaos and civility, disorder and decorum.

Unless all inter-party, inter-cadre or inter-supporter violence is halted, West Bengal will suffer irretrievable damage. All political organizations must together bring West Bengal out of the debris of *bhangchur*, *bandhs* and *bomabaji*. No party should countenance the use of unauthorized arms. All provocations, in word and deed, across the political spectrum, should cease.

‘Maoist’ violence is not only incompatible with a political democracy but is repugnant to it. The South African example of the African National Congress is relevant. The ANC had an armed wing, the Umkhonto we Sizwe, better known as ‘MK’. The MK engaged in violence for many years against symbols of oppression and also against ‘informers’. But the ANC soon saw that armed action was futile and counter-productive. The ANC disbanded the MK and returned to the political path, which, as we all know resulted in the ending of apartheid, the ascent of the ANC to popular office and the miracle of reconciliation. Without a democratic mass movement, such violence can only hurt innocents and itself. When violence overtakes ideology and becomes a cult in itself, it is not the presumed adversary but the cause that suffers. ‘Maoists’ should ponder whether the ANC’s redemptive history carries a lesson for them or not.

I would urge all political organizations in the State to view the crisis in the Jangalmahal through non-political lenses and involve in this task social welfare organizations and NGOs with proven records in selfless service. A new chapter of ecologically intelligent and culturally sensitive progress

needs to be opened for the long neglected and exploited people of that region. Instead of being a 'problem' the Jangalmahal can and must become an example for the whole country to look up to for the development of the quality of Adivasi life and social cohesiveness.

Our stunningly beautiful *parvatmahal* has been going through a tense period. The Eastern Himalaya have been a source of oxygen for our State. We should ask ourselves if we have given to it as much as we have derived from it. We would do well to try to enquire as to why our Gorkha brothers and sisters feel as they do.

The leaders of the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha must also introspect. They must ask themselves if in our democracy any public aspiration, howsoever Constitutional, should be articulated by un-constitutional methods. Looking upon their fellow-citizens in West Bengal as their compatriot brothers and sisters, they must put across their aspirations in a spirit of mutual trust and understanding. The cosmopolitan and broad-minded traditions of Darjeeling have been India's pride. I am sure these traditions will remain unharmed. The tripartite talks opened by the Governments offer the best roadmap and it is my earnest hope that they will lead to a satisfactory resolution. I urge those who are fasting for Gorkhaland to give up that form of agitation because the tripartite process is now on and must proceed in an atmosphere conducive to negotiation.

For the people of Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Kurseong and their environs, I have another message as well: cement constructions and accumulated plastic litter burden your hills and valleys. This is a danger as they are vulnerable

to landslides, not to speak of earthquakes. The fragile Himalaya need safeguarding from man-made and natural disasters. And you, the people of Darjeeling hills, are its first safeguarders.

The five years spent by me in West Bengal have seen some great satisfactions. The consistent productivity of our farms, empowered by West Bengal's epochal land reforms has been a source of joy. So has been the vibrancy of Self Help Groups, with our women in the forefront. The government's initiatives for strengthening the State's industrial infrastructure have won not just national but worldwide recognition. Our birth rate and death rate, our rates of Infant Mortality or Neo-natal Mortality compare favourably with most other States. Our students at school and college are doing us proud; it is a joy to see the number of girl students increasing. Some amazing research and teaching works are being done in our Universities. The Indian Institute of Science Education and Research is an all-India pioneer.

There are areas where we have begun to make a clear difference, such as heritage conservation. Major restoration initiatives have been undertaken by the West Bengal Heritage Commission such as in Birbhum's Rajnagar village where the Rajahs or Nawabs of Birbhum used to stay. Their palace, a remarkable example of our composite culture and Bengal's unique craftsmanship, has been restored. The Imambara as also the temple there are similarly receiving attention. The Bankim Bhavan in Chinsurah has been restored. The Kolkata Municipal Corporation's restoration work, in tandem with INTACH is gratifying. In Santiniketan, the *Upasana Griha* or 'Mandir' which has been restored by ASI, is another jewel of an example.

For me, the restored and gleaming ‘Mandir’ betokens that eternal spirit which has and will sustain Visva-Bharati.

The Victoria Memorial Hall’s initiatives for art restoration continue apace. The able team there has restored for Raj Bhavan, its Atul Bose’s painting of Tagore in a manner that would do any institutional gallery proud. The Indian Museum’s incredible holdings are now being verified, item by item, in an exercise supervised by Smt. Kasturi Gupta Menon that is as unprecedented as it is thorough.

Several autonomous Commissions are performing their duties diligently and often self-abnegatingly.

I have had the pleasure of observing with admiration, the admirable work of the West Bengal Women’s Commission and the West Bengal Pollution Control Board.

Despite difficulties, our Forest Department is bearing its responsibility with singular professionalism. West Bengal is blessed with several natural assets – the Sunderbans, the east Kolkata wetlands, its rivers – not just the Hooghly but also the Teesta, the Mahananda and others, our water bodies and our tremendous bio-diversity.

We have done well with in the sphere of enabling legislation. For example, the East Kolkata Wetlands (Conservation & Management) Act of 2006, is the first and only act protecting wetlands in the country. The West Bengal Inland Fisheries Act, passed in 1984, is still perhaps a one-of-a-kind in India.

The Biodiversity Board was set up in 2004, one of the first in the country. Thus, enabling conditions for protecting some of the assets have been established by us in a pioneering way.

On the other hand, enforcement has been a challenge. Whether it has been lack of adequate resources or misaligned priorities, putting the laws to work for the environment of the State remains a worrying concern. The pressure for action is building up: in the past 2-3 years, media, courts and civil society in West Bengal have expressed an increasingly healthy impatience with delays in translating polity into action. I would like to express my appreciation of organizations like PUBLIC, Friends of Trees and the Howrah Ganatantrik Nagarik Samiti who have done much to sensitize both society and the State.

I wish I should have seen significant improvement in:

- (i) The corporate response, as bulk users of non-renewable energy, fuel and water, to the need for reducing the consumption levels for these sources of life, particularly water, which are going to become increasingly scarce;
- (ii) Individual responses in the use of plastic bags, efforts at harnessing rain water or in demanding more eco-friendly household products;
- (iii) The curbing of illegal mining in the Asansol area;
- (iv) The payment of long-pending provident fund dues to our jute workers;
- (v) The relief of the laid-off workers in our closed tea estates;
- (vi) The condition of biri workers, particularly women and girl-children engaged in it;

- (vii) The stopping of trafficking, especially in and from our northern districts;
- (viii) The restricting of advertising of dowry-accentuating advertisements for ‘complexion lightners’;
- (ix) The practice, despite recent improvement, of the practice of *balika vivaha*;
- (x) The stubborn problem of arsenic contamination;
- (xi) Unabating campus unrest, tending to violence in our Universities;
- (xii) The filling-in of SC and ST vacancies in Government offices and in obtaining certificates;
- (xiii) The availability of doctors and support staff in primary healthcare centres in rural Bengal;
- (xiv) The providing of barrier free access to the physically challenged and the continuing gaps in the filling up of positions reserved for them in government jobs;
- (xv) The protection of our beautiful wildlife from fast moving trains in forest-lands in our northern district.

I must also use this opportunity to say that the Right to Information Act, which, in my view, is the single most empowering legislation in post-Independent India, is yet to come into its own in West Bengal. I am glad our Chief Information Commissioner now has a colleague Information Commissioner, to take this important work forward. Our State, being one of the most politically aware States in the country, needs to be a pioneer in this field, not an ‘also runs’. The Act needs widespread publicity.

Friends, we live in myopic times. Ad-hocism reigns everywhere, not just in our State, not just in our country. But it would be cynical to assume that those in charge of the future of our State cannot or will not think long-term. I am confident that they will; I am confident that they will think of what the unremitting rise in the sea-level will mean for the Sunderban and Purba Medinipur and even for Kolkata itself; what the silting-up of our rivers, the eastward lurch of the Bhagirathi and the impact of the geo-riverine situation around Farakka implies for our farms and our farmsteads; what the long-term impact of the steady subsidence of fertile land due to erosion is. I am, likewise, sure that global warming issues will be factored into plans for adaptation and mitigation in increasingly unpredictable weather conditions and that sufficient attention will get to be paid to the looming water crisis. As I pen these words, there is anxiety among our farmers regarding the inadequacy of water available for Boro sowing. Hopefully, the season will be saved by ground water. But we have to think now beyond seasons. I am sure we will do so.

Wherefrom does my optimism come? It comes from the conviction that our people and their leadership, on whom has devolved the legacy of Raja Rammohun Roy, Bankim Chandra, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Thakur Sri Ramakrishnadeb, Sri Ma Sarada, Swami Vivekananda, Sister Nivedita, Sri Aurobindo, Kabiguru Rabindranath Tagore, Deshbandhu C. R. Das, Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, Kazi Nazrul Islam, the heroes and heroines of the 'revolutionary' school, Acharya J. C. Bose, Acharya P.C. Ray, Dr. Meghnad Saha, Asutosh Mukherjee, Matangini Hazra and Dr. B. C. Roy, will rise above all short-termisms. Some from outside our shores like C. F. Andrews, W. W. Pearson, Tan Yun-shan and Elmhirst made Bengal their

home and gave to it their skills and compassion. They preceded Mother Teresa and her immortal example. To all their memories and to that of Mother Teresa, I offer my obeisance. Their legacy sees beyond the present, beyond even tomorrow, and goes on to a golden future.

Friends, some months ago I had stopped, without notice, at a hamlet called Muradpur. There were not more than ten houses there, around a pond. The occupants of each mud dwelling asked me to come in and spend some time with them. They asked for nothing, expected nothing. Only love was exchanged. Some offered me food, some a little place to sit on. One housewife welcomed me with an impromptu *arati*. As she poured some drops of precious oil on the wick that she had hurriedly improvised, I could barely check my tears. Tagore's song *Eso, eso, aamaar ghoré* acquired, in that Muradpur hut, a new and everlasting meaning for me.

And so, how can I leave except with the greatest wrench? I have rarely felt that I *belong* as I have, here, in the bosom of West Bengal. My parting request to all of you is: Think of me as to a brother whose thoughts and deepest prayers will ever be with you.

As I leave West Bengal, I clasp your hands in love and gratitude.