

Why is Aweek Sarkar so desperate to discredit Mamata Banerjee?

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Aweek Sarkar, Ananda Bazar Patrika group's head honcho and Mamata Banerjee's bête noire, has always trumpeted his position as champion of the masses, but those in the know say that this Bengali Bhadrolok may also be a canny character in disguise. The reason the ABP top gun has his long knives out for Mamata Banerjee and is hell-bent on ensuring she loses the elections to the State Assembly through his extremely vindictive and sustained media campaign against her, is because her policies may have harmed his business ambitions and long-term expansion plans, including her going slow on proposed reforms in land acquisition, the retail, pension, insurance sector and labour laws, and other areas.

The ABP group owner wanted to play with the big boys of industry in Bengal but Mamata Banerjee has refused to play ball from day one. Even in matters which he had assumed were a cakewalk, he found himself stumped by her unflinching refusal to bend the rules. Her claims of coming in the way of his dreams of business glory and thwarting his attempt to play Narad or principal advisor to the government do tend to ring true if one goes back to the history of his clashes with the TMC-led government.

The now most vitriolic critic of the TMC government, Aweek Sarkar, had hoped to persuade the Mamata Banerjee Government to allow him to make a windfall profit of Rs. 500 crore, from a prime piece of land measuring more than 3 acres on E.M Bypass, which he had been leased by Kolkata municipal corporation for a measly Rs. 3 crore, for media-related activities. But instead of media activities, ABP had later sought permission from the TMC-controlled Kolkata Municipal Corporation for commercial activities such as real estate development. This media baron has a long track-record of arm-twisting Bengal's Government for favours. And when denied, he retaliates. This was evident during CPI(M) rule as well.

The documents available with Millennium Post clearly shows that way back on 15th January, 2014, D.D Purkayastha, the Managing Director & CEO of ABP Ltd, had written a letter to the Chief Minister, Ms. Mamata Bandhopadhyay, requesting her that "there are certain clauses in the said lease that may kindly be allowed to be amended." The main claim was that the plot of land, which was given only for construction of printing press and media house offices, should be used for other commercial activities as well. The letter said that the Lessee should be entitled to assign and/or transfer its rights and interests in the said land or any part of, either in one parcel or more, in favour of its holding subsidiaries/companies, as defined under the Companies Act, 1956, "and its associates and affiliates with prior notice to the Lessor for the same and without payment of any additional consideration to the Lessor for the same, the notice for the change shall be sent to the Lessee."

The CEO of ABP Ltd, D Purkayastha, had also met the Mayor of Kolkata, Sovan Chatterjee, and insisted they should be allowed to carry out commercial activities like real estate development on this plot of land. But the mayor in council in Kolkata Municipal Corporation decided that they wanted to take back this land to use it to raise funds for development activities in Kolkata, by auctioning this plot.

On 10th July, 2014, the Kolkata Municipal Corporation in their Mayor-in-Council meeting cancelled the lease of the prime land, this made the ABP group see red and start its all-out campaign to oust Mamata Banerjee.

The agreement between KMC as the Lessor and ABP Pvt Ltd as the Lessee, states that a land measuring about 3.26 acres on E.M Bypass beside Bartaman Prakashani, was transferred pursuant to the above lease for construction of printing press and office by the Lessee within a period of three years. The land since then has been lying idle without any effort made by the ABP group to execute the project according to the terms of the lease.

When this land was being handed over in 2004, ABP Ltd had signed an agreement with KMC that clearly stated this land was being given at a subsidised rate with a rider that it would not be used for any other commercial activity other than those related to media. But when KMC received a letter through the state government that ABP had requested that those specific clauses, which prohibit them from using this plot for other commercial purposes, should be altered, it created a flutter among KMC officials, because Aweek Sarkar was the first to project himself as a moral guardian of the state, but they found that for the last 10 years, this land was not being used for any purpose, ostensibly with the aim of quietly revising the agreement clauses, in the belief no one would notice after such a long period of time, and then reaping the benefits of this real estate bonanza once it had been transformed into a commercial complex.

In addition, KMC found that they had filled up a large portion of the water bodies inside this plot illegally, not only in contravention of environmental regulations but with the clear aim of maximizing use of the land for intensive real estate development.

KMC therefore proposed the termination of the agreement with immediate effect and decided to take exclusive possession of the property at once on the grounds that the Lessee has failed to carry out the purposes for which the agreement was executed and was instead now requesting the Chief Minister to completely alter the clauses and purpose of the agreement and to transfer it for commercial use, in clear contravention of the covenants of the agreement.

ABP Ltd then went to the Kolkata High Court and got an ex parte stay order from Justice Sanjeev Banerjee. ABP alleged that KMC forcibly tried to evict them from the land, a claim KMC has denied. KMC, in turn, alleged that ABP could not produce any document to support its claim and for this, Calcutta High Court judge Sanjeev Banerjee had imposed a fine of Rs 51,000 on the latter.

After the termination of the lease, when KMC tried to take possession of the property and ABP Ltd sought relief from Kolkata High Court, the court said that KMC had the right to cancel the lease but a proper procedure had to be followed, like giving them advance notices, etc. This land is, therefore, still in the possession of ABP Ltd.

If the TMC returns to power, it could mean immediate repossession of the land in question. This would result in a loss of a windfall profit of Rs 500 crore. The cost of land was just Rs 3 crore when allotted to ABP group, but now it stands at a staggering Rs 200 crore and if KMC had allowed them to carry out commercial activities, then the projected value of the land would be around Rs. Rs 500 crore.

The question now being raised is when the news channel, ABP Ananda, has conducted a strident campaign about various water bodies getting filled up and causing environmental hazards in the same EM Bypass area, and trumpeted the use of Syndicates in real estate development by flouting all norms, how can ABP itself illegally fill up the large water bodies inside this plot, measuring 15 kathas?

Earlier, Aavek Sarkar had invited criticism for holding onto another huge chunk of land at New Town, ostensibly to build the Kolkata Museum of Modern Art (KMOMA). As per the rules of the land acquisition, he had to start construction within three years of land allotment but this has not been done. Sarkar is a keen collector of art and the worth of his very expensive collection would soar manifold once he becomes the KMOMA's patron and the collection is housed in such a prestigious museum. KMOMA is a tripartite venture between the Govt of West Bengal, the Govt. of India and the private sector. The project cost has been pegged at Rs.410 crore. The state government in West Bengal had paid up more than Rs 138 crore for the KMOMA project earlier. Rakhi Sarkar, wife of Aavek Sarkar, is a managing trustee of KMOMA.

Sarkar is a connoisseur of good food, fine wines, expensive cigars and the best art that money can buy, and according to his former editor Vir Sanghvi, he has been known to order bottles of wine costing more than one lakh rupees.

A year ago, the former Chief Justice of Uttarakhand, Barin Ghosh, had also sought action from West Bengal chief minister, Mamata Banerjee against Aavek Sarkar, over a proposed transfer of a piece of land belonging to the century old and hallowed Royal Calcutta Golf Club (RCGC), of which he was member, to an outsider. He alleged that as the captain of RCGC, Sarkar had proposed the transfer of 6 - acre of the club's vacant and prime land by way of sale or lease to a real estate dealer to build a 5-star hotel on the premises and for this, Sarkar had put pressure on the state government to repeal the urban ceiling act. It is believed that Sarkar had sought sweat equity in the hotel project. Many senior members of the club opposed the move. Finally, the hotel project fell through after an outcry in the media.

Aavek Sarkar had also reportedly exerted pressure on Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) to reduce property tax on the prestigious Royal Calcutta Golf Club due to which the tax was brought down from Rs 6 crore to a paltry Rs 6 lakh, causing great loss to the exchequer.

Aavek Sarkar is Chairman of ABP Group, and owns two newspapers, nine magazines including Fortune India, four TV channels (ABP News, ABP Majha, ABP Ananda and Sananda TV), two publishing houses, including Penguin India and a Mobile and an Internet company. With a reported personal net worth of more than Rs. 2,500 crores (US\$ 500 Million), he has now launched a Gujarati news channel in Prime Minister Modi's home state, with emphasis on local Gujarati news.

After Anandabazaar conducted a high-pitched campaign against the TMC government for their "chit fund links", Mamata Banerjee pointed out that the ABP group was one of the main beneficiaries of the advertising largesse doled out by these groups to media houses to keep them quiet. Anandabazaar Patrika newspaper, ABP Anando channel and the Telegraph newspaper, in the heydays of chit funds in Kolkata, received hundreds of crores of rupees by way of advertisements from these chit fund companies, namely Sarada, Rose Valley, Euro Group, Icore Group, MVD Group, MPS, Tower, Ramel, Prayag, Silicon, Rahul Group, etc. ABP Group had never written a word against those chit fund companies then, though they were operating with impunity and raising money from the poorest of the poor in Bengal. ABP itself wanted to sell one of its channels, "Sananda TV," to MVD Group, a chit fund company. Also, after a handout of Rs. 4 crore, ABP Group had given the Banga Ratna Award to the controversial chit fund, Icore group's owner Anukul Maity, at the ABP's Ananda Utsav held in New York. Another dubious chit fund company, the KKN Group, was the main-sponsor for the Ananda Utsav in London, and its owner, Kaushik Nath, was also conferred an award by the ABP group.

One of Aavek Sarkar's long-standing demands from Mamata Banerjee has been that she modify the land ceiling act in Kolkata, which would allow unrestricted commercial activities and real estate

construction on a large scale, which Mamata has consistently refused to do, fearing it would jeopardize the interests of the common man.

Neither has she acceded to completely removing the rural land ceiling act, allowing only corporate holding of ceiling-extra land in specific sectors, so that industry honchos who are the main advertisers in Sarkar's publications and his bread and butter, so to speak, are disappointed in his lack of influence with the powers-that-be, and their inability to acquire large tracts of farmland in preferred areas or to gain SEZ status for their projects is another cause of heartburn for this media mogul, who now finds himself totally squeezed out of the sphere of influence. Corporate giants like ITC now also keep him at arms' length.

Sarkar once claimed he was the second most powerful person in Bengal after Jyoti Basu. If not the King, he is intent on at least playing kingmaker, and Aweek Sarkar always wants to be the real Sarkar of Bengal.

Whether Sarkar's gamble of putting all eggs in one basket will reap rich dividends or he falls prey to his unbridled ambitions and interests, only time will tell.