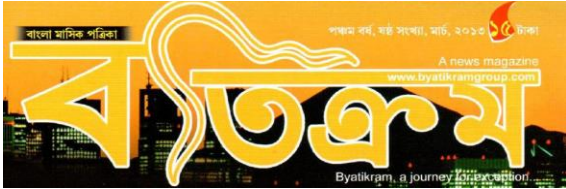


We Need to Move Forward Together, Not Alone: Excerpts from Byatikram's Interview with Astonfield Co-Chairman Sourabh Sen

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(Translated from Bengali)



Astonfield is one of the best and the biggest companies in the solar energy sector. As the head of this American company, Sourabh Sen is a whole-hearted Bengali. He was born in Chandannagar and grew up in Kolkata. He graduated with a science degree from the Mohsin College, Hooghly. He went on to become the Co-Chairman of Astonfield. The following interview tells the story of the chemistry of success of this industrialist to readers of Byatikram. I was accompanied by Subimal Bhattacharya, Cyber Security Expert, and reporter Kallol Bhaumik.



Byatikram: Since you graduated with a science degree, were there fewer hurdles for you coming into the field of renewable energy?

Sourabh Sen: Honestly, I hadn't thought of this. From 1995 to 2005 I worked in a finance company. My father died in 2001 and in 2003, my mother suffered a severe stroke. That was the turning point. After that I started thinking that I need to do something that would be memorable and leave a mark. After graduation, my entire working life has been in America. My foundation was in India, but my finishing and polishing was in America. The best quality about America is their respect for work. There you don't require your father, uncle, mother, brother or anybody. Work hard,

use your mind, produce, and earn good money. I was connected to Wall Street for a long time. My work was in insurance and asset management. I wanted to create a business which was sustainable and economically stable and acceptable to everybody. That is when I started thinking about renewable energy. I wanted to do something for my country and in India electricity is scarce.

Byatikram: You were born in India while your business partner, Ameet Shah, was born in Kenya. However, Astonfield is an American Company. Why?

SS: That is what it is. As I already mentioned, my whole working life has been in America. But there are people from different countries in our company. There are Indians also, of course. The executives in our company are knowledgeable about global markets. Patience is required to do business and I do not see that in the Indian companies in our sector. I live in Manhattan and have followed Wall Street for a long time. I know that it is not possible to earn quick money, it is a long process. Astonfield is working in the Indian market. Our thoughts are Indian but our actions are global. We live in a global society. There is not much distance between New Delhi and New York; the distance is reducing between people.

I have been in America for the last 22 years, but I kept an Indian passport. My wife is *Memsahab*, a foreigner. Everybody asks me, 'so many years have passed, why don't you become an American citizen?' I have only one answer--- I am a proud Indian, I love my country. Today you presented me with a picture of Swami Vivekananda, I am emotional after seeing that, just like I get emotional when I listen to 'Jana Gana Mana...' Vivekananda asked to wake up the youth. This will not happen on its own. First you have to give opportunity to the youth with drinking water, health service, and electricity. And I think that power is the cornerstone of every civilized society. Without electricity you cannot take a single step forward.

I am not a great believer of nuclear power. In a country such as ours, nuclear power will not bring the desired results. Think of a country like Japan, what happened to Japan with so much science, so many scientists and so much technology. Yet, after all of this, they could not stop the destruction. In 2006-07, the Indo-American nuclear deal was in progress. I asked the concerned authorities, 'you had your nuclear plant back in 1987 which did not produce a single unit of electricity until now, so why are you starting plants in India?' No answer. There is no dearth of intelligence in India. There are so many Indians in America. The population of America is 30-32 crore, out of this 10% is Indian. Now we will contribute something to India.

Byatikram: In India there are more mobile phones than there are toilets. In a poor country like this, how reasonable is solar energy in India?

SS: Very reasonable. For example, assume that the population of a village of 100 requires two units of electricity; solar energy will do exactly that. This is not possible with thermal or hydroelectric plants. In other words, [solar] plants will be exactly as per requirements, neither more nor less. There is no [inherent transmission] loss in solar energy. Comparatively, there is a lot of transmission loss in coal based thermal plants or the hydroelectric plants. That will not happen in case of solar plants. This is the benefit of solar power.



Scarcity cannot be reduced with just thermal power. The coal produced in our country is of very low grade. Coal is imported from Australia or Indonesia. This results in higher cost. But there is no scarcity of sunlight in our country. After the Sahara Desert, Rajasthan is the best place for producing solar energy. Globally, Germany is doing good work in the field of solar energy. I went to Germany and talked to the executives of large corporations. The insurance companies there invest in solar energy companies. Pension funds also get into the solar sector because they offer a good investment opportunity and a steady return. Once solar energy production starts, there is not much expenditure required. In Rajasthan, French engineers have built a solar plant producing 8-11% more power than expected.

Byatikram: Tell something about your childhood.

SS: My father was a doctor and my mother a school teacher. My mother was from Dhaka and my father was from Chittagong. I belong to the family of Surya Sen, so revolutionary blood is in me. My father gave me a *mantra* - whatever you do, do the best. Not the biggest, but the best. And whatever you do, do not bow your head down. I was born in Chandannagar, 33 kilometers from Kolkata, a French colony. I studied at St. Joseph Convent, then Don Bosco and then Hooghly Mohsin College. I got a visa to America in 1991. Back then it was very difficult to get a visa. Nine people before me were turned down. By the grace of God I got one. Later, I went to New York and became a banker.



America also wants solar energy now. I have been living in New York for the last fifteen years. Now America wants to be green. India is becoming stronger, however, if every citizen of India is not healthy, the country cannot be healthy. Even now, in India one in every three children suffers from malnutrition. We need development but how? Sustainable development is required. Without a level playing field, a country cannot move forward. Together we have to move forward. I have only one dream, and that's everybody moving forward. We

must praise one thing in America, and that is that irrespective of caste and creed, everybody has only one mantra -- we have to work hard. You need to be honest, and work very hard.

Byatikram: Whenever the Noble Prize is announced it seems that there are so many winners from America but, in fact, hardly any of them were born American. They live just live there.

SS: Right, exactly right. You have told the truth. I was an immigrant. Now I live in America. My father never wanted me to go abroad. Because he was the son of a revolutionary family, he was against the western countries. I told my father, I am not going to Britain, I am going to America. However, even if I go there I will remain an Indian my entire life. America is a land of talent. If you can show your talent, you will definitely command respect.

Byatikram: A Bengali would not normally think "I will give up a job and start a business." Only a few could do it like you did. Tell us what it takes to become Sourabh Sen.

SS: Look, the first point is you have to prepare yourself. You need to be fundamentally strong. Then you will need a good close friend, whom you are on the same wavelength with. You cannot make it alone. Look at Subimal Bhattacharya. He is our advisor. With him I discuss everything. From there, ideas take on another dimension.

By nature Bengalis are fearful. Many people asked me 'what is the need to take such a huge risk?' I gave up a job at the age of 34. I had achieved all of my goals. By the time I was 31 years old, I achieved whatever I had wanted in my childhood so I thought of doing something new. I thought of working with solar energy.

Back then I used to talk ill of entire West Bengal, including Kolkata. 'This is bad, that is bad, and it is dirty here,' then Buddha Bhattacharya told me one thing, "Look Sourabh, you can be a critic or an agent of change. You try to change." To bring change, you have to work from within. Change does not come overnight. So, it is impossible to change if you do not prepare yourself. And you need a good friend. Today I think many times before I take any step. For me I have made a bench mark. I cannot allow it to get destroyed. And there is one more point, one needs to be disciplined. One cannot move forward without being disciplined.

Byatikram: But change is inevitable.

SS: Yes, change is inevitable. Change will come. It cannot be stopped. Therefore, we should keep ourselves prepared for the change. So that when change comes, I should not be left behind. For that we need to prepare ourselves properly. One more point is that we need to analyze ourselves. Everyday I think for half an hour to an hour. What I did for the day, which work could I do even better. You need to analyze yourself untiringly. Otherwise you cannot get to the next level.

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