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Conversation

Gripped in the Challenge of Changes

Samar Ranjan Sen, Dhaka University's first ever Doctorate of Economics, is perhaps best known as one of the sub-continent's foremost political and economic thinkers. He also had a glittering career in the Indian Civil Service and the World Bank. A native of Dhaka and only child of Ashalata Sen, founder of Gandaria Mahila Samity, Dr. S.R. Sen made a sentimental return to the land of his birth last month, and spoke to The Daily Star at length about the momentous changes gripping the world and the South Asian region at the twilight of the 20th Century.



really knows".
The wind of change that began blowing from France in 1789 swept over all of Europe until it turned into the tornado of the Russian Revolution. Yet, within 70 years, the reaction initiated in Poland in 1980 devalued the Soviet Union itself in just over a decade.

Is change then inevitable in China and other societies? Or will things forever remain as they are?
"That cannot be. Things have to change with the times. Those who keep pace with the times will survive and grow; those who don't will slide backwards", came the matter-of-fact reply.

At present, there are two forces of change at work, Sen said. One is to break things up — empires, multi-national states, even confederations. At the same time, another tendency is to unite, like the move towards federation in Western Europe; economic integration among nations of South-east Asia; regional cooperation among South Asian states.

The world is witnessing a momentous tug-of-war between these two trends, but, for Dr. Sen, the outcome is difficult to predict because so many forces are at work.

In the 19th century, nationalism was virtually the only factor that mattered. Today, apart from the opposite pulls of resurgent nationalism and emerging federalism, other political, military and ideological forces are at play. But most important is the stupendous impact of technological advance, which is making every effort at resisting social change virtually futile.

The question that Man has had to deal with over the ages is how to handle the phenomenon of change. One tendency, Dr. Sen suggested, has been to recoil from the advent of change and retreat within oneself; the other trend has been to lunge forward and embrace the unknown.

Sabir Mustafa

"For instance in India, when the Muslims came and were victorious, the Brahmins with their ideas of caste and customs, retreated into a shell like a tortoise. As a result their progress was hampered for a long time", Sen said.

He continued: "Then when the Mughal empire collapsed under British attack, the Muslims went into a shell and refused to accept the English language or Western education.

"But then the Hindus took up English education and as a result between 1857 and 1900, a big gap opened up in the advancement of the Muslims and Hindus.

"The dinosaurs disappeared because they could not change with the times, but Man survived because he adapted. That is the big lesson".
Have states and statesmen of today learnt the lesson? South Asia today faces tremen-

dous prospects for change, both in inter-state relations and among various forces at work inside individual states. One political vehicle for advancement in the region is the South Asian Association for regional Cooperation (Saarc).

That road, however, is fraught with problems. There are people, Dr. Sen said, particularly in smaller countries like Bangladesh, Nepal etc. who are anxious to accept the idea of Saarc. But at the same time, there are those, particu-

larly in India and Pakistan who are not terribly keen on the idea.

"It will be very difficult to make Saarc a success because of the intense rivalry between India and Pakistan. A great deal of diplomatic skill and culture will be needed to make Saarc work", Sen, who represented India, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka at the World Bank as an Executive Director from 1972 to 1978, warned.

The root of the problems, it seems, lies in the fact that



Lenin's statue being removed...



Moscovites rejoicing failed coup...

some Indians feel all the other Saarc countries will gang-up against New Delhi; meanwhile, a number of people in Pakistan think that India will use Saarc to corner Islamabad. This kind of suspicion and fear, Dr. Sen feels, will have to be got rid of if Saarc is to succeed.

Now, what are the chances? "Think about Europe", Dr. Sen instructed his avid listener. "All those countries have a history of fighting one another. But now they are coming together in the European Community. Why? Because in the age of modern transport, tele-communications, overall advancement of technology, it is not possible to stay separate".

One of the major problems always faced by European states in their relations was the question of territory. The history of Europe is a history of never-ending battles over which piece of land or stretch of water belonged to whom.

However, first by drawing up the Treaty of Rome in 1960 to set up the EC, and then with the signing of the Helsinki Declaration of 1975 by 35 countries, they accepted one another's boundaries as existed after the Potsdam Conference among Britain, the US, the USSR and France in 1945.

"For better or for worse, they agreed to maintain the status quo and accept existing lines of actual control. There'll be no more wars over territory", Dr. Sen said. "Instead they are going for total freedom of movement of people, goods, capital technology etc. across borders. As a result, the existence of boundaries becomes less visible, and it begins to matter less who has which bit of disputed land".

That acceptance of the status quo, according to Sen, is the way forward for South Asia too. Whether it is good or bad, whatever the historical reasonings on this side or that, the current lines of actual control need to be accepted if progress is to be made on the subcontinent. Adjustments and improvements could then be made by increasing trade, movement of people, cultural interaction etc.

India, the only country with borders with all the other states of the region except Afghanistan, has disputes of one sort or another with most neighbours. For instance, New Delhi's dispute with Beijing over Aksai Chin in the north-west, over the McMahon Line and the North-East Frontier Area (NEFA) are still far from resolved.

The recent visit of Chinese premier Li Peng to India signalled a willingness on both parties to accept the status quo, Sen thinks, because the ideal thing would be to discard war as a means of solving problems now and try to adjust in the future.

The same applies to Pakistan. India has a dispute over Kashmir. There are good arguments on both sides, historical reasonings on both sides, why lawyers and diplomats to argue both their cases. So the problem won't be solved by arguing, debating or fighting. It is something people have to think over, about how it can be solved", Sen commented rather tactfully.

Within states, however, there is another big cause of tension which needs to be thought over carefully. Within each nationality, Sen said, there are sub-nationalisms, classes, castes, communities etc. Their interests are not the same; in fact, they have quite distinct and often conflicting interests. Now, how do you adjust that?

The traditional way has been, of course, to use force to impose the rule of one section over the rest. Another, less practised, way is to share — 50-50 or 60-40 or whatever. Adjustment of conflicting interests through give-and-take.

In the old days, the sword was the favoured method of maintaining the rulers' power over the rest. Today, there is the power of the vote.

"Whoever has 51 per cent of the vote now tries to impose his will over the other 49 per cent as well. By the sword or the vote, adjustment is made by exercising 100 per cent power", Dr. Sen, who was one of three men chosen by late Indian premier Indira Gandhi in 1983 to study and recommend ways to improve relations between the centre and the states of India, said.

That policy works for a while, he said. But then, those who are being ordered will start to revolt, because arbitrary use of power, whether backed by the sword or the vote, breeds militancy.

"When somebody can't get what he thinks is his due (Continued on page 9)

WHEN Samar Ranjan Sen entered the superbly decorated drawing room of Professor Abdur Razzak's Gulshan home, the soft December sun had already set on the horizon.

Dressed in the simplest of white pyjama-kurtas and a sleeveless sweater, 78-year old S.R. Sen's tall, dignified presence blended perfectly with the sophisticated environment of the room.

The paintings on the wall spoke of the essentially Bengali character of the place, while the intense look in Sen's eyes revealed a sharp intellect refined by decades of experience in the fields of economics, civil administration, political thought.

"There have been many centuries in the history of the world, but never a century like the one we've just lived through. We were born before the Russian Revolution of 1917, and now after two World Wars and the Chinese Revolution, the Russian empire has gone", Dr. Sen began a gentle jog through history by saying.

It was December 22, 1991. A few blocks away, the pre-Bolshevik Russian tri-colour fluttered for the first time atop the former Soviet embassy. People inside the embassy building spoke Russian like they had always done, but the word Soviet, like the Union itself, was no more.

The 20th century saw the disappearance of many great empires — the British, the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Japanese. According to Dr. Sen, that leaves only one empire still intact — the Chinese.

"If the dominant culture incorporates territories with people of a different cultural trend, then that can be called an empire, provided there is no consent. If there is consent then that cannot be called an empire", Sen said, presumably alluding to the fact that the Indian union was based on consent through the exercise of democratic rights and therefore could not be called an empire.

China, though less heterogeneous than India, is still not a homogeneous nation. Tibet, Sinkiang, Inner Mongolia, even Manchuria are not part of the dominant Han culture of main China.

"Despite this existence of different cultures and civilisations, China today is quite united, much more so than was the case with the Russian empire, where the Kazakhs, Georgians, Ukrainians, Uzbeks etc. were clearly distinguishable from one another", Sen said while gently leafing

through a magazine commemorating the 41st anniversary of the Gandaria Mahila Samity founded by his mother, the late Ashalata Sen.

The question is, which way will China go? Sen would rather look at the broader picture emerging from the debris of the Soviet collapse, before pondering the future of China.

Once the basic necessities of food and security have been taken care of, people always look for something else — freedom. Technological change, coupled with the growth of the middle class resulted in rising expectations with which the Soviet system was unable to cope.

For the USSR, it not only meant freedom of the people from authoritarian rule, but also freedom of peripheral nations from the dominating culture of Russia.

"Whether that change will come to China or not is uncertain. Perhaps the events of Tainanmen Square in the summer of 1989 were indicative of something. It was suppressed last time, but whether they'll be able to suppress it again or not, I don't know", Dr. Sen said, adding, "These things are contagious. Sometimes they go away, sometimes they don't. Where they go, why they go, nobody

WHEN I first visited the Armenian church a decade back, it was as an illustrate to for a weekend national paper, while the story was being dug out by an expatriate. I had gone from my house to the oldest church in Dhaka, in a foreign mission car, and returned in the same way, and failed to notice the environment of which I was deeply conscious this time.

Trying to do the story myself, and prodding the half-reticent young camera-man to do his job adequately — in a church that was falling apart in old Dhaka — was an exercise in itself. Reaching there in a "baby-taxi" I was almost intoxicated with the smell of the surrounding incense and candle-makers, apart from the open sewerage at the entrance and around the church.

My experience in going to churches — being a convent student till the age of twenty-one — in the Subcontinent, Europe, USA and even Down Under has always been pleasant. But visiting the Armenian Church, which is a national monument, being a part of our legacy, was no pure pleasure.

The atmosphere was that of a haunted house, which was not the case a decade back, when I had visited the church the first time. There were many foreign Hippies and visitors there, and the condition of even the graveyard was much better. The marble and the granite had now been removed from the graveyard, and the church looked unkempt, even though the Chairman of the Armenian Church Community, Mr. J. Martin, informed me that he had spend one and a half million takas in the face-lift of the church which, was simply of mortar and lime.

Mr. Martin informed that the church was once in the form of a chapel, from the period of 1615 to 1670. It was extended into a church in 1791, when the Armenian community felt they could spare the funds, and needed a place of their own for their marriages, deaths and baptisms.

The hibiscus, henna, ferns,

cacti of various types, poinsettias and the slender palm trees near Mr. Martin's residence, adjacent to the church were the same, as a decade before.



The statue in the churchyard.

There was the same mound of money-plants, except that it was covered with many more layers of dust.

One saw cracking cement over what had been a cream-coloured church. The carvings and the coloured effects were gone or fading. Even the main entrance, despite the fine basic woodwork of the hinges, was a ghastly and raw-red and garish green, and reminded you of the rickshaw painters. Mr. Martin had the embarrassed explanation that he wanted a quick work done for the recent Christmas festival.

At present, Mr. Martin narrated that there were exactly five Armenian families living in Dhaka. The other people who come for the services are the

An Angel from Armenia and More ...

A Look at the Armenian Church in Dhaka

by Fayza Haq

ex-patriates and members of the foreign embassies, when they are informed and invited.

The church had been built by the Armenian merchants who had come to Dhaka from Armenia, Iran and Turkey. "We were here long before the Portuguese and the Dutch. I insist that you believe the Moghul Emperor's second wife, Zamina, was of Armenian origin. The British came to

rule and not simply to trade. We adjusted to them and you see many of our names are Anglicised, as you read on the church tomb-heads.

After Christ began his preaching in the Middle East, the Armenians were the first nation to accept the religion as a state religion. "Our service is different from the ones, such as you find in Calcutta. It is in English and not in Armenian.

This is obviously because of the British influence," Mr. Martin informed me.

Mr. Martin, who is in the electrical business, spent a fortune on his own in making the church more presentable and has put in the basic renovations. The Armenians from Calcutta reportedly wish to help the church in its renovation work, but is said that the Indian government will not permit the remittance of the money.

Sometime back, during the early eighties, Mr. Martin could have obtained donations from the government but did not think it wise to do so. He claims that Sheikh Hasina has visited the church and wishes Begum Khaleda Zia would do the same.

Why does not the church get funds from abroad? Mr. Martin has the ready reply: "There has been the earthquake in Armenia, and US money is required there. The refugees too have to be rehabilitated. There the Armenians involved in the Lebanese conflicts in the Middle East. They too have to be succored by the US and the European community. Russia has its own problems and although Armenia is not separate, it has nothing but problems on its lap. It is hardly the time to ask USSR for aid by us in Dhaka. We have to make do with what we can contrive ourselves in the city on our own."

"We will continue to negotiate with the Indian government. That is perhaps our only hope. We have been knocking for two years and must continue to do so."

The Armenians claim that they own lands in Maulvi Bazar, in the form of the land of the graveyard of the Greeks and the Armenians. The local people had been asked to look after the land. Instead, it is

lamented by the Armenians, that the parts of the land are being sold off illegally.

There is house in the neighbourhood, which the Armenians claim as theirs. But the Government has occupied it, say the Armenians, although they themselves are paying taxes, and have the land registered in the name of the Armenian Church. The local Muslims now occupy the house, and the Armenians are not amused.

A decade back, I had found some sort of a library existing in the church premises. According to Mr. Martin, books have been stolen and removed not only during the Liberation, but eight years ago too.

"We use pure gold and silver in our services. This was pilfered along with the brocade clothes of the priests during the Liberation confusion. The place has been pillaged repeatedly. Even repairing the belfry cost 10,000 takas, according to Mr. Martin, and he was afraid everytime the workers went up to work, while there was the gust of wind.

There are "chowkidars," sweepers and gardeners — five in number — to keep the church and the adjoining cemetery in shape. Yet it appears disreputable. Inside the church, the atmosphere is depressing. Everything is dusty. There are three conventional paintings of Jesus Christ at the cross, "The Last Supper" and a tapestry presentation of the Prophet. Even the pulpit with its falcon is covered with layers upon layers of suffocating dust. The chandeliers, or rather the collection of lights, and fans, are far from sophisticated. They are simply useful. Any corner church in Europe or even in cases in the cities of the Subcontinent is kept in much more splendour. As you climb the winding wooden floor staircase to the belfry, you find heaps of derelict parts of the church.

Incidentally there are no priests officiating at the



The church as it stands today.