

Amartya Sen's Love/Hate for Dhaka

by Nazrul Islam

Bangladesh is a country where the common people cannot get peace even after their death. They are evicted from their graves to make way for new arrivals. In such a country, the programme of industrialization has to be implemented with extra caution.

DID Amartya Sen Really Say That? Reporting on Amartya Sen's address to the "Global Health Equity Initiative Conference" at BRAC center for Development Management at Rajendrapur, the Daily Star (December 18) mentions Sen as saying that "he would not recommend anyone to live in this (Dhaka) city, not even at the posh Gulshan or Biddhara."

Assuming that the reporting is correct, it is clear that Sen was not saying this to offend his hosts of Dhaka city. Rather, evidently, he was distressed by certain aspects of Dhaka City, and he meant the above statement as a way of drawing attention to these distressful aspects.

We all know how dearly Amartya Sen loves Dhaka and Bangladesh. There are many Bengalis who had to migrate upon partition, and who then moved on to become prominent figures in respective fields either in India or abroad. But, there are very few who displayed so much attachment to their ancestral land as Amartya Sen did. It is not the laurels and accolades that Bangladeshis wanted to shower on him in the wake of his receipt of Nobel Prize that made Sen fly to Bangladesh from Stockholm. He was scheduled for this trip even before Nobel was announced. Sen visited Dhaka and Bangladesh many times before, whenever he could fit such trips into his busy schedule. He even went to Chittagong to attend BEA seminar. In a rare display of attachment, he maintains contact with the family that currently occupies his ancestral Larnini Street house; takes the family's sons for lunch when they visit him at Harvard. So, there can hardly be any question about Sen's deep love and goodwill for Dhaka and Bangladesh.

Why did then Sen say (half jokingly albeit) that he does not recommend anybody to live in Dhaka, even in its posh quarters? What are the aspects of Dhaka City that distressed him so much? As we all try to revel in Sen's Nobel glory, it is incumbent on us to pay some attention to his statements and try to draw necessary lessons.

Dhaka: Once a Pleasant City

Dhaka indeed used to be a very pleasant city. This is true not only of Dhaka of thirties or forties, immortalized through the chronicles of another pre-eminent Bengali intellectual, Buddhadev Bose. Even during

the seventies, Dhaka used to be a pleasant city. There were not as many high-rise buildings, or as many motor vehicles, as today. But it was a nice and relatively clean city. In new Dhaka there were still many trees, many water bodies. The air was fresh, and the water was uncontaminated. People could move around the city with ease. Today's Dhaka abounds in multi-storied apartment buildings. Its streets are full with private cars. Yet it is today's Dhaka that reminds one of Kibiguru Rabinranath's famous line, "Bring Those Woods Back; Take Away the City!"

Dhaka today is one of the deadliest places in terms of air pollution. The lead level in Dhaka's air is more than five times higher than the UN recommended safe level. Its streets are clogged. No one can be certain for long it will take to reach from one point of the city to another. Pedestrians find it hard to cross the streets. The trees are disappearing. The water bodies are vanishing even faster. The remaining water bodies are losing their connections with adjoining rivers and their annual recharge. The lanes overflow with uncollected household waste and filth. Industrial waste and medical waste are becoming serious hazards to sanitation and health. The population of the city is heading toward ten million. Once ending at Nawabpur rail crossing, the border the city has now reached as far north as Turag. To the south, it is pushing toward the shores of Dhaleshwari.

There is hardly any open space. It used to be hard previously to conceive a school without an open playground. Now entire universities are crammed into a few building blocks. Overcrowding is assuming frightening proportions. There is no sign of this explosive growth slowing down any time soon. This growth in size and density is putting serious strain on the city's ability to provide basic public utilities as water, power, sewerage, drainage, transportation, waste disposal, etc. In this backdrop, all the talk of converting Dhaka into a "lotlotom nagari" is simply hollow and ironic. It would not therefore be surprising if Amartya Sen did not recommend anybody to live in Dhaka. He knows only too well what John Stuart Mill had to say about the necessity of space and nature for the development of human mind and soul. This

is how Mill put it in his Principles of Political Economy: "Nor is there much satisfaction in contemplating the world with nothing left to the spontaneous activity of nature; with every rod of land brought into cultivation, which is capable of growing food for human beings; every flowery waste or natural pasture ploughed up, all quadrupeds or birds which are not domesticated for man's use exterminated as his rivals for food, every hedgerow or superfluous tree rooted out, and scarcely a place left where a wild shrub or flower could grow without being eradicated as a weed in the name of improved agriculture. If the earth must lose that great portion of its pleasantness which it owes to things that the unlimited increase of wealth and population would extirpate from it, for the mere purpose of enabling it to support a larger, but not a better or happier population, I sincerely hope, for the sake of posterity, they will be content to be stationary, long before necessity compels them to it." (Book IV, Chapter IV)

What Can Dhaka Do?

Despite this sorry state and alarming prospects, Dhaka is and will remain our capital city. Hence, instead of despairing, the question that we need to ask is: What to do? Looking back into its uncrowded and clean past and feeling nostalgic about it cannot carry us too far. We need to look into the future and find out ways in which Dhaka can be fast and modern and yet clean and comfortable; how Dhaka can have a better environment and ensure a better quality of life.

Population Control: There are of course certain things, which do not depend on Dhaka alone. First and foremost among these is population growth. Part of Dhaka's alarming growth certainly comes from natural growth of her own population. But a much greater portion of this growth is from migration from rest of the country. Unless population growth in the country as a whole is checked, Dhaka's disturbing growth cannot be stopped. Bangladesh has had

some success in reducing population growth. But, there is absolutely no ground for complacency. In fact, in absolute terms, population growth may not have decreased at all. The following arithmetic can well illustrate the point. In the early seventies population of Bangladesh was about 75 million. A 2.5 per cent growth then implied an annual increase in population by 1.87 million. Now the population size is about 130 million. Even if the current growth rate is assumed to be 1.5 per cent, the implied annual increase in population is 1.95 million.

The physical area of Bangladesh increases neither arithmetically nor geometrically. So the decrease in rate does not help much so long as the total size of the population keeps on rising. Note that there are many important countries in the world whose total population size is smaller than one or few years' increase in Bangladesh's population. For example, total population of Norway or Sweden is equal to Bangladesh's only 2 and 4 years' incremental population. This is simply unsustainable from any point of view. With regard to population, Bangladesh can learn a lot from China's example. China's density of population in 1992 was about 120 per square mile, which is about 10 times less than that of Bangladesh. Yet China is aggressively pursuing one-child policy (i.e., negative population growth) for already several decades.

Dhaka cannot be responsible for entire country's irrational population growth. But Dhaka is the capital. The central government is seated here. The people who govern the country are residents of Dhaka. So Dhaka can actually play a decisive role in leading the country rapidly toward a zero and then negative population growth. Other than checking population growth, which will require nation-wide effort, there are many things that are directly under Dhaka's control. Dhaka has nobody else for failure in these respects. The following gives just a few such examples.

Air Pollution: The most glaring example of such failure is with respect to air pollution. Take the simple case of eradicating the two-stroke engine-vehicles (TSEV) — the scooters and mopeds. Research shows that these alone are responsible for about 70 per cent of Dhaka City's air pollution, particularly its poisonous lead in air. This is causing irreparable damage to the health of Dhaka's population, particularly its children. There is absolutely no reason why Dhaka should have allowed the TSEVs play in such large numbers for such a long time. Clearly, low per capita GDP is not the problem. TSEVs are banned even in Nepal, whose per capita income is even lower than that of Bangladesh. This has been a criminal negligence on the part of authorities in Dhaka under several successive governments.

Mass Transportation: A second example is that of mass transportation. Common sense indicates that, given its extremely high density of population, the mode of transportation that is most suitable for Dhaka is bus service and not private car. Yet unfortunately, over the years it is the number of private cars that has exploded, while the number of buses has remained pitifully limited and inadequate. Of course, the kind of development strategy that is being pursued at the national level has a direct effect on the mode of transportation that burgeons. However, Dhaka cannot absolve itself of its responsibility both as the city authority and, again, as the seat of the national government.

There is a lot that Dhaka can learn in this respect from Calcutta. The population density problem is no less severe in Calcutta. Yet Calcutta manages to have a well functioning bus system. Unlike in Dhaka, the middle class in Calcutta does not feel stigmatized to travel by bus. Note further that Calcutta's bus system is mostly under private ownership. The other day, the Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina, inaugurated a BRTC fleet of thirty new double-deckers. This is no doubt a good step. However, a fleet of BRTC dou-

ble-deckers will not solve Dhaka's problem of mass transportation. The problem is more structural.

The authorities will have to ask the basic question: Why isn't private sector coming up with enough buses when hundreds wait at bus stands? It is likely that there are two main reasons for this. One is perhaps over-regulation of bus fares by the authorities. Bus owners should be given more leeway to choose the fare they charge. That will lead to different grades of bus service to emerge. That is exactly what is needed. A second likely reason for current inadequate bus service is the following.

It is often alleged that existing bus owners have organized themselves into cartels and thereby are not allowing free competition to work. Thus, a more effective way of ensuring adequate bus service may be to break up this cartel and to deregulate bus fares. Note that these two steps have to be implemented in conjunction. If the government just deregulates the fares and fails to break up the cartels, then obviously the situation will be worse. It is not that we always have to have a World Bank loan to solve every problem that crops up. There are many things that can be done without seeking loans. Exposing the cartel, generating popular support to break it up, and then actually doing so does not require a loan.

Similarly, banishing the TSEVs from Dhaka's street does not need a loan project. Common sense, good judgment, some measures of creativity and imagination, and a little bit of love for people should be sufficient for these steps.

Protection of Open Space and Water Bodies: This has been another area of neglect. The authorities have not tried hard to preserve the open spaces that were available in Dhaka. The damage has been particularly severe regarding water bodies. The authorities have often been eager partner with private individuals in letting the water bodies to be filled up. The constant encroachment of Dhamondi and Gulshan lakes, either in collusion with or despite ap-

proval of authorities, is just one example of such neglect.

Connections with Rivers: Another mistake that authorities are doing is severing Dhaka's connections with her adjoining rivers. The Greater Dhaka Embankment has sealed off Dhaka from her rivers on the south and west. Now the 3000 crore taka Joydevpur-Demra embankment, that is under construction, will complete the circle by sealing off Dhaka from her rivers on the north and east. All this is being done in the name of flood protection. Unfortunately, in the long run, embankments are not going to solve Dhaka's flood problem. (For details of the argument, interested reader may see my flood essay that appeared in The Daily Star on October 6-7 last year.) Meanwhile, these embankments will bring slow death to the remaining water bodies of Dhaka. This will make Dhaka more arid and temperate, and create new problems of water logging, drainage, and sanitation. These embankments may actually bring the arsenic problem to Dhaka's because they will obstruct replenishment of Dhaka underground aquifers.

With Jamuna Bridge in place, a Joydevpur-Demra Dhaka bypass may indeed be necessary. But there is no reason why it has to be built in the form of an embankment. The bypass may be constructed with bridges and culverts of adequate number and size so as to retain Dhaka's connection with her rivers. The government should actually send some of its planners and decision-makers to Amsterdam to see for themselves how a great modern and sophisticated city can enormously benefit from her links with rivers. Instead of sealing the city from the adjoining rivers, Dhaka should consider the presence of rivers along its outskirts as a blessing and try to integrate these as much as possible to its life. It should try to rejuvenate the old canals and rivulets that ones existed and create new ones so that river water can crisscross the city.

Consumption and Life Style Pattern: It needs to be realized that it is perilous for Bangladeshis and people of Dhaka to try to slavishly imitate the US lifestyle. The density of population in the US is just 27 per square mile, which is about 50 times less than that of Bangladesh. Even in the US and other developed countries, there is now an increasing

awareness that the life pattern that has emerged in these countries is not sustainable in the long run for the earth as a planet. There is a growing movement to curtail consumption of energy, fuel, natural resources, and synthetic and other non-biodegradable materials. The people of San Francisco and Portland are now increasing moving away from cars and adopting biking as their mode of commuting. People are shunning plastic bags in favour of those made of natural fibers. The force of this increasing environmental awareness can be seen in Green Party's becoming a partner of the ruling coalition in Germany.

In Bangladesh we simply do not have the vast expanses like that of America to be used as landfills for waste disposal. Bangladesh is a country where the common people cannot get peace even after their death. They are evicted from their graves to make way for new arrivals. In such a country, the programme of industrialization has to be implemented with extra caution. Patterns of settlement, transportation, consumption, etc. all need to be determined in the light of the local conditions and local resources. Constraints. Foreign companies will obviously try to foist a consumption pattern that suits their marketing and profit needs. They can just pocket the profit and leave Bangladesh. But Bangladeshis and their future generations will have to live in this land. They, therefore, need to protect their environment.

Coming Back to What Sen Said

So, Dhaka and Bangladesh can indeed do a lot of things to change Sen's alleged negative recommendation regarding Dhaka. All is not yet lost. Through national and Dhaka-based measures, it is possible to turn things around, and to create a Dhaka that is modern and fast and yet nice and clean, comfortable to live and move around, in harmony with its physical setting in the midst of rivers, and friendly to the environment. Then perhaps Sen will not only recommend Dhaka to others as a place to live, but himself visit Dhaka more often and stay for extended periods and thereby enrich Dhaka's intellectual life.

The author is Professor of Economics, Emory University, USA, and Coordinator, Bangladesh Environment Network (BEN).

'Economic Welfare Is Only One Part of Human Welfare'

— Amartya Sen

What have the intellectual traditions of Santiniketan and Calcutta meant to you? What part have they played in your life and intellectual make-up?

Santiniketan and Calcutta were very important in their influence on my own thinking, but they influenced me in rather different ways. I was in Santiniketan from 1942 to 1951. Of course, I did not recognise at that time how special a place it was. By the time I enrolled, Rabindranath Tagore had died, but his ideas were quite strongly present. I knew him of course earlier, and even had the privilege to have some conversations with him when I was in Dhaka but visited Santiniketan regularly.

What about the Dhaka phase?

Dhaka was a very big presence in my life, from my birth until 1945. My family is formally from a village in Manikganj, but moved to the old city of Dhaka. I was born in my maternal grandparents' home in Santiniketan, but my home was still Dhaka. I was a student of St. Gregory's school between the ages of five and eight. It was a good missionary school — very broad based but not severe as some missionary schools could be. Unlike Santiniketan, St. Gregory's had ranks. I think my rank was something like 33 in a class of 40 which could not be regarded as exceedingly high!

Some of your recent writing has been on culture, politics and society, and the way, as in India, a majoritarian ideology can erode pluralism, a valued civilisational asset. Can a government committed to an exclusionist ideology like Hinduva generate economic policies that expand social and economic opportunities? In other words is there a relationship between Hinduva, freedom and economic welfare?

I think the first and second parts of the question deal with very different issues. I think there are many arguments against what you are calling a majoritarian view. There are enormous civilisational arguments against it. But to base the case for pluralism on economics would be a great mistake. Many countries have had economic development, even free pursuits of economic welfare, under the most extreme forms of cultural tyranny. I don't think the problem is so much that Hinduva is a barrier to economic welfare. Indeed, in the Middle East, the standard bearers for concerns for economic equity have often been people who have been very inspired by the egalitarian features of the Koran. In my view it would be a mistake to base the rejection of fundamentalism on purely economic grounds.

Thinking back, I would say three different things were particularly important in Tagore's school which reflected his thinking. One was the insistence that one has to be interested in Indian traditions, as well as being aware that they are part of many other traditions which also flourished and interacted with each other. In fact

There were innumerable official receptions organised in honour of Professor Amartya Sen during his first visit to Dhaka, Calcutta and Santiniketan, after winning the 1998 Bank of Sweden Prize in Economic Sciences, instituted in memory of Alfred Nobel. The real measure of the pride and warmth that ordinary people in this region feel about his achievement was, however, the spontaneous, huge popular receptions that awaited him wherever he went.

In his second major interview to Frontline after he received the Nobel Prize, Amartya Sen shares his views on issues of politics, culture and economics in present-day India. He spoke to Parvathi Menon on the journey to Santiniketan in a special Eastern Railways saloon car attached to the Santiniketan Express. Excerpts from the interview:

also influenced Indian traditions, and were in turn influenced by Indian traditions. It was a non-insular cultural view of India. Some of the things that Santayajit Ray (an ex-student of Santiniketan) did as a film director, I later thought, reflected that aspect of Santiniketan's understanding of culture, namely, pride in one's culture, but not in the cultures of other countries also, in a very strong way.

Secondly, social radicalism played quite a big part in our thinking. In terms of conventional politics, it was not a radical place. In fact, in some ways Rabindranath was of course a conservative, and yet he was deeply humane and concerned about inequities in the world which many of his writings bring out sharply. In fact, in a long essay I did on a hindrance to Tagore in the New York Review of Books, I argued that perhaps the most important thing about Rabindranath was his insistence on the importance of people's ability to reason in freedom. That, to some extent, was reflected in his school too, and this free reasoning often led to rebellious thought about inherited traditions.

Third, there was a degree of professionalism that was very important in Santiniketan. The teachers were often absolutely excellent. The absence of a strong focus on doing well in examinations was also a greatly liberating factor. I remember I would come to Calcutta and see students of my age in schools where they were severely geared to doing well in exams and being 'good students', a tremendous limitation because they seemed focused on preparing for examinations, rather than preparing for a life.

Santiniketan had many other progressive features. It was one of the earliest co-educational schools. In fact, my mother herself has been a student there a long time ago when co-education was not all that common in India, or for that matter in Europe. Some of these features were even emulated and expanded by an old Santiniketan teacher, Leonard Elmhirst, who started a progressive school, namely Dartington Hall, in England. That school has now deceased, but it was a very famous progressive school in England.

I arrived in Calcutta in 1951, and was a student there for two years. I found the intellectually challenging nature of Presidency College very exciting.

There were classmates of mine who were tremendously good students, not merely in the sense of being good examinees, which they also often were, but they were also unbelievably learned and had critical faculties of the highest order. Perhaps the most well known name in that group would be that of be Sukhamoy Chakravarti, a close friend, who had a striking command over contemporary thought across the world, and it was always educational for me to chat with him or argue with him. This was a time when I got interested in student politics, which had a broadening impact on me. I led quite an active social life too. So it was a very engaging set of two years before I set off to England. As it happened, I went through quite a big problem in the sense that I had quite a serious case of cancer in the mouth.

Would not minorities be excluded from the economics of a government with an exclusionist agenda like Hinduva?

That is possible, but it is also perfectly possible for even asymmetrical societies to give a functional role to minorities. Christian cultures have standardly given particular roles to minorities — Jews, for example, in the context of London. It was standard for many centuries that even though the country was Christian and Protestant, a lot of the trade was carried out by Jews and Italians. In fact, even the Bank of England is located in the Lombard Street which reminds one of Lombardy, the centre of Italy. Similarly, when the great 12th century Jewish scholar Maimonides, sought refuge from European intolerance, he received the patronage of the Muslim emperor Saladin in Egypt. Saladin fought with the Christians in the Crusades for the victory of Islam, but he gave protection and appreciation to Maimonides.

To construct an argument against Hindu fundamentalism on grounds of economic progress is, I don't think, a very sound basis of criticism. The real basis of criticism are much more fundamental, much more foundational. I think economics is invoked in hundreds of ways where it does not really belong.

Economic welfare is only one part of human welfare. It is very possible for asymmetrical societies to look after minorities very well. If you look at a document like Arthashastra of Kautilya, it is quite clear that the obligation of the Emperor is

to look after the economic welfare of the entire population, but it was not an egalitarian society in terms of political power, in fact very far from it. A society in which a rigidly dominant group looks after the economic well-being of the non-dominant group, "from above", would not be a good society, as the dominated are denied the right to enjoy political influence, civil freedom, and participate in the decisions of the state and the society.

The main argument against Hindu rule is that this is not a Hindu country, and that Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and others have as much right to take part in the polity of India, in the society of India, as Hindus do. In fact, I don't accept this term, 'majoritarian' which you used. The majority of Indians may be Hindu, but the majority of Indians are not intolerant Hindus or intolerant Muslims. I would not accept the right of Hindu sectarians to be described as majoritarian. They are minorities. The majoritarians in India are those who regard religious tolerance to be very central no matter whether they are themselves Hindus or Muslims. The main argument against asymmetrical power in religious and social matters is the barbarity of that arrangement itself, not its implications in terms of economic welfare.

What is your assessment of the change in India's nuclear policy? Will it heighten the risks of nuclear war in the sub-continent? Does a nuclear weaponisation programme divert resources from development needs and priorities?

I won't dissent from the argument that the recent nuclear events have added vastly to subcontinental tensions. But before I go on, let me mention that I fully understand the extent of Indian frustration on the subject that make many people feel sympathetic to the nuclear programme, even though they see its dangers. This arises from seeing inequity in the contemporary world, in which there are some established nuclear powers who have a lot more freedom to carry out experiments with certain types of nuclear weapons development, which others don't. That is certainly one factor. Second, the asymmetry of military power in the world is also very striking, as is the "pushing" of military sales by the big powers. My friend Mahbubul Haq from Pakistan who used to be in charge of the Human Development Reports, produced by the

United Nations Development Programme, pointed out in one of his reports that 85 per cent of the armaments sold in the world market are sold by five permanent members of the Security Council. It is not surprising that the Security Council does nothing to curb the arms trade! Third, some Indians feel that by constantly equating India with Pakistan, which is one-seventh its size, and not giving India the status of a large country like China, the West in particular is unfair to India.

I understand all that logic. But having said that, it was still a great mistake, I think personally, to undertake the nuclear tests.

First of all I think it was a big moral mistake. We are thinking of a world in which nuclear weapons are unlikely to be used, so that the moral quality of it is partly a matter of our self-discipline. And the discipline of having the ability to blast nuclear bombs and not doing so has a certain moral quality to it. So this odd position India had, whereby it acknowledged that it could make the bomb but nevertheless did not want to pursue a nuclear programme, could be described as having an ethical characteristic, which is now completely lost.

But even at a more pragmatic, realpolitik level, there is no question that India has lost a lot from it.

First of all, if India is worried that India and Pakistan are being treated symmetrically, rather than India and China, nothing ensured a continuation of that international thought more than India blasting its own bombs followed by Pakistan blasting his. That puts us in an exactly tit-for-tat situation. Pakistan's rulers feel, I think with justice, quite successful in this particular respect, because after all to be treated in the same way as India which is seven times larger, is quite a big recognition of Pakistan's military prowess. Through this programme India has helped to consolidate that view.

Second, India had already blasted a nuclear bomb in 1974. It wasn't in overwhelming scientific need to do more. Obviously, nuclear scientists always think there's need for more experiments, but it was not in such dire need of an experiment as Pakistan's nuclear scientists were. While most of the Indian nuclear programme is home grown, quite a bit of Pakistan's programme is derived from

abroad. Under these circumstances, a scenario whereby both sides will have one round of blasts, is much more important for Pakistan than for India. I would have thought, this could not have been a stunningly clever move by India, from a realpolitik point of view.

Third, India was very keen on keeping Kashmir off the international agenda. I personally think that it will be very hard to keep Kashmir off the international agenda anyway, but the guarantee that it will continue to recur in the international agenda was provided by the nuclear blasts. Since Kashmir is a major — perhaps the major — bone of contention between India and Pakistan, the threat of a nuclear war makes it natural for other countries to take an interest in all this.

Fourth, India had — and still has — massive superiority over Pakistan in conventional warfare. I hope these arms will never be used, but India had military advantage in this respect. In a nuclear war, however, there are no winners and losers. If India wins, but Delhi, Bombay, Madras, Calcutta suffer a nuclear holocaust, that's not a victory. So what India did was to trade its massive, non-nuclear advantage for a nuclear stalemate. And so it does not now have any military advantage either. I don't personally attach very great importance to military advantage. In fact I am very anxious that India and Pakistan should both disarm, and I think there is a very strong economic case for that. However, in the narrow-minded thinking about power balancing, it did not serve India's interest in respect of military advantage.

I would add one more thing. No country has as much interest as India in having a democratic government in Pakistan without strong power-sharing by the military. And yet the nuclearisation of the subcontinent makes the military much more powerful in Pakistan than it would have been otherwise.

So in all these respects; I think, this was not a fruitful move, aside from the moral case against it.

Would spending on a nuclear weaponisation programme divert resources from development needs?

Well, I think that argument is much more contingent, because we don't know how much expenditure is incurred in nuclear war. But it can be argued that that is not the primary argument against nuclearisation. For two reasons. First of all, it is not always the case that nuclear programmes are more expensive than conventional warfare. Second, conventional armaments are often bought from abroad. Thanks to the nuclear discipline in the world, the expenditure that is incurred on nuclear programmes is domestic expenditure — primarily. So in both these respects, the primary argument against the nuclear programme is not the economic cost. There is an enormously strong argument against military expenditure altogether in India, and I am very anxious to emphasise that. But this is not a specific argument against nuclearisation only.



You have stated that you have differences with present economic policies, but have refused to be drawn into "If you were the Finance Minister..." questions, or into offering prescriptions for specific problems (the Insurance Bill, for example). On the other hand, India has in some senses been your research laboratory, and there are many people who would be interested in knowing what you have to say on post-1991 economic liberalisation. What would be the main features of an alternative economic strategy that would ensure an end to the kind of poverty and deprivation in which the majority of our people live?

In order to talk intelligently about specific economic policies, one has to be enormously well informed. Nothing is as sensitive to information as policymaking. Flying in from London and giving high sounding advice on economic policy is unfair to the people who make economic policies, and also to those who, through hard empirical work, have earned the right to criticise government-made policies. This includes both the Opposition and the government.

Having said that, however, I should also say that there is a level at which one can operate which is neither one of silence, nor one of involvement in concrete details beyond one's competence and beyond the field of relevance of one's knowledge. There is an intermediate level at which one could advise.

Before the reforms came in 1991, I had consistently taken the view then that there were two major deficiencies in the Indian economy. In terms of government activity, I thought there was massive underactivity in the fields of education, health care, and social security in general; and there was a vast overactivity of the government in running a licence raj, in preventing any-

thing from happening on the basis of private enterprise without a bureaucratic clearing it, possibly taking some money too, or if not, at least having the ability to put various spokes in various wheels to stop them from turning. My main criticism of the policies that followed in 1991 concerned errors of omission rather than commission, namely that they addressed only the second issue. Manmohan Singh was very concerned about the overactivity of the government, and I don't think he was mistaken in thinking that these policies needed a radical change. On the other hand, there was a need for a big initiative from the government of expanding the social basis of economic development in terms of education, health care, land reform, social security and so on.

One government after another has neglected these vital social opportunities. There was a need for a radical change in that. Unfortunately, that need still remains unfulfilled. And the need for change is not merely in terms of verbal recognition. In statements whether in Parliament or outside. The creation of social opportunities depends vitally on the actual facilities of education, health care, land reform, social security, etc.

Also, this requires me to emphasise the importance of gender equity. In my last book with Jean Dreze, India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity, we argued how women's empowerment, through education as well as through employment opportunities, and in other ways, is a major necessary force for social change as well as for economic development.

These are very general policy recommendations, which have to be scrutinised and pursued with detailed analysis of particular policy instruments. But general directions are, I believe, quite important. Nevertheless, navigation requires detailed knowledge, but it also demands a clear understanding of where we have to go.

Courtesy: The Jan 2-15 issue of Frontline magazine of India