

## FOCUS

## 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.**

**D**ID 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 Baridhara."

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 Larmin 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 Bengal intellectual, Buddhadev Basu. Even during

the seventies, Dhaka used to be a pleasant city. There were not as many highrise 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-story apartment buildings. Its streets are full with private cars. Yet it is today's Dhaka that reminds one Kobi Gurjor Rabindranath'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 how 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 of the city has now reached as far north as Turaq. 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 "tilottoma 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 rood of land brought into cultivation, which is capable of growing food for human beings; every flower 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 hedge 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 the 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 in-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 tempos. Research shows that these alone are responsible for about 70 percent 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' ply 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.

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 begets. 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 double-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 is not 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 be given 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 Dhanmondi and Gulshan lakes, either in collusion with or despite ap-

roval 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 in-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 under-ground aquifers.

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 resource 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.

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## 'Economic Welfare Is Only One Part of Human Welfare'

### — Amartya Sen

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.

First of all, India has lost 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, 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 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 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 the 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 minoritarians. 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 asymmetry of power in religious and social matters is the barbarity of that arrangement itself, not its implications in terms of economic welfare.

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 a conservative, and yet he was deeply humane and concerned about iniquities in the world which many of his writings bring out sharply. In fact, in a long essay I did on Rabindranath 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 thoughts about inherited ways of thinking.

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". 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. 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 actually 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 five bombs followed by Pakistan blasting six. 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. 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 enormous 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 "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, one 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 one's 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, land reform, health care, and social security in general; and there was a vast overactivity of the government in running a *ceasece raj*, in preventing any-

thing from happening on the basis of private enterprise without a bureaucrat 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 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, both 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.

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the obligation of the Emperor is