

Amartya Sen says Politics of intolerance won't yield dividends in India

NEW DELHI, Jan 7: Politics of intolerance will not yield dividends in India because the country has a tradition of people of different faiths coexisting in peace, Nobel economics laureate Amartya Sen has said, reports IANS.

It is the dynamics of Indian politics that is fuelling intolerance even though Indian society is basically tolerant, Sen said while condemning the recent attacks on Christians in Gujarat as "despicable".

"This country has had Christianity 200 years longer than Britain had," he pointed out during an interview to the CNBC Asia television channel.

The interview will be telecast on the 'India Talks' programme in two episodes today and tomorrow.

Sen felt the intolerance displayed by certain Hindu right-wing groups militated against Indian tradition. "I don't think that the society itself is becoming more intolerant," he said. "I think the politics is often giving priority to the intolerant and that, in my judgement, is more connected to the dynamics of politics of India at this time rather than with the nature of society. India is basically a tolerant society."

"I also object when some people describe the intolerant Hindu position as a majoritarian position because the majoritarian position is not [one

held by an] intolerant Hindu or an intolerant anything," Sen said. "They may be Hindu, they may be Muslim or Sikh or Jain or Parsi... but tolerance is very much a part of Indian tradition."

Sen said there was clear evidence of Christian settlements in India from fourth century A.D. "There was none in Britain at that time. So we have had a long history of living together in different religions and the same applies to Islam."

"Of course, there have been fights and when the invaders came from outside, the levels of brutality that invaders often had... as the Mongolian invasions in Europe. But as people settled in, there have been voices of reconciliation, of living together, of coexistence and so on... in a sense that has come up in India again and again."

"I don't think Indian society has changed, but there are elements of intolerance always," he asserted.

Sen, who met Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee yesterday, said the "more visionary leaders of those parties" would be very worried "because in the long run, this is not a country in which intolerance pays dividend. It can bring local, short-run dividends, and very quickly. But it costs in the long run... which is very high for all the parties."

About Vishwa Hindu

Parishad (VHP) leader Ashok Singhal's reported remark that the Nobel prize to Sen was part of a "Christian conspiracy," he said: "Well, I was astonished, of course... But to be a part of Christian conspiracy is not something I was expecting to learn about myself."

"I was, of course, in the very distinguished company of Mother Teresa," he noted, referring to the VHP's allegation that the Nobel peace laureate also helped only those who agreed to convert to Christianity. "It was immensely flattering."

"I was, of course, much more concerned about the problems that came at the same time, namely the chastising of Christian communities in Gujarat," Sen said. "That, of course, did worry me and does worry me enormously more... To attack defenceless minority communities is despicable behaviour and whoever is responsible for it has every reason to be ashamed of it."

On India-born writer Nirad Chaudhuri's reported remarks that Sen was not English enough to be Master of Trinity College, Cambridge, the Nobel winner said with a laugh: "I hope they are not assessing me either as a pretending Englishman or as a continuing Indian," Sen said. "I hope they are looking at me as a possible academician to play the role."

"I think there is a strong Indian connection in my college at Trinity. Two (former) prime ministers, (Jawaharlal) Nehru and Rajiv Gandhi (had studied there)... so had the great politician poet Iqbal, the great cricketer Ranjitsinhji," he said.

He said "one of the frustrating things of being a social scientist" is that it is difficult to "get people excited" about an issue like illiteracy on which he has been expounding for more than three decades. Sen stated there should be public pressure to "make it more expensive for politicians to survive illiteracy."

— IANS



India-Nepal to work together for better tomorrow

By Deepak Gajurel

KATHMANDU, Jan 8: The signing of the transit treaty has brought with it agreement between New Delhi and Kathmandu to jointly tackle two persisting problems — diversion of Nepal-bound goods to Indian markets and use of Nepali territory by anti-India elements. The two sides have agreed in principle to work together to check illegal trade along the 1,500 km open border.

"Though this matter has not been formalised into any agreement, both the governments have agreed in principle to find ways for checking this illegal movement of goods," Indian Commerce Minister Ramakrishna Hegde told reporters here. India has long been complaining that diversion of Nepal-bound goods from third countries has been damaging Indian industry and revenue collection. This was the most serious concern raised by the Indian side during negotiations for the transit treaty, officials at the Nepali Commerce Ministry told IANS.

It is estimated that India loses about Rs. 10 billion (\$238 million) due to this trade deflection every year. Security is another Indian concern vis-a-vis Nepal. In the past decade, there have been reports of Nepali territory being used by anti-Indian elements. These terrorists are said to be particularly active along the open border between the two countries, where police have recorded illegal movement of weapons. Two months ago, a huge amount of RDX explosive was confiscated by police in Kathmandu. Police suspects that the consignment was bound for India and press reports have alleged Pakistani involvement.

"We are aware that the Pakistani intelligence agency ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) has been active against India," Hegde said. "We (Nepal and India) have agreed in principle that both the governments will keep vigilant eyes against such activities. We will work jointly against terrorist activities as well as unauthorised movements along the border," he said.

As for the transit treaty, Nepal stands to gain considerably from the simplification of paperwork and the facility for automatic renewal of the agreement every seven years, analysts say. Nepal, being a landlocked nation bound by India on three sides, is completely dependent on its neighbours' port facilities and its roads for access to Bangladesh to conduct its foreign trade. As in the past, Nepal will use 15 entry points to India.

Nepal has now been granted more storage space and depot time at Calcutta port, the closest to the country. Nepali goods will get seven days' free depot time in Calcutta even though Indian importers get just three days. "Nepali importers and exporters will certainly be encouraged by these privileges," observers said.

This Himalayan kingdom will also continue to have access to Bangladesh through Indian territory and be allowed to use the air route to certain Indian cities for its cargo traffic. Exports to Bangladesh have increased since India allowed Nepal transit in 1996.

"The continuation of land routes to Bangladesh will greatly expand Nepal's export which in turn will benefit the country's economy," said Narendra Prasad, who has been exporting fresh vegetables to Bangladesh since last year.

Farmers of the eastern Terai region have been reaping the fruits of the land routes to Bangladesh, he added.

— IANS

Year of the South Asian tortoise

By Dev Raj

NEW DELHI: It is the year of the South Asian tortoise. With the decline of the East and South East tigers, the World Bank is now actually laying its bets on this long-reviled region as an engine of growth.

The Bank's latest World Development Report finds South Asia's 4.6 per cent growth rate slow but sees reason for optimism in the fact that the region is still ahead of Eastern Europe and Central Asia.

At the World Bank jamboree in Washington in September, India, by far the largest economy in the South Asian region, came in for rare praise for its cautious approach to liberalisation, especially on capital account convertibility.

Though India's Finance Minister Yashwant Singh insists that the sluggishness was deliberate and part of "good management", it is more likely to have been owing to bureaucratic lethargy and sheer resistance to change.

Deepak Nayyar, Professor of economics at the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), says India's liberalisation process, which began eight years ago, has been far more sluggish than the World Bank of IMF would have desired.

Nayyar whose opposition to faster reform under finance ministers Manmohan Singh and P Chidambaram in the earlier part of the decade, says what afflicts the Indian economy is under-governance rather than over-regulation.

Whether it was luck or lethargy which saved India and the rest of South Asia from contagion the world seems to be rediscovering the virtues of strong regulation and macro-economic fundamentals while taking to the path of liberalisation.

Commenting on an UNCTAD report on the world's weakest economies released here last month, another economic expert, R Panichmukhi, said it is now well established that poor regulation and fundamental gains from rapid liberalisation of financial markets.

But tight controls are not everything and South Asian countries pose other worries. India, for one, has a yawning fiscal deficit which stands in the way of investment, a fact pointed out by the World Bank report itself.

Reflecting the right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)-led government's base attitude, Bimal Jalan, governor of the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) was on record recently saying that the fiscal deficit is a poor guide to economic health. After all the Asian tigers had decent fiscal balances.

While fiscal deficits can be turned to advantage, India's bureaucratic and political setup, with its profligacy and lack of initiative are more likely to turn a large deficit into disaster, economists have warned.

India's much vaunted mixed economy based on Nehruvian Socialism, has over the years turned into a partnership between crony capitalism and crony socialism best illustrated by the huge sums owed by sick industries to nationalised banks.

Money borrowed from the nationalised banks by private enterprises with little intention

Parsis worry about their extinction

By Hemant Babu

MUMBAI: The world may be worrying itself to no end about population explosion, but India's dwindling Parsi community has other things on its mind. Like how to increase its numbers, for instance.

The Parsis, who originally fled to India from Persia 1,200 years ago in the face of persecution, are facing the threat of extinction.

There are only 125,000 Parsis left worldwide. Of this, about 60,000 live in Mumbai. According to one estimate, on an average there have been 450 births against 1,000 deaths per year in the community over the past several years. Falling birth rate, fewer marriages, and a growing trend towards inter-community marriages have got elder members of the community worried.

It used to be said in jest in Mumbai that the entire Parsi community could fit into a railway compartment and yet there would be place for ticket-less travellers. Jokes apart, the community's efforts to save it from extinction have yet to show results.

The community elders' body, called Parsi Panchayat, had introduced a scheme to sponsor the third-born in every Parsi family till he/she achieved the age of 18. That was way back in 1993. But till date, according to the record of the Panchayat, only 50 families could avail themselves of the benefit. Some members of the community now feel the Panchayat should extend similar benefits for the second child as well in order to make the scheme more "practical and feasible".

Similarly, the Panchayat had started a marriage bureau to bring Parsi girls and boys together. According to the bureau, it could "arrange" just about 40 marriages so far. The elders equate the present crisis before the community with the threat their ancestors faced 1,200 years ago when they fled Persia — what is now Iran — to escape religious genocide. They landed in Gujarat and lived there as refugees.

The Parsis' high priest, Firoz Kotwal, says Parsis do not recognise inter-religion marriages and, therefore, a child born of such a marriage is not considered a member of the community. A community magazine called 'Persiana' had recently compiled the figures of inter-faith marriages. According to the magazine's study, such marriages have almost doubled in the past decade. The editor of the magazine, Jehangir Patel, claims that the inter-community marriages in 1987 were about 12 per cent, which rose to 24 per cent this year.

Small in number they may be, but the Parsis' contribution to India's social and economic life has been immense. Some of the biggest industrial names in India like Tata and Godrej are Parsi. 'Jame Jamshed', one of the oldest community paper, recently listed the many firsts the community had to its credit. It was amazingly long for such a small group of people.

Bawaji, as Parsis are lovingly called around here, however, have been losing their traditional businesses. First it was the liquor brewing business in southern Gujarat. Once dominated by Parsis, it has completely faded out in the post-independence period. They also lost out the bakery and restaurant business in south Mumbai as the spiralling land prices had made these businesses unprofitable in the high-cost business district of the city.

About 200 Parsi women, who had married non-Parsi, formed an association to demand that their children be included in the faith and given access to the religious and social institutions.

A Zoroastrian of either sex mixing seeds with non-Zoroastrian is a heinous sin, they say. Citing history, they say the Zoroastrian empire had disintegrated because the king had married foreign women and their children had revolted against the empire causing its downfall. Yet another reason for the falling numbers is the large scale migration of Parsis to Europe and Africa during the last two decades.

— IANS

Delhi for restructuring global financial system to avert crisis

By Lalit K. Jha

JAIPUR, Jan 7: India has called for restructuring of the global financial system so that crises like that experienced by the Southeast Asian countries could be averted.

External Affairs Minister Jaswant Singh said that following the Asian financial crisis "there is now worldwide recognition that something needs to be done, particularly for reforming the international monetary and financial architecture system."

Singh, who is also Deputy Chairman of India's Planning Commission, said: "India is ready to engage constructively with the other countries to promote an international consensus for restructuring the global financial system."

The minister was addressing the Partnership Summit of Indian and foreign business organisations in this city, some 260 km from Delhi, by the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII), the country's largest business chamber. The theme of this year's conference is "Preparing for the new millennium."

Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister and Commerce Minister Supachai Panitchpakdi stressed the need for greater co-operation between India and Southeast Asian nations. Panitchpakdi, who has attended four of the five Partnership Summits to date, said to begin with there should be increased frequency of air links between India and the Southeast Asian region. With the new millennium around the corner, he said, international linkage and network was a key element, as was the quality of political leadership.

South African Posts, Telecommunications and Broadcasting Minister Jay Naidoo noted that in the past decade India had emerged as an information technology superpower. According to the organisers, about 800 delegates from 17 countries are participating in the three-day meet. Eight nations — including Bahrain, Oman and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) — are participating in the Partnership Summit for the first time. Although the present meet has seen the largest number of participants, no head of government is attending this time.

Referring to India's Nobel economics laureate Amartya Sen's development theories, Singh said: "Greater economic reform and increasing globalisation can contribute to human well-being but only if they are accompanied by credible social sector safety nets."

Previous summits over the past four years have been addressed by the prime ministers of Singapore, Britain, Italy and Poland. Sources said this was because countries of the European Union were busy due to the launch of the common currency euro while those in East and Southeast Asia were trying to steer their nations out of the financial crisis.

Singh told the delegates that the 21st century would be one of knowledge-based industry fuelled by the digital revolution. India, he said, aimed to become a major player by targeting to export \$5 billion worth of software by 2008.

Referring to India's Nobel economics laureate Amartya Sen's development theories, Singh said: "Greater economic reform and increasing globalisation can contribute to human well-being but only if they are accompanied by credible social sector safety nets."

"After all, we have to ensure

Sharif grapples with sectarian monster

By Syed Talat Hussain

ISLAMABAD: Widespread administrative changes besides extra security measures for VIPs and even tighter security rings around important mosques followed Monday's massacre of 20 Shi'ites in Southern Punjab, Pakistan. One of the most incidents of the last sectarian killings in Pakistan, in which gunmen attacked a mosque and butchered nearly two dozens injuring many more, has left the Sharif government totally panicky. Already under immense domestic pressure over deteriorating law and order, it is trying to lessen the impact of the tragedy by making cosmetic changes. While its intentions are good, their results might not be so promising. Part of the reason is that sectarianism has become a critical problem in Pakistan. "When religion and weapons fall in the hands of extremist, rise in sectarian violence should not surprise anyone."

The sudden upswing in sectarian tensions in the country marked by a new spree of killing of leaders and workers of religious parties and attacks on and murders of judges, and massacres such as the one in Muzaffargarh, indicates how serious the problem is," says Afaq Shahi, a political analyst. And he is not wrong. On at least four counts the present sectarian tensions are dangerously different from previous incidents. First, these have surfaced in a combustible domestic context, accentuated by the Nawaz Sharif government's reckless politicisation of religion. This has emboldened the

religious zealots to take on each other more ruthlessly than ever before. They now operate in a religious environment laden with new controversies about religion. They can justify their misguided religious crusades against those who do not subscribe to their religious point of view with reference to the need to create a pure Islamic society. Second, the government can not direct or guide the excited religious sentiment towards this or that direction because it has lost the administrative authority to deal with the zealots.

Third, the present regional backdrop to mounting sectarian tensions is explosive and can lead to a sectarian disaster of an unimaginable scale. "Pakistan has always been vulnerable to the developments around and on its borders, and particularly to developments of religious nature. Either because of governments' policies or because of the country's geographical position, regional turmoil has influenced Pakistan substantially," says Rifat Hussain, an International Relations Associate Professor at the Quaid-e-Azam University Islamabad. It is no coincidence that some of the earliest incidents of sectarian violence took place in Pakistan at the beginning of the war against the Russians. Those who came from the far corners of the world to fight the Russian forces and were gladly inducted in the ranks of the international army of Islam the West and the Middle East raised and paid for, brought with them germs of militant sectarian

ideology and sharpened sectarian feelings in Pakistan. Sunnis, or more precisely Deobandis and Ahle Hadith, developed their own militant outfits and their counterpart emerged in the shape of Shia militants, reinforced by a growing role of Iran in Afghanistan where it had started to work towards rallying Shi'as on the sectarian platform.

Western arms and training to the Afghan fighters initiated them to the real world of war, whose longevity made them battle-hardened and intolerant of dissent especially to their respective religious beliefs. Further, it was during the same period that these groups and organisations in Pakistan for the first time developed institutional linkages with international outfits pursuing other and larger goals. These institutional linkages outlasted the Afghan war, and subsequently kept Pakistan's sectarian fires burning. The same thing is happening even now. The present strained ties between Afghanistan and Iran have fuelled the sectarian strife in Pakistan. It is an open secret that many of the sectarian groups operating in Pakistan have their supportive organisations in both these countries.

The Afghan Taliban have their counterparts in Pakistan who pride themselves on being anti-Shia and anti-Iran. In fact many of the anti-US demonstrations which took place in Pakistan in the wake of US missile attacks on the bases allegedly operated by Osama bin Laden also became platforms for militant Sunni Groups to vent their spleen against Iran. Condemnatory slogans in these meetings identified Iran and the US as the two most feared enemies of Islam! The fourth factor which makes the present sectarian tensions different from the past is that the country is passing through bad economic times. The cost of living is constantly rising and the



'US has no authority to ask India about its security concerns'

NEW DELHI, Jan 7: Defence Minister George Fernandes today angrily rejected a US call for India to spell out its requirements for a minimum nuclear deterrent, reports AFP.

"I don't think the US has been given the authority to ask US about our security concerns and requirements," Fernandes told reporters.

"It is sheer arrogance to make such observations."

Earlier this week the US ambassador to New Delhi, Richard Celeste, said India should specify in "concrete terms" the number of missiles and warheads it needs to ensure its security.

Celeste said New Delhi which staged nuclear tests in May sparking a matching riposte from arch-rival Pakistan should take care not to be viewed as an "open-ended threat" by neighbours.

But Fernandes insisted that Washington had no business interfering in India's defence policy.

"How we address our security concern is our problem," he said.

"If the US think that it can express concern over other countries' security requirements, then other nations should also have the right to express their concern over the United States."

The United States imposed sanctions on India after the May tests, despite protests from Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee that Washington and the rest of the international community refused to recognise India's legitimate security needs.

Mother's lone battle to free her son

NEW DELHI, Jan 7: As the first winter showers drenched the Indian capital yesterday, an old Tibetan woman sat huddled on a roadside behind a large banner, appealing to the Chinese authorities to release her incarcerated musician son. Few passers-by gave a second look to the woman, Sonam Dekyi, 64, as she squatted near Jantar Mantar, the 16th century observatory built by the Mughal rulers, where individual and collective protest demonstrations are all too common because of its proximity to Parliament House. Even as the woman continued her lone fortnight-old campaign, hundreds of Tibetan refugees, both men and women, with yellow headbands embossed with the slogan "Save Tibet", held a noisy demonstration watched by a posse of policemen.

"I have nothing to do with them. They are (protesting) for their country. I am only interested in my son," said Dekyi, one of the tens of thousands of Tibetan refugees in India.

The refugees had fled their homeland along with their spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama, in the wake of the Chinese crackdown in the late 1950s. The influx of the refugees has been continuing since then. It is estimated that there are over 130,000 Tibetan refugees in India. Successive Indian Prime Ministers have received the Dalai Lama, who has his temporary headquarters in the hill town Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh, as a revered spiritual and religious personage.

Dekyi, who came to India in 1968 and settled down with her family at Munagad in the Karwar district of the southern Karnataka state, said her son Ngawang Chopel, 29, a Fulbright scholar, was arrested by the Chinese authorities when he visited Tibet in 1995. She said her son, who studied Tibetan traditional arts at the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts in Dharamsala in Himachal Pradesh state, had visited Tibet to make a video film of the disappearing local musical customs.

After a brief trial, he was sentenced to 18 years' imprisonment for alleged "espionage activities" for the Tibetan government in exile.

"If recording of Tibetan songs and culture is a crime, then three years of imprisonment should be enough," the mother said.

She said a person released from a Tibetan prison had told her of having seen her son and that he had since been shifted to another prison a few kilometres away from Lhasa. "I fear my son was made to confess to being a spy for the Chinese authorities after he was subjected to severe torture and inhuman prison conditions," she charged and said the Chinese authorities had offered "absolutely no evidence" to support their accusations. She said rain or shine, winter or

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