

Understanding the modernisation of China

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THE process of modernisation began in China with national liberation in 1949. In that year, the historic triumph of socialist forces spearheaded by the Chinese Communist Party marked the beginning of the emancipation of the people of China from the shackles of imperial colonial domination and oppression and exploitation by vested interests. The liberation of one-sixth of humankind was a turning point in world history. The victorious "Long March" under the legendary leadership of Chairman Mao Ze Dong was the end only of a beginning. It signified the inception of a longer and quieter march: the process of development and modernisation of an entire people hitherto steeped in disunity, poverty, ignorance and economic, technological and industrial backwardness.

The task before the leaders of New China was not easy. National reconstruction was rendered even more difficult by external enemies and internal constraints including paucity of material and technical resources. Undaunted by adversities, People's China steadily and gradually grew stronger. Its economy developed phase by phase under a socialist dispensation. Its military might, drawing strength from the people, was consolidated before long. Reawakened China reemerged in its own right as a Great Power in the second half of the twentieth century.

Economic and technological development and rapid modernisation have always been items of high priority in the national agenda of People's China. Nevertheless, intense and systematic attention was focused on these priorities during the late seventies and early eighties of the last century.

The conscious change of direction was initiated at the national level since the close of the seventies. The Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee Meeting of the Chinese Communist Party in 1979 resolved to transform the unidimensional nature of China's agrarian economy. Diversification with increasingly greater reliance

on off-farm income and employment generating activities and rural industry set the tone and temper of the new economic times. As a result the standard of living in the countryside improved. In early eighties the rural population in China were on the threshold of a more prosperous age. For instance, in Zhou Xi near Shanghai, the per capita income had climbed from 290 Yuans in 1978 to 495 Yuans in 1983.

The national society at large had moved towards a new direction. Crude and unrealistic designs of communalisation of life and society had been tried, found wanting and decisively abandoned. The concept of the "Big Pot", community cooking, community eating, community living and the centralized way of economy and life were things of the past. The Responsibility or Profit Transfer system had come to dominate the centre-stage in socio-economic life.

Rising expectations were generated by the application of flexible economic methods and organisations under Den Tsiao Ping's pragmatic "responsibility system". Individual initiative and a system featured by limited profit-motive were given a fighting chance to develop. This process led to widespread positive impact all over the vast country. Like peasants and farmers in China, herdsmen and cattle-grazers in Inner Mongolia were also allowed to keep a portion of their surplus production for themselves and their families. There were signs of increased productivity bringing a touch of comfort, even prosperity, to the people.

Den Tsiao Ping had identified four 'windows' through which Chinese modernisation could be rapidly achieved. These were the windows of knowledge, technology, management and investment which signified a new, exciting and highly productive openness. The well planned, careful but relatively speedy opening of China to the outside world promised enormous prospects of economic growth and development. It also posed great problems, some of which were not predictable.

The new evolving socio-economic universe of People's China strive consistently to industrialize and modernise itself beginning from the late 1970's. There were mundane problems both at the macro and micro levels: shortfall in

investment, lack of adequate equipment, skill and knowledge. The static nature of old management techniques warranted the introduction of a reform system which was featured by decentralization, optimum use of local resources and indigenous methods and techniques.

In the new order, local initiatives were fully tapped and experiences in the county units exchanged. Permanent jobs and fixed wages for workers were no more guaranteed. Workers were contracted and paid on the basis of performance and production. This had a singularly beneficial impact on the county of Jiangning near Shanghai. The new system resulted in 1983 in a 15.9 per cent increase in the output value

over that of 1977. The net profit increased by 29.6 per cent. Since the 1980's China has been pulsating with the thrill of a new Long March. It was modernising itself. It was on the way to opening up. There was eagerness to enter into transactions with the world at large. A new give and take was in order. It was to be on reawakened China's own terms. There is a continuity of the collective Chinese psyche. Generations have come and gone. Empires have grown to mighty heights and crashed in blood and dust. Systems have been fabricated to be defeated and destroyed by moving time. China has encountered all these chastening experiences during four millennia of her civilised history. The Chinese people have not been diminished by tumultuous turn of events. If anything, they have grown wiser and more confident. As Dick Wilson, the Westerner dedicated to the understanding of China, wrote:

"The history of China is the history of the spread of civilised order from Yellow River delta throughout the readily accessible and inhabitable areas all around, incorporating the entire Han

started reaching out to modernise itself. New study and Research institutions were created in response to the demands generated by the process of 'opening' in China's international life. The world outside was suddenly crowding China's gates. For the ancient nation it was virtually a process of rediscovery. The World of the fifties, sixties and seventies was largely a world from which China had distanced herself. In late seventies and early eighties there was thus a felt-need to attempt a fresh understanding and comprehension of others—especially Western nations. The international economic order had to be studied and analysed. The trends and tendencies in world economy needed to be watched carefully and understood in all their ramifications. These needs are vital to all developing nations. These were urgent in the case of China: the giant of a country had to make up for lost time.

The new Chinese institutions focused on trends of world economic development and recommended strategies for China. There were studies on the ways of expanding China's foreign trade,

augmenting the nation's exports and problems and prospects of introducing foreign technology and capital in the country. Specific research projects concentrated on economic policies especially external policies and programmes of the Federal Republic of Germany, Japan, France, ASEAN countries; the structure and operation of the economies of Hong Kong and ASEAN nations and their inter-relationship. There was a great deal of attention given to the analysis of policies and programmes of developing countries for absorption and effective use of foreign capital and technical know-how.

China needed and still needs and welcomes foreign economic assistance and direct investment for

area of freedom had started during the late seventies and early eighties.

Among the socialist countries, China was evidently the first to come out with clear declaration and programmes of liberalisation and openness in the fields of economic, agricultural and industrial development. The decisions and resolutions of the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee Meeting of the Chinese Communist Party in 1979 constituted the Grand Charter for that epoch-making change. The Responsibility or Profit Transfer System was the lively child of that charter. It had brought economic growth and prosperity in community life in rural China by the summer of 1984..... The restructur-

ed the political kingdom first. In mid-nineteen eighties 'Perestroika' and 'Glasnost' signified for the Soviet Union canons of a new society adhering to the principles of restructuring and openness. Evidently, that other way is not also a bed of roses. There are violence, riot, ethnic and national conflicts crowding that path like unbending thorns. Gorbachev's Soviet Union learnt that lesson at a great cost: Its collapse and dissolution by the early 1990s.

By the end of 1989 entire East Europe was in turmoil. Socialism could not hold its own there anymore. The one party system broke down. East European states became multi-party democracies. The Soviet Union itself, beset with problems, both of democratisation and freedom of nationalities collapsed during early 1990s. Its constituent parts became separate and opted for multiparty democracy and open market economy. China herself had her trauma of forceful political challenges from massive demonstration and agitation staged by those who assembled at the Tiananmen Square in Beijing in the summer of 1989.

Can economic liberalisation succeed without concomitant expansion of political freedom? Can political liberalism begin and expand without economic equity? These are the questions that the hitherto socialist world is now facing. Did China start it all?

We do not know. What is evident is that the modernisation of China has to be viewed in the perspective of China's long and chequered history. One needs to have the insight of Israel Epstein, co-founder of the well-known journal 'China Reconstructs' with Madame Sun Yet Sen, the wife of the founding father of reawakened China of the twentieth century and also a friend of Mao Dze Dong. Israel saw the enduring pragmatism of the Chinese people as the key to their survival, resilience and progressive success. There was in Israel Epstein's perception of China an essential love and understanding that found eloquent expression in the words of Dick Wilson:

"Of all the Asian nations, China is usually found by outsiders the most difficult to understand. The Chinese of today has a traditional heart, a modern nationalist head and a

communist face, and he has to be understood at all three levels."

"The Chinese perceived others as separate but not necessarily as inferiors. In turn, they too expect to be treated as equals though distinct". Again, Dick Wilson echoes Epstein's wisdom, as he writes:

"The key to the distinctive Chinese personality lies in the fact that China developed a civilisation broadly comparable in its achievements with those of the Western world but formed virtually in isolation from them."

Unlike the civilisations flourishing in ancient West Asia, Mediterranean coasts, Persia and India, "the civilisation that grew up in the Yellow River basin had no sustained contact with its counterparts to the West. The Chinese thus saw themselves not as one of a number of viable civilisations but as the very centre of world civilisation itself. The name which they give to their country—Chungguo—means middle kingdom or central state; it bears no racial meaning as do the names of European nations. This fact alone sheds light on the difficulties of the Chinese leaders even today in coming to terms with a polycultural world of equal sovereign states."

One wonders if this is explanation enough for the Chinese response to the suspected involvement of foreign hands in the upsurge that ended in the tragedy of the Tiananmen Square in Beijing in the summer of nineteen eighty nine.

The world needs to understand that the modernisation of China is a unique process begun and propelled by largely internal realization and inspiration. Further, it is also tinged by the Chinese societies' distinctive characteristics of self-confidence and self-reliance shaped by centuries of glorious and challenging experiences. The world, especially the West, needs to appreciate these and with great care in dealing with China. If this is done, the world of our times does not have to be apprehensive and share Napoleon Bonaparte's fears: "Let China sleep for when she awakes, the world will be sorry".

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WORLD ELDERLY DAY

Population aging: Emerging issues and future challenges

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POPULATION aging is one of the most distinctive demographic events of the new millennium. In the near future virtually all countries will face population aging, although at varying levels of intensity and in different time frames. Increase in the proportion of older persons in a population results from declines in fertility and mortality. In the developing countries, aging issues have only recently begun to emerge as a cause of concern. Bangladesh is one of the twenty developing countries with largest number of elderly population. This development affects the work force, public pension and family relations. By 2025 Bangladesh along with four other Asian countries, will account for about half of the world's total elderly population. The rapidly increasing elderly population is a new and important group in terms of social, economic and changing cultural context. According to the Bangladesh Census 2001 the number of elderly population was about 7.8 million. This is considerably a large number in absolute terms, as the total population will continue to increase in future. About half of them live in poverty; and policies and programmes, often overlook majorities of the elderly who are women. Inadequate support and the erosion of traditional family support by migration, urbanization and other factors leave many older people in extreme difficulty.

The aging process is expected to accelerate in the new millennium, mainly because the large cohorts from the post-Second World War "high family size" will be joining the ranks of those 60 years and more old during this period. The decline in mortality, particularly among those at young ages that occurred after the Second World War also means that a higher proportion would survive to old age. The UN projection suggests that by 2025 the elderly population of Bangladesh will be 16.2 million and by 2050 it will rise to 42.8 million which will be little over 9 percent and 20 percent respectively of the total population. Despite the large elderly population in absolute terms and the gradual increase in the relative terms, attention given to this by policy makers in Bangladesh has remained negligible. In 1998, Directorate of Social Welfare of the Ministry introduced new pension scheme called "Boisko Bhata" for the 10 poorest elderly persons at the lowest administrative unit. Under the scheme 10 elderly men and

women are being provided with Tk.100 in a geographically defined ward. The present article is assessing the situation.

Coupled with the demographic changes as well as social and economic changes sweeping across most parts of the Asian countries, profound changes in family structures have occurred in this region for a number of reasons, with serious implications for old age support. In Bangladesh the family has traditionally been the main source of support and provider of care for the old, changes in the family structures may not automatically provide such old age support. Traditionally the elderly live in extended households and rely on their adult children, their spouses, and other family members for material needs and personal care. Today, the traditional family support system is under pressure from demographic, social and economic changes. Old age support and care, which can be provided by the family may be simplified into three categories:

The government must take the aging of its population into account in socio-economic planning. The possible policy options may be: undertaking programme that enhances traditional support system of family; encouraging the elderly population to participate in income earning activities, specially those who are physically capable. Families alone do not have the capacity to provide the care support for increasing number of elderly population. Government and NGOs should consider policies and programmes to facilitate and strengthen family support.

physical, social and economic. Physical support is required only when the elderly person is ill and/or too frail and weak to attend himself or herself. Economic support comes from pension scheme which covers only a very small proportion of the elderly population, and mainly those living in urban areas. This is why most elderly persons depend on the family support.

The care and support provided to parents are usually in the form of shared housing, food and other necessities and less often in the form of direct transfer of income. Women, the traditional caregivers, are likely to have less time than did in the past to care for elderly family members. At present, living with children and other kin may be the only option available to the majority of elderly persons, and those who lack this option may face destitution. To the extent that older persons contribute to the household, joint living arrangements may be tolerated and considered advantageous to all members of the household. But as older persons' contribution begins to decrease and as they become more a source of demand for services, there is reason for

concern that co-residence arrangements may begin to weaken. When co-residence becomes increasingly difficult or simply is not an option, some older people will necessarily have to enter institutions. Secondly, if living arrangements influence older persons' health conditions, socio-economic standing, emotional well-being or other dimensions of individual welfare, the effects could be highly contingent, that is, dependent on the presence or absence of other conditions. Thus, it is known that existence of social connections to individuals other than those in the immediate family has an important effect on emotional conditions such as loneliness.

Public health in Bangladesh has traditionally focussed on the younger population, especially children and women in the reproductive age. Until now, the needs of the elderly people have not been considered to be a major issue. The country has neither separate health care provision nor infrastructure for elderly

commitment of time. In a joint family this support may be available but in a nuclear family such help may not be available around the house. Population aging will place an increasing burden on national health care system. Whatever the level of economic development, population-aging presents challenge in financing and delivering healthcare. The increase in life expectancy offers new opportunities but it also creates challenges for the future. As people live longer, there is a growing demand for care related to conditions such as cardiovascular disease, cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, arthritis, vision impairment and disability. Health status of the elderly population is a major problem. In Bangladesh the ratio of population and doctor is 1: 13,000. Bangladesh lacks medical facilities and infrastructure to meet the needs of the vast rural population not to speak of the older population.

Although strong support can be provided by children and other close

relatives not living in the household, but rapid out-migration coupled with poverty can morally disrupt the fabric of intergenerational caring and reciprocity. The importance of elderly support, sharing accommodation and caring grandchildren should be encouraged and emphasized. There is also need to formulate or strengthen policies aimed at enhancing family relationships between generations. Elderly persons could also be organized and utilized as a pool of valuable resources, with their vast experiences and expertise, to influence policies and participation in decision making. Child support services for working women can also be provided by such elderly persons. Concession and free medical services should be provided for elderly persons, especially those who cannot afford to obtain basic aids such as spectacles, dentures and hearing aids as well as other support where necessary for them to continue to interact and particularly in the home and community. Public facilities and services should also ensure that priority lines are created for the elderly population, and their needs are attended.

In 1976, Bangladesh government introduced two-child family policy, which has a major impact on the kinds of support systems parents expect to foster. The policy eliminates the tendency towards large families, affects the system of social security that depends on children's support of elderly parents. With the emphasis of two child family norm, there may exist more and more family structures characterized by two grandchildren being shared by four grandparents. When more children are sharing the cost of supporting the elderly, the burden may not be great; however, if one couple has to support four grandparents, who, in addition, may live longer in the future, the cost may be excessive.

Although prevailing socio-economic situation, increasing landlessness and poverty have been affecting the elderly population, the new government has increased Boisko Bhata from Tk 100 to Tk 125 in 2002. Yet the coverage

is only about 12 percent of the elderly population. It is, however, an encouraging step towards the welfare of the elderly population. Although a large number of NGOs work in the area of micro-credit, but poor elderly population are not entitled to receive micro-credit because of their age. The expected increase in the absolute number and relative number of elderly persons aged 60 years and above could significantly affect development effort. During this period the proportion of elderly population is also expected to increase and the government has to face an unprecedented situation, because of lack of plan and strategies for their welfare. The socio-economic welfare plans for the elderly population will be different from those for working population. If more elderly population is brought under the Boisko Bhata scheme it will require significant resource reallocation. Given the present unemployment of youth and illiteracy problem and health care needs of the population, it is highly unlikely that government will be able to cover more elderly population under the system.

Government and NGOs should focus on involving elderly population creating employment opportunities for those who wish to work, and improving their livelihood in rural areas.

National policies need to incorporate the issue of aging and appropriate support mechanisms for older people into the mainstream of social, economic and health planning. In Bangladesh at present there is no separate health service for the elderly population. In the rural areas, the problems of health care for the elderly are even more serious. Those who visit health facility centres know that queues are typically very long, and providers rarely have time for detailed examinations. Reducing queues at government health facilities, increasing contact time with the providers, and strengthening outreach services will not be an easy task. To cater to the needs of the elderly population geriatric services should be introduced to provide for unmet need for problems of the elderly population. Because of migration and poverty the family will not support most of the elderly in future. How much the burden of caring for elderly population can be transferred from the family to the community or to the government depends on the importance of caring for the elderly and economic situation of the country.

Although any attempt to predict the direction of future socio-economic changes is involved with uncertainty because of fragile economy, the increase in the size of Bangladesh's aging population in the near future will be challenging one. Therefore, the government must take the aging of its population into account in socio-economic planning. The possible policy options may be: undertaking programme that enhances traditional support system of family; encouraging the elderly population to participate in income earning activities, specially those who are physically capable. Families alone do not have the capacity to provide the care support for increasing number of elderly population. Government and NGOs should consider policies and programmes to facilitate and strengthen family support.

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