

Amartya Sen On Singur

M N Majumder

Prof Amartya Sen's defence of the left front Government's lease to the Tatas of nearly one thousand acres of arable land of mostly unwilling farmers for a small car factory and ancillary units in Singur, is biased and misjudged, to say the least. History is replete with such bias and misjudgments of great scholars. This could be unintentional, stemming from academic or professional bias and are typical 'tunnel views' of specialists, keeping out of focus related matters and based on self-serving logic. He has equated Singur farmer's struggles to protect their lives and livelihoods largely non-violent, with the violence of the State and the CPI(M)'s cadres and hired goons. He himself once found no wrong in people defending their livelihood through 'armed struggle' : he wrote some forty years ago that people's 'armed struggle' is also a 'democratic form of struggle'.

A scholar and humanist of Prof Sen's calibre should have, at the outset, condemned the fascist atrocities by the cadres and goons on the hapless unarmed farmers of Singur and Nandigram, true to his belief, "human rights are sacrosanct and inviolable". Would Rabindranath, a much greater writer and humanist, have given such a certificate to an elected Government for such anti-people savagery? It was fair that so many scholars, writers, artists, and other intelligentsia opposed the government move and gave up government posts they held, as Tagore did by renouncing the Knighthood in protest against Jalianwala Bag massacre of 1919.

Prof Sen has not dealt with two vital issues—employment generation and income distribution. Does he believe the discarded economic theory of 'trickle-down effect', that the growth of the GDP percolates down to the backward in the social strata and betters their education, health etc. and raises their income, as much as it does to the people of the upper strata? It does not happen in reality and will not happen in the left ruled West Bengal where inefficiency, insincerity and corruption are rampant in virtually every sphere. It is on record that less than 13% of the budgetary allocations, for development trickle down to its target beneficiaries.

The type of industries that the CPM-led LF Government is seeking may enhance the GDP but will not bring about fair income and empowerment for all. In this age of automated high-tech industries production rises phenomenally but accentuates income disparity between the rich and the poor. Farmers and farm labourers will be impoverished and over them will roll the juggernaut of the capitalist State.

The new technologies have their characteristic effects on the economy, the society and politics. These determine not only the nature of the industry but also production, income distribution and employment. Tata's Indica's car factories at Pune employ only 250, not one of whom belongs to the families displaced. The Patton water reservoir factory, built at a cost of 13 million US Dollars, at the Special Economic Zone at Falta (South 24 Parganas, West Bengal), is likely to employ only 250 people. Production in labour-intensive units and small work places, e.g. in units producing household goods, using low cost materials, inexpensive equipments and regional human resources become quickly viable,

generates and distributes wealth fairly. Such industrialization also promotes a democratic ethos and empowers people for whom it is meant. It is definitely not desirable that inefficient, non-competitive, small-scale industries should continue or proliferate. By using modern infrastructure facilities and green technologies, a much more stable and eco-friendly industrialization is not only possible but should be a model for many developing and under-developed countries. For example, traditional agriculture can improve by using modern techniques prevalent in the USA ; so can dairy, animal husbandry, pisciculture; social forestry and host of agro-based industries. Prof. Sen recalls the rich and long tradition of prosperous agriculture, dairy products, handicrafts, cotton, silk and other textiles in medieval Bengal. Why can't an industrial regeneration bring that about again? Of course in improved modern form.

Farming knowledge and techniques have come about through efforts spanning centuries. Why should an elected government fritter them away and make no use of the skills of the peasantry and other folk technologies? It could preserve and promote business and industrial expertise of many successful people, like Alamohan Das, G D Birla, and Jamshedji Tata who had no MBA degree? Indian States like Kerala, and Punjab, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, Sweden, Norway, and Iowa of USA are prospering through developing their traditional sectors- agriculture, dairy, etc, and by promoting small industries. Even the Swiss mode of development can be emulated. Indian industries must be in tune with the country's geography, history, social mores, culture and ecology. It will be disastrous to emulate, or import, blindly inappropriate technologies and development models from the developed countries of the West, without adopting them to specific Indian conditions.

There have been economists who, though foreigners, understood better the problems and prospects of India's development. E.F Schumacher whose 'Small is Beautiful : A Study of Economics as if People Mattered' (1973) made a mark in the world, was one such. He had observed, three decades ago, that the nature of industries and of the technology was the main determinant of sustainable dispersed industrialization to boost economic growth and generate employment and that every region should develop in its own way. Highways, Expressways, and automobile factories are ill suited to geologically unconsolidated monsoon lashed deltaic Gangetic plain of Bengal; its ecology is also fragile. Instead, reclamation of the dead rivers and choked waterways would have rejuvenated the region as the pre-British rulers did centuries ago, and made people prosperous.

Further, Tata's car factory will jeopardize the livelihood of at least 10,000 people but will employ only a few hundred, most of whom will be outsiders. Prof Sen thinks, it would have been improper to ask the Tatas to locate their unit in Bankura or Siliguri instead, because these places are far from Kolkata and do not have developed infrastructure. The infrastructure in Singur—the rail line, Delhi Express way, electricity, water supply etc. have been built with public funds, which are being given to the Tatas free. The government could also try to reclaim leased land of some 56,000 units, which closed, or fell sick during 30 years of left rule and give these unused lands again to new entrepreneurs.

Like most economists, Prof Sen believes, industries will generate more jobs and wealth than agriculture. He says, "The prosperity of the peasantry in the

world always depends on the number of peasants going down; that is the standard experience of the world.” This could be true of Western Europe and North America which had many colonies in which surplus peasantry was resettled. Many of them were also absorbed in their labour-intensive industries, which flourished after the first industrial revolution. Thus, industrialization did reduce the number of people lived on and off agriculture but did not create much social; unrest. The new industries, envisaged by the LF government will be generally high-tech, capital-intensive, needing a slim work force. Has West Bengal any colonies for displaced peasantries to emigrate? Industries set up on arable land will result in loss of livelihood of thousands of farmers and farm labourers who will converge in, congested cities and add to their squalor. The opposition parties are not opposed to industrialization per se; they have not opposed the Jindal Steel Factory, proposed in the waste land near Shalboni in West Midnapur. They are merely protesting against sacrifice of arable land and begging their owners. When developed countries are phasing out eco-damaging industries to backward regions, West Bengal is going the whole hog for them.

The traditional divide between agriculture and industries is diminishing under pressure of globalization and advance of science and technology. On the one hand, agriculture is becoming an industry; on the other hand, industry is embracing agricultural inputs. Environmental regulations, non-existent before, are becoming stricter. Eco-friendly technologies are being invented using agro-based feedstock, green chemistry and biotechnology. Prof Sen says “Industry has always competed against agriculture” but in the modern world they are coming closer and cooperating. Not only the agriculture-industry divide is diminishing but high-value items are also being produced in agro-based plants, substantial advances have occurred in such Green Chemical technologies. Industries involving food-processing and newer chemicals and drugs are also proliferating. In fact, the relation between industry and agriculture is becoming more symbiotic. Traditional rural-urban divide is narrowing too as in South Indian States, the US state of Iowa and the Netherlands.

Prof Sen rightly believes that real development lies in human development. Human beings with developed health, education, skills and team experience in construction and productive work usher in real material development and improve national character, discipline and work ethos. It has happened in Germany, Japan, Israel, England and Switzerland and become indestructible and permanent.

Prof Sen’s views on price of arable lands need a closer look. In the new branch of environmental economics, agricultural lands are not merely a medium of growing food and crops. It provides diverse ecological services whose value is much more than its market price. Economists and other experts have computed that the total value of ecological benefits from arable land of 194 UN member countries was a whopping 33.3 trillion US Dollars per annum, as against 18 trillion dollars of gross national products (GNP) in 1997, as reported in that year’s ‘Nature’ (Vol 387) & ‘Science’ (Vol 276). Nature takes up some 500 to 1200 years to develop an inch of soil and many decades to create a few inches of nutrient rich topsoil. Sources of most valuable fresh water are becoming scarcer and scarcer due to industrialization and pollution.

The market price of land is thus artificial and does not include and reflect the real ecological value. It should be the sacred duty of every government and of all others concerned to prevent the 'robbery of soil', which Rabindranath Tagore warned in 1928, be it through concrete jungles of industries, highways, or poisoned by toxic waste of industries, particularly Petrochemical Industries. When land goes from one peasant to another, its ecological values are not lost but when it goes under industries the loss is permanent. The West Bengal government should give up its present policies and invite investors to set up heavy and medium-heavy industries on the barren and waste land, stretching for miles, in West Midnapur, Bankura, Purulia and Birbhum. They should build up their own specific infrastructure at their cost.

The people of Singur and Nandigram may not be pundits, but they possess common senses and are eager to protect their lives and livelihoods from wanton assaults by the State. Social activists, writers, artists and scientists who are opposing savage acquisition of farm land in these places for industries of dubious benefits, are doing it out of their conviction and have no axe to grind. They are impelled by the moral obligation of preserving human rights and safeguarding the region's future. Prof. Sen's biased support to the LF government makes it more desperate and ruthless in quelling revolting peasants and ride roughshod over their resistance. The government may achieve a short-term success but in the long run, can invite food insecurity for 85 million people and even famine, if some two lakh acres, as planned, are eventually acquired and given on a silver platter to affluent home and foreign industrialists, making a U-turn in its traditional attitude towards capitalists. It is a pity that a man so learned and humane as Prof Sen is providing grist to the government's hated mill. □□□