



**Dhirendranath Sen**

## **Professor Dhirendranath Sen (1901-1961)**

Professor Dhirendranath Sen (1901-1961) was not only an erudite scholar and affectionate teacher in the postgraduate Department of Political Science in the University of Calcutta but also an original thinker and up-right personality. He simultaneously belonged to the world of professional journalism and to the world of academic discourse in political economy, political philosophy, constitutional and administrative law. This is undoubtedly a rare combination, the like of which is hardly seen in journalistic and academic world. His understanding of Indian politics for about forty years from the 1920's to 1950's was rich with a deep analysis of the forces and personalities active during these four decades. His erudition and sense of judgment have always been highly valued by his readers and students.

**Asok Mukhopadhyay\***

Professor Sen was always held in high esteem in the world of journalism in Calcutta and elsewhere for his independence of character, fearlessness, selfless service and active support for struggling journalists. From his colleagues and students in the university he commanded respect and admiration for leading his life as a man of principle, who never hesitated to call a spade a spade. This is a rare quality indeed, especially in the context of the present-day opportunism and spinelessness widely seen in the academic world. He was an 'organic intellectual' in the Gramscian sense and served the larger society and the interests of the struggling people by contributing his honest critique of life's problems and issues of current affairs.

Dhirendranath Sen was born on 20 October 1901 in a village called Dhighirpar at Kotalipara in Faridpur district of undivided Bengal (now in Bangladesh). He was educated at Hare School and Presidency College, Calcutta. He graduated in 1923 from Presidency College, Calcutta, with Honours

in Economics and did his M.A. in 1925 from the University of Calcutta. From his school days he took avid interest in the politics of the freedom movement and political personalities of the day. It is known that in his youth he was attracted by the oratory of Surendranath Banerjea, the then famous Liberal leader and formerly a leading light of the 'Moderate' Congress. Dhirendranath himself was a good debator and speaker and for his oratorical skill his friends used to call him the "Demonsthenes of Hare School and Burke of Presidency College". In those crucial years of Indian politics in the 1920s, his mental temperament and intellectual analysis did not allow him to go with the Gandhian currents. Gandhism never attracted him. Personally he did not prefer calling Gandhiji 'Father of the Nation', and humorously put the question to his students : "If Gandhiji is the "Father of the Nation", who is the "Mother of the Nation" ? In course of time, he developed interest in Marxian philosophy of historical materialism and very soon became an academic Marxist without taking the membership of either the Communist Party of India or any other political party.

His journalists career began in 1925 with the radical nationalist English daily *The Servant* edited by nationalist leader Shyamsunder Chakrabarti. In 1927 he joined *The forward*, the English daily newspaper of the Swarajya Party led by Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das as its commercial editor. After *The Forward* was forced to discontinue its publication, he joined in December 1929 the English daily *the Advance*, owned by Deshapriya J.M. Sengupta, as its Assistant Editor. Simultaneously he began his teaching career as a part-time Lecturer in the Department of Economics of Calcutta University. In 1933 he became the Editor of *The Advance* after the demise of J.M. Sengupta. Meanwhile, he submitted his Ph. D. thesis in Calcutta University on the problem of minorities which was a very live political issue in those days. He received the Ph.D. degree in 1936, which was highly praised by his famous adjudicators like Professor Harold Laski of London University, Professor A.B. Keith of Oxford University, and the liberal leader Rt. Hon. M.R. Jayakar. The thesis was highly appreciated by Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru and professor Pramathanath Banerjee. It was revised for publication in 1940 in the context of the changes in the minority issue introduced under the Government of India Act 1935. *The Problem of Minorities* is a great scholarly treatment of a very complex issue of Indian politics.

Dr. Sen's twin love for academic and journalistic careers continued throughout his life. In 1937 a new English daily *the Hindusthan Standard* came out with Dhirendranath Sen as its Editor. This was the time when he was very much involved in public affairs. He became a member of the All India Committee of the League Against Fascism and War which was formed in 1937 with Rabindranath Tagore as its President. He was elected on the All India Congress Committee (AICC) at the Haripura Congress (1938) presided over by Subhas Chandra Bose.

In 1941 Dhirendranath Sen joined the Editorial Board of the nationalists English daily *Amrita Bazar Partika*. This highly-paid post he resigned in 1948 after extending support to the striking employees of that organization and protesting against the high-handed attitude of the owner towards the employees. In his resignation letter Dr. Sen upheld the principle of freedom of journalists.

From early 1940 he was increasingly associated with various political –cultural movements. He became an active member of the Progressive Writers' Association which was formed in Calcutta as an anti-fascist cultural forum. He was actively associated with the Anti-Fascist Writers' Association from its very inception in 1942. Through these contacts he developed an intellectually close and cordial relation with

the Communist Party of India and its top leaders in Bengal, although he never accepted the membership of the party. When the Association for Friendship with the Soviet Union (first established in 1941) was reorganised as Indo-Soviet Cultural Society (ISCIS) in 1952, Dr. Sen was elected the General Secretary of its West Bengal Committee. In this capacity he visited the Soviet Union in 1954. Since 1952 he had been editing his own Bengali monthly *Mukhapatra* which became popular among the Left-minded intellectuals in West Bengal in the 1950s. In 1960 Dr. Sen was elected an Alderman of Calcutta Corporation. In this role he could experience for a brief period at first hand the local political life of the city.

Dr. Sen also took active interest in trade union movement. He was elected President of the Federation of Mercantile Employees Unions, and of the Employees' Union in the Press Trust of India (PTI), TISCO, and Balmer Lawrie. In the 1950s he was closely connected with two Calcutta-based academic organizations viz. Socio-Economic Research Institute, where he was one of the Research Directors along with Professor Sushobhan Sarkar, and Marxist Study Circle, where he was the President.

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In the 1920s and 1930s Dr. Sen was a radical nationalist and in the 1940s and 1950s he developed into an academic Marxist. He gradually turned away from mainstream journalism when he found the major newspapers in India passing under the control of the capitalist class. He had always maintained his connection with teaching at the post-graduate level in Calcutta University, though in a part-time capacity, till he joined the newly-established post-graduate Department of Political Science as a full-time Lecturer in 1948. Simultaneously he began taking classes in the newly-opened Department of Journalism in Calcutta University.

In the Department of Political at Calcutta University Dr. Sen was all along a popular teacher and an enthusiastic inspirer of the budding scholars in social sciences. He was never seen to be indulging in pedantic show of scholarship but the depth and expanse of his erudition could be sensed in intimate conversation with him in small tutorial classes and in the staff-room of Asutosh Building. As a colleague, he widely endeared himself to the teachers of other disciplines by sheer warmth of human touch in his behaviour and humourous conversation. There was a stance of anti-authority attitude in his life-style which is in marked contrast with what is seen in recent times. This could perhaps be one of the reasons why his rise to the Chair of Surenderanath Banerjea professorship in the Department of Political Science was delayed till 1961.

Professor Sen published *Whither India* (1930) and *The Problem of Minorities* (1940) when he was a radical nationalist. Since the late 1930s he became a convinced academic Marxist. His first publication *Whither India* was a thorough analytical study of the context and recommendations of the All-Party Committee under Motilal Nehru for writing a Constitution for India. In this critical study of the Nehru Report he gave an exposition of the principles of India's future governmental system. Till then he was not a Marxist and he was all for objective and critical assessment of the on-going political developments in the country. In the year of Indian independence he published '*Revolution By Consent?*' (1947) containing his analysis of the background and nature of the process of transfer of power from the British Raj to the Congress leaders—a process which he described as a *bandobast* (mutually acceptable compromising formula).

Professor Sen is best known for his magnum opus *From Raj to Swaraj* (1954), which was translated into Russian language, and its companion volume *The Paradox of Freedom* (1958). In these two books one gets the real touch of his intellectual calibre in giving a refereshing analysis of the political-constitutinal processes in India. Here he prsented his philosophical and legal understanding of the State (*Raj*) in India and the phases of the evolution of social autonomy (*Swaraj*) whereby people themselves would shape, manage and control their own affairs. All through his life he made an unending quest for *Swaraj* or self-rule. His marxist conviction led him to the conclusion that self-rule was the key to Man's freedom and that freedom could not be meangifully attained in a class-divided society.

Professor Dhirendranath Sen is always remembered by his studnets, colleagues and co-fighters in the cause of freedom and dignity of the individual and egalitarian social order as an uncompromising crusader against dishonesty and corruption in public life, a courageous and radical thinker and commentator on public affairs, an affectionate teacher and a large-hearted friend in the real sense of the term. His mortal life came to a sudden end on 2nd May 1961 quite peacefully but his ideas and ideals continue to inspire all those who care for the suffering humanity, value honesty and courage in public life.

Intellectually professor Sen graduated from radical nationalism in his youth to Marxism in his mature years. He developed acquaintance and freindship with some leading figures in the Communist Party of India and also rendered his valuable theoretical advice to other leftist parties, but he never accepted membership of any political party as he did not feel free in the regimented system of party political life. He was known as a front-ranking intellectual of his time in India and was invited to visit the Soviet Union in the mid-1950s as an important functionary of the Indo-Soviet Cultural Association. Throughout his public life he fought for freedom and the rights of the individual and aspired to realise an egalitarian social life. On his birth centenary we pay our respectful tribute to this erudite professor, profound scholar, fearless journalist, compassionate humanist, and a public intellectual of his time.

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\* Political Science (1958-62)