

Arjun Kumar Sengupta (1937-2010)

Jyotirmoy PalChowdhuri

Arjun joined the Presidency College in 1952 as a first year student of Intermediate in Arts classes. I was in the second year of the same stream. I got to know him almost immediately after he came to Presidency because we both were supporters of the same student organization which in the early 50s was led by Amartya Sen and had Sukhomoy Chakravarty, Partha Sarathi Gupta, Benoy Choudhury etc. as active members. Last time my wife Maya and I met Arjun and his wife Jayasree was two years ago over a dinner at their Hauz Khas Enclave home and thereafter at Habitat Centre in Delhi where we had them along with some other Presidency alumni at a get-together. It has been a relationship that lasted for six decades and was snapped only by death. News of Arjun's death on September 26, 2010, therefore, shattered me.

Arjun studied Economics at Presidency and later at MIT. He taught at the Institute of Economic Growth, Delhi School of Economics, Jawahar Lal Nehru University, London School of Economics and at one stage was associated with Harvard as a Visiting Fellow. He was a member of the Planning Commission, Special Secretary to Mrs. Indira Gandhi, then Prime Minister of India, Ambassador of India to the European Union and Belgium, Executive Director, IMF in charge of India, Bangladesh and Bhutan. Dr. Sen Gupta also worked as Special Advisor to the Managing Director of the IMF. He was elected a member of the Rajya Sabha from West Bengal as a Congress candidate in 2005 – a position he held till death.

It is obvious that Arjun Sen Gupta had a multifaceted career. He shone as an economist, proved to be a successful administrator, an effective diplomat and a politician of some stature. However, Arjun will be remembered for years to come for something else. Arjun was the Chairman of the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector. The Commission brought out a voluminous report on this. It is usually referred to as Dr.

Arjun Sen Gupta Report. The report is considered the most comprehensive document on the condition of unorganized workers of India. The Report revealed that despite many years of economic growth 77% of India's population live on less than Rs. 20.00 per day and that as much as 86% of India's work force is in the unorganized sector.

The Commission found out that the vast majority of India's 'Poor and Vulnerable' are Muslim and Lower Caste and thus, in addition to poverty, also suffer from social discrimination.

According to the report 'These groups emerge as a sort of a coalition of socially discriminated, educationally deprived and economically destitute while less than one fourth of India's population is enjoying the fruits of high economic growth.'

Dr. Sen Gupta's recommendations on social security led to the enactment of the 'Unorganized Workers' Social Security Act, 2008'. A great achievement indeed.

Arjun wore many hats and adorned many glamorous chairs in Washington, London, Brussels and South Block but deep inside him there was a serious concern over the widening cleavage in the Indian society. His universally admired report is an authentic testimony to what he stood for.