

Dhirendranath Sen, a Marxist Political Thinker of 20th Century India

Dhirendranath Sen was a Marxist thinker and a teacher of Political Science, a recognised authority on constitutional questions and a frontier journalist. He dealt with complicated and complex issues of Indian politics and society with a critical approach, instructed mind and scientific outlook. He discussed Indian problems with a clarity of vision, catholicity of view and a refreshing human sympathy.

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Let us first have a glance at Dhirendranath, the man — his family, education and career. Dhirendranath was born in 1902 at Kotalipara in the district of Faridpur which is now in Bangladesh. Kali Kumar Sen and Shakuntala Devi were his parents. He had his school education at Hare school. After this he went to Presidency College and from Presidency College to the University of Calcutta, from where he received his Ph.D. degree in 1936 for his thesis on "Problem of Minorities".

He chose the career of a journalist and worked as an Assistant Editor of "The Servant" from 1926 to 1927. In 1927 he joined "The Forward" founded by Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das as its Commercial Editor. He stayed there for two years. In 1929 he joined "The Advance" as its Editor and worked there for nine years. In 1938 he became the Editor of "The Hindustan Standard" and served it till 1940. Then he worked as a member of the Editorial Board of "The Amrita Bazar Patrika" for some years. Marxist Dhirendranath had sympathy with the downtrodden sections of the society. This principled man refused to make compromises and changed his journalistic jobs frequently. He finally bade adieu to journalism and became a teacher.

Dhirendranath Sen became a full-time Lecturer in the Department of Political Science of the University of Calcutta, where he worked as a part-time lecturer since 1929. In 1961 he became the Surendranath Banerjee Professor of Political Science of Calcutta University. But he could not hold the post long, as death took him away on 2nd May 1961.

As a student of Presidency College he took active part in the students' movements there. He had also been connected with Indian freedom movement. He was for some time associated with All India Congress Committee as a member. Because of ideological differences he finally cut himself off from Congress and its activities. Ideologically he was a Marxist and was the general secretary of the West Bengal Indo-Soviet Cultural Society. He worked as the general secretary of the West Bengal Peace Council. He worked seriously for Indo Soviet Friendship and went to Soviet Union in 1956.

Prof. Dhirendra Nath Sen wrote many books and articles on Indian constitution and Indian problems. His publications bear testimony to his vast knowledge, profound scholarship and sharp intelligence. Some of these are "Whither India", "The Problem of Minorities", "Revolution by Consent", "The Paradox of Freedom" and "From Raj to Swaraj."

[II]

Professor Dhirendranath Sen, a Marxist by conviction, believes in the Marxist view of the state. He does not believe that the state is an eternal institution, meant for good life. Nor does he think that the state is the realisation of moral idea on earth. To him the state is not a metaphysical reality, nor an abstract idea, but a concrete historical phenomenon. State came into existence with the appearance of classes in society. Change in the force of production resulted in the change of relations of production. With a change in the relations of production, i.e. class structure of the society there is a change in the character of the state. So slave states changed to feudal states and feudal states into capitalist states. When the capitalist order would be overthrown, there would come about a socialist state, a stage where the organised labourers and peasants would exercise state power. When all classes would be abolished, the state would disappear altogether. This means a withering away of the state. In this communistic stage all would be equals.

This theory of the state is definitely Marxian. Prof Sen refers to Indian puranas & epics in support of this marxian theory. He refers to the description of the emergence of the state by Bhishma in answer to Yudhishthira's query as stated in the Shantiparva of Mahabharata. According to this story there were no states and no king, no law and no lawgiver, no crime and no criminal. It was an age of bliss and peace. But when people became greedy and jealous of each other, private property relations based on economic exploitation took the place of communal ownership. The state, the law and the lawgiver appeared in consequence. He also finds in the description of the sudras driving the Brahmins from seats of power and humiliating and insulting them in the Kali Yuga an example of the replacement of one class by another.

Prof. Sen views law in relation to the state, which sustains a given system of production relations. Law is nothing but the expression of the dominant class in the society. According to Sen constitutional law is also not free from economic and social base. Prevalent production relations are the foundation of law in general and also constitutional law, in particular.

Sovereignty of the state is also exercised by the class which owns the means of production and not to the people, as propagated by the bourgeois thinkers.

According to Prof. Sen functions of the state are also to be discussed in relation to the class character of the state. In the 18th and 19th centuries when capitalism was expanding, the rising bourgeois class wanted supreme political authority and freedom from state intervention. But in the 20th Century the concept of the state has faced active crisis from the internal contradiction of capital and labour, contradiction between capital and capital in the international market and challenge of colonial states to foreign exploitation.

To avoid this contradiction some countries chose the path of revolution and some only searched for temporary patchworks. Modern states are not police states of the 18th and 19th centuries, but are providers of social service. But mere state intervention is not enough according to him. He wants a fundamental change in the economic and social system. Economic inequality is the result of the economic foundation of the society. Universal adult franchise confers political rights to the masses, but it is incapable of changing the economic and political foundation of the society. So he does not have much illusions about universal adult suffrage.

After a discussion of D.N. Sen's concepts of state, law, sovereignty of the state and functions of the state, we may take up his conception of right. He does not believe that rights are inherent in human beings. According to him the concept of right is to be viewed against the background of social realities. This is why the right to property is sacred in a capitalist state, but unimaginable in primitive societies. Right to property is actually the right of the owner of the means of production to appropriate the product of labour. So all cannot enjoy it equally in a society where there is private ownership of the means of production. Only under social ownership of the means of production can a person enjoy this right equally with others.

[III]

Marxist Sen was not oblivious to the problems facing the Indian society during his time. He dealt with them from his Marxist standpoint.

He had no false illusions absent transfer of power from the British rules to the Indians. As a Marxist he believed that political independence cannot bring about any fundamental change of the social order. He regarded this transfer of power as a paradox of freedom.

Prof. Sen discussed the problem of minorities, which had affected and still now affects the Indian society. He provided a solution to the Indian minority problem strictly on Marxist lines. He felt that in a multinational state like India demands of separate nationalities ought not to be ignored. He accepted the Soviet model for the solution of the problem of minorities. In his words "The solution...lies in the redistribution of Provinces and States on the basis of cultural and linguistic homogeneity with the right of self-determination for each individual unit, subject to its conformity in broad principles to socialist democracy. A move in this direction is likely to lead to the evolution of India into a voluntary Union of Socialist Republics..... It may be necessary in certain cases for the purposes of cultural development and protection of minorities to divide these republics into smaller constituent units such as autonomous republics, autonomous regions and national areas. These units shall, however, exercise powers vested in them by the laws of the Federal Union and of the republics concerned". He prescribed the Soviet model for India.

Dhirendranath Sen also discussed the Social and Political issues of new independent India. Here also the Marxist in him speaks out. The preamble to the Constitution contains the western ideals of justice, liberty, equality and fraternity. The constitution of India recognises universal adult franchise and guarantees fundamental rights. Prof. Sen points out the gaps between the written words and the practice followed in the bourgeois democratic state of India.

The constituent Assembly which framed our constitution was the product of British Statute. It was not also elected by the people but by persons, chosen on a restricted franchise under a British Statute. So the authenticity of the Constituent Assembly to act on behalf of the people of India has been questioned by him.

Prof. Sen doubts India's independence because India is a member of the commonwealth of Nations. True, India became its member in 1949 by its own will and accepted the king as the symbol of free association of independent member-nations and as such as the Head of Commonwealth. The words 'free association' imply that every memberstate has a right to secede from the commonwealth. There is also equality of status between the member-states in internal and external affairs. As symbolic head the British King or Queen has no right to interfere into the affairs of the Indian Republic.

Despite all these, Prof. Sen raises doubt about India's independence. India is not free to declare war against Britain or any commonwealth Country so long she is a member of the commonwealth of Nations. Moreover, the constitution (Declaration as to Foreign States) order, 1950 declared that commonwealth states are not foreign states. A major part of British investment flows into India and much of it was accompanied by British control, Legacy of British rule is manifested in the pattern of the training of the armed forces and the civil service and also in jurisprudence.

Coming to Indian judiciary Prof. Sen says that it is claimed to be an independent and impartial institution. But the character of the judiciary is to be assessed in the context of the class character of the state. In our bourgeois democratic state judiciary serves the interest of the dominant class in our society.

Prof. Sen mentions that in a federal set up a second chamber is needed to protect the interest of the memberstates. But Indian council of states does not provide for equality of states. Here also, like the lower house, representatives are chosen on the basis of population. Dhirendranath Sen wishes a thorough restructuring of this chamber so as to provide equality of representation to the states. In Indian federation there is great centralization of powers in legal, administrative and financial relations. This reduces the autonomy of the states. In a multinational state like India there is, according to him, need for greater autonomy of states. He also supports the right of secession of the units.

[IV]

Dhirendranath Sen was not a theory builder of politics. Metaphysical speculations were not his forte. He was not interested in abstract principles. He responded to living social realities and discussed some crucial political issues of his time, particularly of India, and throughout his life he analysed them in the light of Marxist Principles of politics. His solution of the minority problem is of great importance, since even in the 21st century today national integration is still a problem for India. He was, indeed, a pioneer in evolving Marxist political science in India. He was the first Indian, who applied the Marxist method of scientific enquiry to the study of Indian politics.