

Global Justice in the Post - Tsunami World

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The waves have receded and the rude shock has been absorbed. Tsunami has left a trail of destruction on the shores and scars in our minds. Even as we are trying to cope with the situation for the past several months, we need to direct our attention to the many critical questions Tsunami has left for the entire world to ponder about. One such crucial question is the state of justice in our world. The issue of global justice stares into our eyes. It should not get blurred by the outpouring of sympathy and assistance to the victims by the developed world.¹ We need to open our eyes wide, and see what lies on the other side of the heap of assistance.

Tsunami needs to be placed in the overall picture of injustice our world presents. It is a world, which has abandoned the cause of justice at all levels. How else are we to characterize a world in which 8000 million people suffer hunger and malnutrition, and thousands of children die everyday for want of food and basic medical care? There were many opportunities to remove this scandalous condition. The end of Cold War brought about substantial cut in the military spending of developed

¹ Felix Wilfred, "Honour to the Dead and a Warning to the Living. Coming to Terms with the Tsunami", *Concilium* 2005/1, pp. 121-135.

nations – a cut of almost 46%.² This is a fabulous sum. But this changed situation and the spared resources were not translated into a programme for the poorest of the poor in our world. Instead, we have been witnessing a situation of callous apathy towards victims – except, of course on such occasions as Tsunami tragedy. The amount of money spent for the developing world by the rich nations is a derisive pittance, often amounting to .01% of the national income.

What is most preoccupying is that the victims who suffer hunger and deprivations are blamed for their situation. The history of colonialism and continuing neo-colonialism is completely forgotten. As for solution, the international community of the rich and powerful nations wash their hands off, lest culpability for the death of the millions of innocent should be imputed to them. The solution is not sought in interventions in terms of justice. The managers of developed nations wedded to the neo-liberal ideology and economic praxis, are relying on the market and its mechanism to solve the problem of poverty and hunger. In short, the discourse on sharing of wealth and resources as an international obligation has been made to take the backseat and is becoming a matter of yester years. It is the market and its laws of demand and supply which eventually will solve the problem of want and destitution – so it is believed. This is the new mantra in vogue. The assistance coming for Tsunami victims by the international community at this juncture is nothing but a gross hypocrisy. It is a frantic effort to cover up the naked greed and exploitation neo-liberalism practices.

Against this background of the crisis of global justice, we want to examine whether the proposals being made by the pundits of economy could redeem the victims. We turn to the thought of Amartya Kumar Sen

2 Cf. Thomas W. Pogge (ed.), *Global Justice*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 2001. pp. 6ff.

to examine critically whether his widely publicized proposals could help the process of global justice.³ Sen, obviously, is a respected economist of international repute. He has made significant contributions especially to the field of welfare economics, for which he was also awarded Nobel Prize in the year 1998. As someone born and brought up in a developing country – India - Sen knows and has been confronted by poverty, destitution and negations. Though he lives in America, he could not but have seen the struggles of people for greater justice in his home country. To study the questions connected with global justice today, it may be interesting to learn what he has to say about justice through his economic theories and considerations, and to see what extent his approach will stand up to the growing demands for justice in our global world.

In the first part of this article I intend to present very briefly some of the salient points from the thought of Sen, and in the second part to reflect critically on what he says and what he represents.

Part I: The Proposals of a Philosopher and Economist

Redefining Development as Expansion of Freedom

Sen's contribution to welfare economics is most known. It rests on a broader basis and vision, and it comprehends social, political and cultural spheres, and is not confined to economy. Freedom is the axis on which his complex thought revolves. For him freedom remains both *the end* of development as well as an important *means* for it. Freedom is also

³ For an overview on various aspects of his thoughts and proposals, see Ajit Kumar Singh - Raj Kumar Sen (eds), *Economics of Amartya Sen*, Deep and Deep Publications, Delhi, 2000. For a professional economic perspective on his contribution, see "Amartya Kumar Sen and the Human Science of Development", in *Economic and Political Weekly*, December 5, 1998, pp. 3139- 3150. For an easily readable popular presentation of his thought, see *Frontline*, February 12 - 25., 2005.

the nodal point where the various aspects and dimensions of development intersect.⁴ Development of individuals and communities is stifled when, for whatever reason, freedom is curtailed. Achieving development means achieving freedom, and vice-versa. In his writings Sen repeatedly comes back on this point and consolidates it with many enlightening illustrations. He also shows how the various freedoms are closely interconnected to such an extent that the absence of one could lead to the impairment of other freedoms.

According to Sen, there is a distinct advantage of considering development in terms of freedom, because it is a perspective that highlights the *agency* of the people. For Sen, today we need to understand freedom, not only as freedom from hunger, illness, illiteracy, etc., but also as freedom to be able to enter into exchange relationships through market mechanism. Under this freedom he is particular to include the freedom to participate in the labour market, without which the poor depending upon their labour power would remain bonded and enslaved.

The Process of Development: The Capabilities and Social Opportunities

The basic conception of development as freedom defines also the way development can and should take place. The process is one in which individuals and collectivities are enabled to participate in their own development, rather than remaining passive recipients of benefits.⁵

4 Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, Anchor Books, New York, 1999; ID., *Freedom of Choice: Concept and Content*, World Institute for Development Economics Research of the United Nations University, Copenhagen, 1987.

5 Amartya Sen comes on this point repeatedly, and it could be found almost in all his writings. For example: *Resources, Values and Development*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1984; *Choice, Welfare and Measurement*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1982; *Commodities and Capabilities*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 2004 (8th impression); *Beyond Liberalization: Social Opportunity and Human Capability*, Institute of Social Sciences, New Delhi, 1994.

The process of development can be viewed as a story of freedom. It is the ever greater expansion of freedoms of the individual in such a way that a person has increasingly more alternatives to choose from to conduct her life according to the way and values she holds, and is not constricted by force of necessity. Sen explains the matter with an example:

A person's "capability" refers to the alternative combinations of functioning that are feasible for her to achieve. Capability is thus a kind of freedom: the substantive freedom to achieve alternative functioning combinations (or, less formally put, the freedom to achieve various lifestyles). For example, an affluent person who fasts may have the same functioning achievements in terms of eating or nourishment as a destitute person who is forced to starve, but the first person does have a different "capability set" than the second (the first *can* choose to eat well and be well nourished in a way the second cannot).⁶

In other words, capabilities go beyond the conception of well-being as having the necessary utilities for the conduct of human life. It goes also beyond "primary goods" approach of John Rawls according to which well-being would be the availability of the necessary means and resources to be able to attain the idea of good life every individual may have.

Sen also distances himself from the view that inequality may be permitted as long as we experience reduction in poverty. Against such a view he argues on the basis of capabilities. According to him, the persistence of inequality negatively impacts on the capability function of the individual.

6 Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, *op.cit.* p. 75.

Even if poverty remains unchanged, high levels of economic inequality directly curtail some of the relevant capabilities for the disadvantaged groups; examples of these capabilities include self-esteem, protection from violence, and the ability to participate in society and politics. People have reason to value these equality-related capabilities, even if they are poor and hungry.⁷

Poverty and Social Exclusion:

The contribution of Sen is widely acclaimed also for his redefinition of poverty. Poverty is seen by him not in relation to income and utilities, but as deprivation of capabilities. This has broadened up the understanding of poverty. Sen makes a close connection between his understanding of poverty as capabilities deprivation and the concept of social exclusion which has been in vogue for the past few decades since the introduction of this expression by René Lenoir. Relational dimension of human existence is so very important that anything that contributes to it enhances the capabilities and anything that goes contrary to it diminishes this capability. Seen in this light, social exclusion is a matter of capability reduction. Sen illustrates the importance of overcoming social exclusion as a critical component in overcoming poverty as capability deprivation. He notes:

Being excluded from social relations can lead to other deprivations as well, thereby further limiting our living opportunities. For example, being excluded from the opportunity to be employed or to receive credit may lead to economic impoverishment that may, in turn, lead to other deprivations (such as under-nourishment or homelessness). Social exclusion can, thus, be *constitutively a part* of capability deprivations as well as *instrumentally cause* of diverse capability failures. The case

7 Amartya Sen - Jean Drèze, *India. Economic Development and Social Opportunity*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1995, p. 93.

for seeing social exclusion as an approach to poverty is easy enough to establish within the general perspective of poverty as capability failure.⁸

As we can see, Sen tries to integrate within his key concept of capability the new concept of social exclusion.

Evolving A New Development Index

As we noted, capability approach refers to the ability of the individual to function in a society at different levels and to be able to fulfil the various aspects of his or her well-being. Such ability would imply that a person is in a position, for example, to fulfil her nutritional needs, health needs, and to avail of education and security. Capability involves also the ability to use the opportunities offered by the society – something which cannot be taken for granted. This new and more comprehensive approach has led Sen to develop, along with Mahbub ul Haq, new parameters for the measurement of poverty and a new development index.⁹

The development index of a nation, unlike in earlier times, is not based simply on the gross national product or per capita income. Development needs to be judged on the basis of how a nation has progressed in sectors like life-expectancy, primary education, land-reform, the literacy of women and their well-being, health-care, and so on. Consequently, there can be cases – as Sen demonstrates – in which we have significantly high rate of per capita income, and yet many people suffer poverty and destitution. The new development index, also

⁸ Amartya Sen, *Social Exclusion. Concept Application Scrutiny*, Critical Quest, New Delhi, 2004, p. 6.

⁹ Amartya Sen, *On Economic Inequality*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 2002 (original edition 1973).

employed by the United Nations Development Report, corrects this anomaly and offers a more accurate picture of the development in any given country.¹⁰

Why development cannot be equated with gross national income or with per capita income is explained by the fact that individuals may not have the purchasing capacity enabling them to have access to those goods and services necessary to fulfil their needs. In this context, very illuminating is Sen's study on famines. Through many empirical studies, Sen has shown that famine is not due to lack of availability of food, but lack of entitlements and other external factors.¹¹ Precisely because the people in a particular locality do not have the purchasing capacity, it tends to be transported elsewhere, giving rise, thus, to the break-out of famine. The lack of purchasing capacity of food, in spite of its availability ultimately belongs to the lack of entitlements which makes the famine into a social reality. We are faced with a situation not so much of scarcity of food, but rather the lack of command over food. Sen cites several examples from his empirical studies to substantiate his point. One of these examples may suffice for us to understand his point.

10 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) uses the new index for the past several years. See the latest *UNDP Human Development Report 2004*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2004, pp. 139. The index includes such parameters as life expectancy at birth, adult literacy, life-expectancy, education, and so on.

11 "The famines can take place without a substantial food availability decline is of interest mainly because of the hold that the food availability approach has in the usual famine analysis. It has also led to disastrous policy failure in the past. The entitlement approach concentrates instead on the ability of different sections of the population to establish command over food, using the entitlement relations operating in that society depending on its legal, economic, political and social characteristics" Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2004 impression), p.162.

During the Ethiopian famine in Wollo of 1972, the food availability per head in Ethiopia as a whole was normal. Though the food output in Wollo itself was much lower due to drought, food did not move much into Wollo from elsewhere in the country, and some food actually moved *out of* Wollo, which experienced a famine with largely stationary prices since the ability of the Wollo population to buy food had fallen along with the decline of agricultural output.¹²

Democracy and Development – The Case of Famine and Public Action

Yet another important contribution of Sen is to have shown the connection between democracy and development. It was argued by many, especially in East and South East Asia, that a nation needs to sacrifice freedom and democracy if its wants to develop and catch up with the developed nations. What is feasible, at the most, is “guided democracy”, an euphemism for authoritarian rule and centralization. Sen has shown that there is a correlation between expansion of democratic freedom and development. They do not stand in inverse relationship. Secondly and more basically, democracy itself is to be seen as an integral part of development on par with literacy and other capabilities the diminishing or absence of which means overall less development in spite of high economic growth. For, democratic participation is integral to development viewed as freedom.

To illustrate his point, Sen brings in the case of famine to which he devoted much of his research. He contends that famine has not occurred in any country with true democratic governance. In a democratic

12 Amartya Sen, *Resources, Values and Development*, *Op.cit.* p. 518; see also *Poverty and Famines*, *Op.cit.*

country with a free press there is the role of public action and communication by which the plight of the victims are discussed freely and facts disseminated, and not concealed as in many dictatorial states.¹³ He explains the absence of famine in India since 1943 (the Bengal famine) due to its democracy and public action, whereas it has occurred more frequently in China. The famine of 1958 – 1961 in China was a most severe one. But the state denied that famine existed, and withheld any information on it, which is not possible in a country with democratic governance and a functioning civil society.¹⁴ Sen argues his case also in relation to the situation of the East Asian economic crisis of 1997. His analysis of the crisis points to the absence of democracy, and consequently lack of transparency in the financial dealings of the states involved.

The Case of “Missing Women” – Poverty and Gender Issues

The situation of women exemplifies what the deprivation of capabilities and social opportunities mean. It starts from the time of birth itself: The girl-child is, in most cultures, unwelcome. Consequently, the growth and development of girl children are affected by this biological bias. Sen speaks about the “missing women” especially in South Asia and North Africa. This is precisely due to the discrimination in nutrition and health-care of girl-children, leading to alarming disparity in the ratio of women in relation to men.

13 See Prabhat Patnaik, “Amartya Sen and the Theory of Public Action”, in *Economic and Political Weekly*, Nov. 7, 1998, pp. 2855-2859.

14 Amartya Sen – Jean Drèze, *India. Economic Development and Social Opportunity*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1996, chapter 4: “India and China”, pp. 57 – 86., Sen finds that Kerala through its land-reforms, literacy and other measures has become one of the advanced states in India, and in many respects comparable to China. In another work edited with Jean Drèze, Sen makes regional comparisons. See *Indian Development. Selected Regional Perspectives*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2003.

Earlier we spoke of Sen's distinction between well-being and agency. The significance of this distinction stands out, when we deploy it in the case of women. The understanding of economics in their case cannot be limited to their well-being, which would show them in the passive role of receiving economic assistance; what is more important is their *active agency* towards which the economic processes should be steered. This type of welfare economics with an in-built ethical orientation centred on agency will promote social transformation through women. This agency does not do away with the perspective of well-being; on the contrary the agency perspective can help fulfil the demands of women's well-being:

Empirical work in recent years has brought out very clearly how the relative respect and regard for women's well-being is strongly influenced by such variables as women's ability to earn an independent income, to find employment outside the home, to have ownership rights and to have literacy and be educated participants in decision within and outside the family. Indeed, even the survival disadvantage of women compared with men in developing countries seems to go down sharply – and may even get eliminated – as progress is made in these agency aspects.¹⁵

Sen has also established a connection between the agency of women, which includes their well-being, and certain aspects of fertility and child-bearing. For example, with greater literacy of women and their employment there will be increase in child survival and in the fertility rate reduction. In general, he acknowledges the crucial role women could play in development.

15 Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom*, *Op.cit.* p. 191.

Part II : A Neo-Liberal With a Social Programme

NO one can seriously dispute the many valuable contributions of Sen to give a social tilt to contemporary economy. However, we will be able to assess his contribution only by inquiring into the deeper anchorage of his thought: It is neo-liberalism at bottom. Amartya Sen comes across to me as a bleeding heart liberal who would like to contribute to greater justice in our world, but would not give up his neo-liberal moorings. In fact, most of his dialogue partners are the liberals of different colours and hues, and Sen goes into the many nuances of their thoughts, as his ample references demonstrate. His entrenchment in the liberal tradition and within it to create a space for global justice, reminds me of Will Kymlicka. Kymlicka makes a parallel attempt to prove that the issue of minorities and multiculturalism can be resolved by liberalism by smoothening some of its rough edges.¹⁶ Amartya Sen would then be among those authors who seek to validate neo-liberalism and its ability to rise up to the challenges of global justice in our times. In the end, Amartya Sen has more a liberal social programme than any new avenue for global justice.

Even in discussing such an important concept as social exclusion he could only think of Adam Smith and what he said about the ability to appear in public without shame, and the exclusion of people from the market. It does not occur to him that the worst of social exclusion in the whole world is in his own country in the form of caste. Caste remains a

16 Cf. Will Kymlicka, *Politics in the Vernacular. Nationalism, Multiculturalism, and Citizenship*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001; ID., *Multicultural Citizenship*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2000 (reprint of 1995); ID., (ed.), *The Rights of Minority Cultures*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000 (reprint of 1995); Will Kymlicka – Wayne Norman (eds), *Citizenship in Diverse Societies*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2000.

taboo for Sen. It is the Pandora's box which Sen studiously avoids to open.¹⁷

The liberals would see in Sen's contribution the expansion of the idea of freedom beyond its traditional individualistic interpretation, to include such basic realities as poverty and deprivations of basic necessities of life. The inclusion of a social agenda within the definition of freedom is a welcome development, but it is a far cry from the actual demands of justice, especially as it is experienced in the developing nations. The title of his more recent book, "Development as Freedom" itself is symbolic of his liberal stand and outlook. Things would have been quite different, had he taken an approach of "Development as Justice". Though he does speak about justice, the attention is diverted and focussed on freedom which becomes the key concept to understand justice, and not the other way round.

The neo-liberalism of Sen can be discerned from some of his underlying orientations: 1. His individualistic approach 2. Absence of consideration of identity and identity-politics 3. Pro-empire views of globalisation and economic liberalisation 4. The failure to do analysis of power-relationships. This brings about a contradiction in his orientation, which I have characterized as the Achilles' Heels. In the following pages, let me try to elaborate these points.

17 As the Mandal Commission report states, "The real triumph of the caste system lies not in upholding the supremacy of the Brahmin, but in conditioning the consciousness of the lower castes in accepting their inferior status in the ritual hierarchy as a part of the natural order of things. In India caste system has endured for over 3, 000 years, and even today there appear no symptoms of its early demise" *Reservations for Backward Classes. Mandal Commission Report of the Backward Classes Commission, 1980, Akalank Publications, Delhi, 1991, p. 19.*

1. Individualistic Approach

Sen's thought remains wedded to an individualistic approach. For instance, the capability's approach concerns primarily the capabilities of individuals. There is little attempt to take into account the various incapacities to which groups and peoples are subjected in the name of ethnicity, race, language or religion. We need to only think of such situations as the one we witnessed in Kosovo, Rwanda-Burundi, Sri Lanka and to be aware of the conditions of Roma (gypsies) in the Balkan region, the Kurds in Iraq and the Copts in Egypt, and the tribals and indigenous peoples all over the world. In fact, the issue of poverty in the developing countries is often closely connected with the deprivation of food and other basic necessities to specific ethnic or linguistic groups or minorities. To be fair, Sen does make mention of minorities, immigrants and other groups who suffer social exclusion, but this seems to be more a tangential treatment, whereas his main focus appears to be the individual and his or her capability deprivations.

In treating such a practically momentous and consequential issue as globalisation, we note how Sen views it from his capability and social opportunities approach. He is for integrating the poor and the disadvantaged into globalisation, lest they should lose the new opportunities, even as the old securities are giving way because of the fast changes that are taking place. He notes:

The ability of people to use the positive prospects depends on their not being excluded from the effective opportunities that globalisation offers (such as new patterns of exchange, new goods to produce, new skills to develop, new techniques of production to use, and so on). If people are excluded from these opportunities – either because of international restrictions or due to national or lack of preparedness – then the overall impact of globalisation may be exclusion from older facilities of

economic survival without being immediately included in news ways of earning and living.¹⁸

Unfortunately, Sen lacks a critical approach to globalisation, and indeed from the perspective of the victims.¹⁹ Like many liberals with a social agenda, he is one who promotes the optimisation of globalisation and market for the benefit of the poor *as individuals*. The aim is to change the poor into individuals capable of competing in the marketplace with other individuals. There is no inquiry into what globalisation is doing to various groups of people, the farmers, the workers, the tribals, the dalits, and so on. That leads us to the next point.

2. The Question of Identity

To pursue the goal of justice today means concretely facing the question of identity. The social reform proposals of Sen, unfortunately, do not pay attention to this truth. There is even a neglect of the identity question in favour of an abstract rationality. The treatment of the question of welfare and of justice turns out to be abstractions in the absence of the vital link to the issue of identity which has become so very crucial politically, and progressively also for the attainment of economic goals by the disadvantaged peoples. More and more studies from different parts of the world show that identity is an important *means of power* for the poor and the downtrodden. It is something that brings to the fore their dignity, rights and agency.²⁰ In the struggles for justice, the identity

18 Amartya Sen, *Social Exclusion. Concept Application Scrutiny*, *Op.cit.* p. 23.

19 See Jon Sobrino – Felix Wilfred (eds). "Globalisation and Its Victims" *Concilium* 2001/5 ; Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalisation and Its Discontents*, W.W. Norton and Company Ltd, New York - London, 2003. This well-informed critique of globalisation is significant not only because the author is a Nobel Prize laureate in economics, but also because he was for a long time associated with the International Monetary Fund and World Bank; Sakia Sassen, *Globalisation and Its Discontents*, The New Press, New York, 1998; Raykiely – Philip Marfleet (eds), *Globalisation and the Third World*, Routledge, London – New York, 1998.

20 Felix Wilfred, *The Sling of Utopia. Struggles for a Different Society*, ISPCK, Delhi, 2005.

has been and continues to be an important weapon, which Sen, as a neo-liberal, is not prepared to accept. His dominant vision is individualism and rationality. Even when he attempts to broach the question of identity, he tries to dissolve identity within rationality.²¹

Lest this critique of Sen be understood as fostering ethnic chauvinism, I must add that there is a difference between the identity assertion of the marginalized and the dominant. Both these may not be placed at the same level or considered on par. If the Indian “untouchables” or the African Americans affirm their identity, it is a process towards justice, and this cannot be equated with the identity-assertion, say, of the Brahmins or the White Anglo-Saxon Protestants.

The importance of the identity perspective in the pursuit of global justice strikes us if we think that in conflict situations people are killed simply because they belong to a particular group, and have a specific ethnic or linguistic or national identity.²² “Some of the most socially divisive debates today are on cultural identity and diversity – in vastly different contexts, in many ways” – so states the latest report of the United Nations’ Development Programme.²³ Identity does play an important role in the economic processes, something that seems to be almost absent from the works of Sen. It is only logical, that as a neo-liberal, he does not want to enter into the question of identity.

3. Pro-Empire View of Globalisation

Speaking of individualistic approach, I already referred to the view of Sen on globalisation and how he views it from an individualistic

21 Amartya Sen, *Reason Before Identity*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1999.

22 Cf. Michael J. Perry, *The Idea of Human Rights*, Oxford University Press, New York- Oxford, 1998.

23 *Human Development Report 2004*, UNDP, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2004, p. 27.

perspective. A second aspect in the consideration of Sen's view on globalisation is related closely to the conditions to be able to avail the opportunities it offers. He means that if in a country certain basic conditions are not fulfilled, the results of globalisation could be quite disastrous. In the absence of these conditions, the degree of inequality may increase further. Sen exemplifies this concretely by a comparison between India and China. Though both nations are pushing ahead with remarkable economic growth, yet there is a difference globalisation makes in these two countries. Whereas China in the pre-reform period had secured such basic things as land-distribution, health-care and primary education, in India these have not taken place. As a result, the inequality globalisation creates is greater in India than in China.

The thought of Sen on globalisation can be understood even better by focusing attention to the way he expands this comparison to the economies of East and South East Asia. According to him, the phenomenal growth and integration of Japan, Taiwan, Singapore, and Hong Kong was due to the fact that they had placed emphasis on basic education, land-reform etc. The removal of social exclusion catapulted these countries into fast-growing economic powers with the full participation of their citizens. In simple terms, these countries could perform economic miracles, because they availed themselves of the opportunities offered by the market and its mechanism. Here again, we could see clearly Sen's indelible liberal stamp, in spite of his reformist thoughts and suggestions, which might evoke a different impression. Again in the analysis of the crisis, Sen follows exactly what the mandarins of financial capitalism are voicing today after the crisis. Strangely, the very countries which were praised for their economic achievements and projected as models became overnight the targets of criticism. The cause for the crisis was attributed, among other things, to the lack of transparency, an analysis Sen also espouses.

4. Absence of Power Analysis

In the liberal circles, Sen may be considered as a “radical” who has contributed to a socially conscious and ethically sensitive economics.²⁴ However, his analysis of economy does not match up to the demands of justice in our world. This is because he leaves out of consideration the relationship of power to development. His reflections, explanations and proposals move at a level in which the imbalance of power would not matter. At the global level, many developing nations are not able to move ahead because of serious power imbalance. The same is true also at the micro level. In Sen’s analysis, however, no *causal connection* is established between the imposition of an unjust economic order and the reproduction of poverty and inequality. His proposals go only as far as to make best sense of the prevailing order of things. His concern seems to be to provide for a development that could take place within this imposed order whose deeper roots he refuses to investigate.

It is a fact that, in spite of the fast economic growth in India, the condition of the dalits (“untouchables”) is becoming worse. They have less means for their survival and less protection than before. The advantages of the information technology have been, so to say, pocketed by the upper castes and classes. Information technology has become a new means of power in the hands of the upper castes and classes. The persistent imbalance of power pushes the disadvantaged groups further to the margins. The new *dot coms* deal with virtual reality, and they cannot bring water to the millions for whose life and survival it is a primary need.²⁵ The poor do not have the power to negotiate the means

24 Amartya Sen, *On Ethics and Economics*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2005 (original edition 1987). From a technical economic perspective, the ethical contribution of Sen has been brought out by Tapas Majumdar, “Amartya Sen in Search of Impure Welfare Economics. Finding New Space”, in *Economic and Political Weekly*, November 7, 1998, pp. 2860 – 2862.

25 At the time of the recent visit of the president of the World Bank, Paul Wolfowitz in India, simple women took to streets with empty pots to demand that

and resources for their survival and well-being. As the Mandal Commission report on reservation (affirmative action) noted, the imbalance of power is such that we cannot put the able-bodied and the handicap to run the same race and hand over the trophy for the victorious.²⁶ The imbalance of power at the starting point needs to be addressed, which Sen does not do.

The Achilles' Heel

To go by his theories, Sen is sensitive to the cause of justice and equity, for the attainment of which he has strongly advocated the increasing of capabilities, entitlements and social opportunities. But the point is at the same time, he proposes as solution liberalisation of economy and integration with the world market. These according to him will increase the opportunities for the poor and the disadvantaged. What he does not, however, realize is that the process of liberalisation and its processes go just in the opposite direction of equality and justice. This is the Achilles' heel in the thought of Sen which fails to take him to the extent the actual demands of global justice warrant today.

Trying to juxtapose both these orientations leaves Sen in a situation of deep contradiction. We can also notice here again his reluctance to go deeper into the social and political processes touching upon the structural questions. Prabhat Patnaik calls this "a sort of tactical silence" on the part of Sen, and goes on to comment that "tactical silences seldom pay on the long-run".²⁷ This contradiction need not surprise us. For, Sen only reflects the general contradiction we find in some of the

loans be stopped for water privatisation. In their memorandum they said, "World Bank loans are failing to bring water to people. They are successful only in guaranteeing contracts and profits for water corporations like Suez-Degremont, Vivendi, Bechtel and Consultancy firms PWC". *The Hindu*, 21 August, 2005, p.8.
²⁶ *Reservation for Backward Classes. Mandal Commission Report of the Backward Classes Commission, 1980, Op.cit.*

²⁷ Prabhat Patnaik, "Amartya Sen and the Theory of Public Action", in *Economic and Political Weekly* November 7, 1998, PP.2855-2859.

global financial institutions. The World Bank, International Monetary Fund and other institutions show great concern to the situation of poverty in the world and express their commitment to eradicate it through several programmes. On the other hand the very economic order these institutions support engender poverty and destitution. Sen is part of this general contradiction of a neo-liberalism that would contribute to "justice" without trying to remove the structures that produce injustice. This contradiction is common as well for the developed nations which follow the neo-liberal economy and try to reap rich dividends out of it.²⁸

What has been said is true also of Sen's analysis of famine. No doubt, the point he has made about the famine as due to lack of entitlements and absence of democracy is a very valid one. However, he does not go into such factors as the compulsion of export of staple foods by some of the poor countries under the so-called structural adjustment programmes, and forced withdrawal of subsidies and assistance by the state, which all prove to be no small cause for malnutrition and famine.²⁹ This analysis he cannot make, once he has basically accepted liberalisation and globalisation as the given and non-negotiable. The quest for global justice has to move, according to his scheme of thinking, within a liberal and globalised world. It is here that we would like to part his company in spite of the very insightful analyses he has made and the arguments he has ingeniously built up.

The freedom about which Amartya Sen speaks is one which ignores the fact that for millions of people it is not the same as for others. Those who have been chained for centuries and millennia by oppressive systems cannot be brought to the starting-line of the race to run on the

28 The outpour of Tsunami assistance from the developed countries becomes suspect because of this inherent contradiction.

29 Prabhat Patnaik, *art.cit.* p. 2589.

track of freedom. The very starting point is problematic. The victims of oppression have been impaired and one simply cannot exhort them to exercise freedom, without taking into account the fact that the conditions for the exercise of freedom are absent or seriously impaired. This is the area of the silence of Sen, and shall we say, of the neo-liberals in general. The ground realities in many developing countries with many conflicts and contradictions of every kind, calls for a different starting point than an abstract programme of "Development as Freedom". His approach is by and large very formal, logical and argumentative.

Conclusion

To return back to the Tsunami victims, the overwhelming sympathy they have experienced, and the extraordinary amount of money and support they have been given by the international community are something which arouse our suspicion. We need to probe deeper into the situation. Deep down, the world is shifting more and more to an order of injustice and neglect of victims.

It is in this context that we turned our attention to an Indian economist and his explanations of poverty and his proposals for its eradication. Amartya Sen, may appear as following the so-called "third way" steering between a rigid liberal orientation and the leftist programmes in favour of the oppressed and the marginalized. His espousal of the third way has all its disadvantages and contradictions the third way has. His theorizing in favour of the reforms in social sector and his call for building up capabilities will be mistaken if we do not recognize that at bottom he is a neo-liberal whose advocacy in the present global scenario has the effect of making the empire and its market-agenda as the only plausible course for justice in the world and the well-being of the poor. The third way may help the concealment of an ideological affiliation with the empire and its consolidation.³⁰ He is not alone in this. In India

30. As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri point out, the Empire is different from imperialism.: "The passage to Empire emerges from the twilight of modern

and in many developing countries there are a growing number of elite intellectuals advocating social reformism but who are wedded to economic neo-liberalism. These oppose fundamentalism which adds to their credibility and the programme of their reformism. But their tacit pro-imperialist stance by failing to question the deeper structures of injustice and hegemony may not bring about long-lasting solutions. The social measures propounded with so many arguments and scholarship in the economic realm could be redeemed by posing radical questions about global justice in our contemporary world.

The brief study and analysis we made of Sen's economic and ethical thought show us that, in spite of the language of ethics he uses, he is deeply entrenched in the neo-liberal economic tradition. From his thought we can infer that assistance to the victims of Tsunami is a *beneficence*, and there is no foundation in his thought to conclude that it is a *moral obligation* to do justice to the victims of Tsunami who are among the poorest of the poor in our world.³¹ We need to begin our discourse afresh from a different perspective and with different premises for global justice in the post-tsunami world.

sovereignty. In contrast to imperialism, Empire establishes no territorial centre of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers. It is a *decentred* and *detritorializing* apparatus of rule that progressively incorporates the entire global realm within its open, expanding frontiers. Empire manages hybrid identities, flexible hierarchies, and plural exchanges through modulating networks of command. The distinct national colours of the imperialist map of the world have merged and blended in the imperial global rainbow" *Empire*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge Massachusetts, 2000, pp. xii-xiii.

31 This point can be illustrated with an example. The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) at its Summit held in 1996 with the participation of 186 countries condemned as "intolerable that more than 800 million people throughout the world, and particularly in developing countries, do not have enough food to meet their basic nutritional needs". Such a condemnation brought about suspicion and fear in some of the developed countries and their policy makers. Lest the statement of FAO should be interpreted in terms of an "obligation", the United States came out with a statement that threw cold water at the condemnation. It stated: "[T]he attainment of any 'right to adequate food' or 'fundamental right to be free from hunger' is a goal or aspiration to be realized progressively that does not give rise to any international obligations". See Thomas W. Pogge (ed.), *Global Justice*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford, 2001, p. 2.