

Sen, Argumentative Indians and Bengali Modernity

Considering the public profile of Amartya Sen, his domination of the public space of enlightened liberalism and the veneration in which he is held by educated Indians, it becomes all the more imperative to subject his work and intellectual views to a rigorous examination. Alas, Suman Ghosh's documentary film, Amartya Sen: A Life Re-examined, does no such thing.

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It has been reported that after Amartya Sen won the Nobel Prize in economics in 1998, parents in West Bengal began to name their baby boys after him. Among contemporary Indian intellectuals, he has a wider readership in the Anglophone world than any of his peers; and though at least one other Indian economist, Jagdish Bhagwati, has often been mentioned as a possible Nobel laureate in economics, among Indian economists Sen has a reach that is without comparison. One cannot think of many contemporary eminent economists who write on politics, literature, and cinema with apparent ease, and one of his former students, Harvard history professor Sugata Bose, assures the viewers of Suman Ghosh's documentary film¹ that Sen has also made invaluable contributions to the study of Indian history. Those economists, such as the late John Kenneth Galbraith, who were viewed as departing from the extraordinarily rigid protocols of the discipline, which has been singular both in its insistence that it is an exact and complete "science" and in its contemptuous repudiation of theoretical trajectories – among them, poststructuralism, post-colonial theory, postmodernism, and feminism – that have in some measure informed other social science disciplines, soon found themselves ostracised by their fellow economists. In this respect, at least, Amartya Sen may have the unique distinction of having retained a following in his own discipline while continuing to gain adherents among other intellectual and educated circles.

Prominent as is his role as a public intellectual, it can quite reasonably be argued that Amartya Sen, alongside his friend Martha Nussbaum, has garnered a place for himself as one of the pre-eminent spokespersons for the liberal sensibility, and he appears in much of his writings as

the cultured, ecumenical, and humane voice of moderation, learning and awareness. It would be difficult to charge Sen with excess of any kind: neither a nationalist nor an indigenist, Sen has also apparently not erred on the side of unequivocally committing himself to globalisation, unhampered liberalisation, or free market fundamentalism.

In this documentary, which is nominally shaped around a conversation between Sen and his former student, Kaushik Basu, now an economist of some renown at Cornell University, we hear Sen expressing more than once an admiration for Adam Smith's alleged humanism. Sen reminds us that Adam Smith, whose iconic status in *laissez-faire* economics is scarcely in doubt, also championed state intervention to eliminate poverty, and was even an adherent of the view that an economy is to be judged by how good it is for the poor. Sen comes across as something of a critic of the World Bank and the IMF, describing these institutions, which arose out of the Bretton Woods conference (1944), as "not very democratic". Though Sen agrees that the economic reforms of 1991, stewarded by Manmohan Singh as the then finance minister, were long overdue, he argues that the government was not sufficiently attentive to the social dimensions of reform and to such sectors of state intervention as social welfare, health, education, and micro-credit. Yet, as Sen's fellow Nobel laureate, Paul Samuelson, reminds us, Sen has been "solidly in the mainstream of economics". Sen, Samuelson tellingly adds, was "ideologically a little more to the left than Milton Friedman when he got the Nobel prize or Friedrich [von] Hayek." Lest anyone should construe this as irrefutable evidence of Sen's propensity towards left wing politics, one might ponder whether it is possible to be to the right of Milton Friedman.

Considering, then, the public profile of Amartya Sen, his domination of the public

space of enlightened liberalism, and the veneration in which he is held by educated Indians whose hunger for recognition and pain at India's invisibility – in global sporting events, for example – are themselves sociological phenomena that merit considerable study, it becomes all the more imperative to subject Sen's work and intellectual views to a rigorous examination. Alas, this documentary, which purports to "re-examine" Sen's life, does no such thing.

It is a particular debasement of the English language, and a sign of the lazy intellectual culture of our times, that phenomena which have never been subjected to examination in the first place are then put up for "re-examination". Past the initial montage of adulatory comments from Sen's peers and admirers, the documentary commences with Sen's early years at Shantiniketan. Lingering shots of Shantiniketan and the countryside around it set the pace for the film, determine its mood and style, and furnish the intellectual motifs around which one might frame a discussion of Sen's intellectual world. Sen found himself flourishing in the air of freedom at the venerable institution founded by Tagore: the students were not hampered by exams, and they were encouraged to look at the world outside – not just Europe, which too often meant the world for colonised people, but also China, Japan, Africa, and beyond. Sen's professor, Dhiresch Bhattacharya, suggests that Sen outgrew Shantiniketan, and that Cambridge, where Sen earned a second undergraduate degree and a doctorate, allowed Sen to pursue new approaches, engage in a different style of thinking, and ask searching questions. Sen never looked back, moving from one distinction to another.

Sen's Economics

Whatever searching questions Sen may have asked, the film leaves the viewer no more the wiser. Before around the mid-1990s, when Sen started assuming the mantle of the "Renaissance man", his work on famines would have been most widely known to educated people outside the circle of professional economists, and his famous observation that famines do not take place in open societies with public accountability had almost canonic status. The film makes virtually no mention of Sen's large body of work on famines. There is a relatively lengthy discussion of "social choice", but the film assumes some knowledge, on the viewer's part, of Kenneth

Arrow's "impossibility theorem". (Sen's specific contribution consisted in attempting to delineate the specific conditions under which Arrow's theorem might come to pass.) Sen's role in the formulation of the Human Development Index receives mention, and a very gentle criticism by his fellow Nobel laureate, Kenneth Arrow, who expresses uncertainty about the equal weight given to life expectancy, literacy, and income, is permitted. Though the viewer is often reminded about Sen's interest in poverty, one would not know from the footage in this film that poverty has any relationship to the deprivation and suffering that people experience in real life.

The West Bengal finance minister comes on towards the close of the film to assure the viewer that Sen's ideas are in convergence with the work being done on the ground by the government and NGOs to confront illiteracy and poverty, but this does little to disturb the atmosphere of nobility, gentility, and civility which suffuses the film and Sen's life alike. The horns blare, the Master of Trinity College, appointed by royal warrant from her majesty, is installed; the air comes alive with the roll-call of Sen's great predecessors at Trinity: Byron, Tennyson, Newton, Bacon, among others. Ever so keen on describing Indians as beholden to bizarre rituals, one suspects that the colonial administrators were drawing on their experience in Britain, which now derives a substantial part of its revenues from tourists enamoured of rituals and royalty. The camera lovingly follows Sen around the "Master's Lodge", permitting the ordinary viewer to experience vicariously the intellectual life of the great man.

Sen himself comes across as a modest and generous man, and his description of how he self-diagnosed himself at 18, when he was struck with cancer and the doctors dismissed his medical complaints as inconsequential, conveys not a contradictory impression but rather the sense both that Sen is a man of extraordinary determination and one not easily beholden to expert opinion. That may partly explain why he has often ventured into fields about which he knows little, and where his views are often uninteresting, cliched, and even embarrassing.

One wonders, for example, how often Sen will flaunt Akbar as an instantiation of India's traditions of multiculturalism, pluralism, and tolerance. Sen has written widely in recent years on multiculturalism, and he even seeks to distinguish between

"genuine multiculturalism" and "plural monoculturalism", but here as in much of his humanist writings of the last 15 years there is little awareness of the politics of knowledge. Much more interesting is the problem of how American multiculturalism has become a template for the world, and the consequences of the imposition of official multiculturalism upon people who, so to speak, always practised multiculturalism on the ground. It is Sen who, at the Lionel Trilling seminar on (what else) "India and the West" at Columbia University in the early 1990s, at which this reviewer was present, launched into something of a discussion on whether William Jones, the 18th century Orientalist who has been the subject of sustained intellectual inquiry, was a good man or not. Sen, unsurprisingly, concluded that Jones was a "good man". We might say that Suman Ghosh has reached something of a similar conclusion about Sen, and so he ends up giving us a hagiography rather than a critical examination of Sen's views. The author of the *Argumentative Indian*, one would have thought, deserves more.

Grandiose Claims

For the first elements of a critique of Sen, as well as this adulatory film, it would be instructive to turn to the grandiose claims made on Sen's behalf by Sugata Bose. Sen's contribution to our understanding of Indian history, Bose tells us, is the

discovery that reason is not the historical achievement of the European enlightenment alone. This is mentioned as though previously no one was aware of the exegetical traditions of Hinduism, the debates between Shankaracharya and the Buddhists, the hermeneutic traditions of Indian Buddhism and the stunning intellectual feats of Nagarjuna, or the long history, of which Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya has written a magisterial account of materialist schools of thought in ancient India.

One doubts very much that, in his debates with Tagore, Gandhi was drawing upon Enlightenment traditions of rationality, just as it is doubtful that Tilak, for all his mastery of English common law and jurisprudence, could have offered a vigorous defence, which at places is reminiscent of Indian philosophical treatises, at his trials in 1897 and 1908 without recourse to brahminical intellectual traditions. Supposing, however, that Sen has been particularly attentive to India's own rationalist traditions, it becomes incumbent to ask whether his work thus acquired a very different inflection. There is, in fact, nothing to suggest that the ideas of poverty, justice, or welfare with which Sen works owe anything at all to Indian intellectual traditions. Nothing in the long tradition of the interrogation of the idea of poverty found, for example, in numerous bhakti traditions finds a place in Sen's thinking, and it is unequivocally clear that the idioms through

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which Sen seeks to understand poverty are those made familiar to us by economists and professional social scientists working squarely within the parameters of the academic disciplines.

Much is also made in Suman Ghosh's film of Amartya Sen as the inheritor of the tradition of Rabindranath Tagore and Satyajit Ray. As a general rule, the invocation of their names as part of a genealogical exercise is calculated to prevent, rather than foment, discussion. It is supremely ironic that though Shantiniketan was supposed to resuscitate India's links with the larger world, and in particular with Asia, the Indian Ocean world, Africa and other parts of the world with which India's trading, cultural, religious, and intellectual ties have an astonishingly long history, Shantiniketan's largely Bengali students have never been able to steer very far from specific narratives of Bengali modernity. What begins in Shantiniketan

ends in Shantiniketan, and as in this film, which is peopled by fellow cheerleaders from the twin fan clubs of economists and Bengalis (all too often combined in the same person), one has the inescapable feeling that the bhadrak culture of Kolkata is much too busy referencing itself, applauding its own members, and swelling with pride at its own genius. Sugata Bose avers that, with Tagore, Ray, and Sen we are better positioned to comprehend that the "intellectual and cultural history of our times is characterised by competing and multiple universalisms", but a certain Gujarati bania, who knew much better, would have recognised this for the wishful thinking that it is. [EPW](#)

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Note

- 1 *Amartya Sen: A Life Re-examined*, First Run/Icarus Films, New York, 2003, 56 mins.