

Op-Ed

How free can we possibly ever be?

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Posted online: Monday, March 27, 2006 at 0000 hrs

Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum show how restraints on freedom in fact strengthen its benefits, says Pamela Philipose



Amartya Sen, we've heard, is a welfare economist, a development economist, a social choice theorist. But "feminist economist"? Sounds a bit over-the-top, perhaps? In fact, Sen was more than happy to wear his "feminist economist" hat during a recent interaction one New Delhi afternoon, with ethical philosopher Martha C. Nussbaum, Ernst Freund Distinguished Professor of Law and Ethics, University of Chicago, and Bina Agarwal, professor of economist at the Institute of Economic Growth, University of Delhi. Agarwal moderated the discussion. Of course, it would make sense to view an economist, who has constantly iterated his pluralistic identity as a human being, as a "pluralistic economist". But Sen, in fact, went one step further when he described gender equality as one of the hardest of human inequalities to address.

So how did Sen find himself in the company of two extremely distinguished and articulate women one Saturday afternoon in New Delhi? It was to release ***Capabilities, Freedom and Equality***, a book that engages critically with his work from a gender perspective, edited by **Bina Agarwal, Jane Humphries, Ingrid Robeyns (Oxford University Press)**. And Sen acknowledged the contribution of the lesser known tribe of feminist economists by stating at the outset that "the world has not fully realised how creative feminist economists have been". As for him, he said, he has on occasion even been happily included as part of the female gender. Once he received a letter saying, "Dear Ms A. Sen. THEY will never understand!" It made his day, he said.

Three broad themes figured in that afternoon conversation. The first was whether the "freedom" approach, favoured by Sen, was more effective than the "capabilities" approach favoured by Nussbaum, in understanding gender inequalities. Freedom, for Sen, had many different aspects and could be viewed from numerous perspectives. He believed that the capabilities approach captured most issues associated with women's deprivation, but not all of them. In contrast, Nussbaum saw "capabilities" as the central building block in the theory of justice. It was also very germane to any idea of "human dignity", she argued. She found the idea of freedom often made little sense because it came hand-in-hand with the idea of constraints. And, to her mind, constraints were often important. The freedom of a woman to enjoy her bodily integrity could be posited against the freedom of a man to beat her. The man, therefore, will have to be constrained from beating her. Ultimately, you will have to evaluate the value of each freedom.

Sen came back on this sharply. "I don't doubt that in order to gain freedom for some, you may have to restrain the freedom of others. But you don't celebrate that restraint." The person whose freedom is being curtailed has the right to ask: why? This right is an important one in order to judge the relative merits of freedom. Take the example of seat-belts. There is a reason why making them mandatory, and thus curbing the freedom of the commuter in the car, makes sense. Every time there is an accident, it imposes costs, not just on the persons in the car, but on society at large. Nussbaum, he acknowledged, was quite right to point out that the subject of freedom was a complex one.

Another theme that moderator Bina Agarwal introduced into the conversation was the role of the state. Nussbaum set down for the record that she is deeply interested in constitutions — including those of India and South Africa — and the role they play in ensuring rights for everybody, not just the majority with its traditional power interests. To her mind, there was a role for the state in addressing the burdens that women face, like the double working day, and the need to provide care to the elderly within the family. How can women, she argued, keep up with the rest, if they find one leg tied? What can help then, she believed, was political intervention. State care of the elderly, for instance, or an education for boys that incorporated the idea of housework as a worthy activity.

Sen agreed totally with her on this point. But he also clarified that the state should know in which area it should intervene and in which it should not. By way of analogy, he recalled that India was once described as a “socialist” state, yet, what kind of a socialist state was it anyway? Its primary education was a mess, its healthcare was a mess... At the same time, the state interfered in all kinds of things — like running bad hotels, for instance. So he believed, it was important to distinguish between appropriate state intervention and inappropriate state intervention.

The conversation then shifted to identity. Both Sen and Nussbaum, incidentally, endorse the idea of a “plural identity” and agree that every individual has the right to choose their identity, rather than accept what has been bestowed upon them by birth. Nussbaum saw the women’s movement as one that has generally not been tyrannical. Women, she said, have generally been respectful of the differences among them. It was a point that Sen agreed with.

For him, the fact that a person had plural identities was a given. When one group disturbs the air by claiming that only its identity has to be privileged, there are serious problems. He recalled being a child in the ‘40s: “One January, India was a total entity. By July, it had Hindu and Muslim halves.” This tendency to view large swathes of people as having one single identity is highly problematic, he believed, point to the recent trend in the West, to view Muslims as good and bad; as brutal and moderate. “But history tells us that there were all kinds of Muslim leaders, from brutal ones to a person like Akbar who was the first in the world to codify minority rights,” he said. Therefore perceiving people as a monolithic construct makes for all kinds of absurdities: “I do feel intensely strong about asserting the importance of plural identities. The basic assumption is that we belong to many, many identities.”

Thus did the afternoon wind to an end. Sen had begun with the observation that he couldn’t think of a more boring afternoon than an ‘Afternoon with Amartya’. Now there he was wide off the mark.

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