

AMARTYA SEN AND THE SEARCH FOR A MEANING OF DEVELOPMENT*

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1. Introduction

Amartya Sen's winning the Nobel Prize in Economics is a long awaited triumph of a human concern in Economics. It cannot be said that this prize has particularly honoured this concern in the past. Most of the past awards in Economics have been awarded primarily for technical contributions to the subject rather than for promoting insights toward increasing the welfare of peoples. This has been curious, insofar as the founder of the Nobel Prize originally intended the Prize to reward works that benefit mankind rather than merely promote knowledge as such. Sen's work on famines has made no small contribution toward creating awareness among policy makers and development establishments as well as among concerned public and the media all around the globe, as to why famines that are preventable occur and how they can be prevented. This has been a contribution toward the prevention of new occurrences of this horror.

In the course of his inquiry on famines and otherwise, Sen has reflected on the meaning of *development* as many others have done and have been doing ever since the term was coined¹. In this paper I shall try to place Sen in the search for a meaning of development. In particular, I shall discuss where Sen departs from the traditional development thinking, and also contrast him with the ongoing search for an alternative development paradigm rooted in the view of human beings fundamentally as *creative beings*. In so doing attempt has been made to deepen the understanding of the *creativist* view of development.

Sen's departure from traditional development economics is discussed in section 2. Section 3 discusses Sen's position, in particular his concepts of *entitlement* and *capability*, in relation to the *creativist* view of development. An objective of promoting the *creative engagement* of people is contrasted in section 4 with an objective of *poverty alleviation* with which much of the development discourse in recent times is concerned. Finally, the question of *individual* versus *collective* creativity is discussed (section 5). In so doing link is drawn between the *creativist* view of development and recent developments in a number of disciplines toward a new systemic understanding of the nature and evolution of life.

¹ after World War II, as a discourse for national and international action toward advancement of industrially backward countries.

2. Sen's departure from traditional development economics

Sen accepts the value of growth of incomes as an element in measuring development, but says that there is much more at stake. To him, the relevance of income is not in income *per se* but in the things that income can buy, and for most countries in question mere growth in income does not promote access to some of the vital needs of life. In this category Sen lists needs like "health, or education, or social equality, or self-respect, or freedom from social harassment "(Sen 1983, p 756); and elsewhere, *equal treatment of women* in the context of the specific forms of deprivation suffered by women from the social down to the family level (Sen 1985 & 1988). This view makes Sen move from the concept of income to the concept of *entitlement*, i.e. whether a person has entitlement or access to some of the vital things s/he needs in exchange for income or otherwise (e.g. by social right). This includes the question whether the thing in question is physically available at all for the person to buy (school for education or hospital for health service) as well as whether the social system grants one the rights and the quality of life that one needs for a humane existence. In thus conceiving development Sen rejects the "first approximation" approach to measuring development, viewing entitlement as a complex notion that can scarcely be reflected by "one real number " (Sen, 1983, *loc cit.*). And some of the elements of this notion are qualitative, not measurable objectively by numbers, and yet not to be bypassed. Sen thus moves away from *Cartesian* to *holistic*² thinking integrating economics, ethics and philosophy in the same inquiry.

In introducing qualitative indicators of development pertaining to the overall quality of life rather than income alone, Sen belongs to the *humanistic* trend in economic philosophy starting with the thoughts of Sismondi in the 18th century down to Mark Lutz, Manfred Max-Neef and others of the present day³, and overlapping also with Marx. Sen's own original contribution is the introduction of the notion of "entitlement" as discussed above as a more basic notion of access to needed things than access through income *per se*, and the associated notion of *capability* (Sen 1982) proposed by Sen as an even more basic notion than *entitlement*. Sen's notion of capability is a

² For an overview of the emergence of holistic thinking in modern inquiries in a number of disciplines see Capra (1982). See also n5.

³ See Ekins and Max-Neef (1992) for a collection of contributions on what has been called "Real Life Economics".

notion of some depth, going as it does beyond the concept merely of capability to acquire different things through income and social right, and including the notion of *capability to become something*, i.e. to choose between *different modes of life*. To give an example from the toiling population in Bengal, a manual rickshaw-puller in Calcutta or a cycle-rickshawallah in Dhaka may experience higher income if the relative demand for rickshaws rises, but without the capability to choose an alternative mode of living he may be eternally miserable pulling other people with his legs all his lives, and in this sense not experiencing any development worthy of human aspiration. Sen himself gives the equally poignant example of the “*domestic servant kneeling with the weight of work beyond one’s capacity*” (Sen 1990; translation from Bengali). Thus Sen sees *capability* as the set of life-styles one has a choice of, greater capability meaning greater freedom to choose between different life-styles. And entitlement in this sense includes to Sen an entitlement to a greater choice of life-styles, i.e. to greater *capability* which gives one the freedom thus to choose. As he has said, “*this introduces the question of right, i.e. right to one’s own life*” (Sen 1990, p 105; translation from Bengali). This makes the development calculus even more complex, but this is a cry from the very depth of the human soul to which development calculus must respond. On this humanistic view of development Sen stands unequivocally, and points to a depth of the poverty question from which the conventional income measurement of poverty is a pitiful long way off.

All this makes Sen quite a departure from the traditional development discourse. The mainstream development economics profession is yet to fully absorb and integrate Sen in its stride, not to speak of national and international development and policy making establishments. All are trailing hopelessly behind, chasing the growth of GDP tempered only with periodic head counts of people below the “poverty line”(on the question of poverty alleviation see section 4 below).

3. Sen and the creativist view of development

Sen's search for a humane meaning of development has run parallel to the trend in development discourse and activism that has viewed development as liberation of people's *creative energy*. Formal articulation of this trend started around the mid-seventies (Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation 1975;

Haque *et al.* 1977)⁴, and elaboration has continued to this day. While Sen has sought to humanize and deepen the problematic of development from within the arena of economics, articulation of the "creativist" trend has by and large remained outside the formal discourses in economics. There are differences between Sen's notion of *capability* and the notion of *creativity* that the alternative trend in development thinking has been articulating. In order to give concreteness to this comparison I shall first illustrate the working of creativity with a successful literacy movement in a village in Bangladesh with which I had personally interacted, which was initiated by the village youth shortly after the liberation war of 1971:

The youth of village Kachubari-Krishtapur (henceforth KK) in the district of Thakurgaon in northern Bangladesh had participated in the liberation war of 1971, and from their camp at the border had planned to wipe out illiteracy from their village after they would achieve independence. They did this in a 3-month intensive literacy movement ending in July 1973. The method that they used included elements such as the following:

- 1. Small village children (many half-naked) were assembled on the premises of a village school at dawn every morning, to parade through the village with slogans such as: "shame to the thumb sign! If you want to give the thumb sign get out of our village!"*
- 2. The youth went to the various government agency offices in Thakurgaon town six miles from the village, and told the clerks there: "We have launched a literacy movement in our village. If any villager from KK comes to you and wants to give the thumb-sign on any document will you please tell him/her that s/he has to give a nose-sign instead of the thumb-sign"! The clerks cooperated, and told the villagers of KK so, saying that government rules had changed after independence and only nose sign would be accepted in lieu of the written signature. Nose sign being a mark of the greatest humiliation, villagers from KK who could not give a proper written signature went back to the village and to the literacy centres that the village youth had opened, to learn to read and write.*
- 3. An old woman in the village was dying. The youth went to her death-bed, and told her: "grandma, when you go to the Lord the Lord's agent will come to you to take your statistics – your name,*

⁴ I have discussed elsewhere the creativist views of development implicit in Marx and Mao (Rahman 1989). For my own further reflections on the subject see Rahman (1993c).

what village you come from, etc. Then you will be asked to sign, and you will offer to give the thumb-sign. This will be a matter of great shame for our village – we cannot send you like this to the Lord. Before you go you must learn to write!" The dying woman was taught how to write before she died, and the news was announced and celebrated in the village with great gusto, and the incident was showed in a village drama⁵.

I was at that time a Member of the Government's Planning Commission with Education as one of my charges. With my training at Harvard University I had been busy doing input-output matrices to find out how much resources - - by way of school buildings, furniture, teachers, books etc. -- would be needed to reduce the rate of illiteracy in the country by 'x' percentage points in 5 years. The result, invariably, was showing up by way of deficit budgets to add to the size of the government's submission for "foreign development assistance". And here the youth of KK wiped out illiteracy from the village completely in a few months of social mobilization⁶ without needing resources from outside, and with social organizational resources created and social energy recreated to move further forward.

We may now reflect on *capability* versus *creativity*. On the definitional plane, creativity is a pursuit of novelty while capability without creativity repeats the conventional. Creativity has no blueprint, and uncertainty is at the heart of it. Does creativity require any given level of capability? Among the youth in KK who accomplished their novel feat most were below high-school age, and a few had taken high school exams with some passing and some failing. *Capability*-wise they would not have promised what they achieved and with the resources at their disposal. The 'social technology' that they invented to achieve their objective was "*appropriate*" and cost-effective, invoking the sense of individual and collective *self-respect* of the villagers (one of the elements in Sen's non-economic objectives of development). An example of *creativity* that did not wait and did not need to wait, for raising the *capability* of the actors who had no education or training for the task they addressed, to deliver what both the market as well as the state failed to deliver. And it is conceivable that an attempt on the part of the

⁵ A fuller account of this literacy movement is available in Bengali in Rahman (1992 & 1997).

⁶ The writer went to the village and personally verified that every villager above the age of seven, male and female, was able to read and write easy conversational sentences and sign one's name. This was the first ever village in the country from which illiteracy in this sense had been completely wiped out.

state to "train" them – to raise their *capability* -- for this task would have misdirected them away from what was possible and how.

This by no means is a point or an argument *against* raising the *capability* of the people to promote their creativity. There cannot be any question that *capability*, if raised by education, training or otherwise in a proper social context and environment, can enhance the creativity of people by adding possible new directions of creativity as well as by bringing technical knowledge, experience, etc. at the disposal of creativity. It may be suggested, however, that *the ability of an individual or a collective of individuals to astonish the world by one's creativity is independent of one's educational status or technical knowledge or experience and, in that sense, of one's capability*. It should also be independent of one's income or entitlement, except to the extent that creativity is a function of human organs which require a minimum of nourishment. It may also be suggested that any person's creativity at any level of *capability* is unlimited even if one's creativity may be enhanced by higher capability. Indeed, this, i.e. the power of unlimited creativity at any level of education and training, may be suggested as the basic quality that distinguishes the human species from other living beings.

And if so, then one may suggest that human beings must have an urge to fulfil their creativity, by way of doing things themselves, solving their own problems themselves in their own ways, exploring, inventing and experimenting⁷. As it has been observed by India's greatest philosopher, Rabindranath Tagore:

"In his experiments with creating life the Creator suddenly becomes quite daring when he comes to creating human beings. He does not confine the freedom of its soul. Outwardly the species is thrown naked, armourless and weak in all respects while its soul is freed to fly. Elated by the joy of this freedom it cries out: 'I shall do the impossible!', meaning I shall not accept that what has been happening

⁷ See Rahman (1989) for a discussion of this urge as a "basic need" in addition to the five basic needs – food, clothing, shelter, medical care, education - that are conventionally recognized. See also Rahman (1990, section 4) for a critique of conventional notion of treating saving as *sacrifice of consumption* insofar as saving (investment) may be a positive way of channeling one's creativity - an ultimate act of *consumption*. This also questions conventional "optimum growth theory" preoccupied with optimizing time-streams of *consumption*, since the distinction between consumption and saving (investment) from the point of view of activities yielding immediate direct satisfaction disappears.

all the time will continue to happen – what does not happen will also happen".

(Tagore, 1947 ed. pp 320-321. *Present author's translation*).

The most decisive proof of this proposition is, of course, “old man *Adam*”, who initiated the process of human civilization merely with his two bare hands and his brain, without any “entitlement” or “capability” in the modern sense (for an inspiration on this question recall Michelangelo’s famous painting “*The Creation of Adam*”, in which the Creator is transferring his creative power to his best creation⁸).

The urge of the human species to create is an urge for *self-realization*, a notion widely found in the creativist development literature. The term was perhaps first suggested by Aristotle in his concept of *entelechy* (literary meaning “self-completion”). People must have many other urges, but the urge to fulfil one’s creativity and thereby realize oneself is primary⁹. And it should, therefore, be an objective of development to give the people freedom and space, to stimulate (“animate”; see Fals Borda 1985 & Tilakaratna 1987) them and to assist them, to express their creativity at any level of their development. This, “creativists” would argue, should be a primary *entitlement* to which the people should have a right.

The youth of village KK in Bangladesh got this right from the liberation war of 1971. The unauthorized support that they got from the government agency clerks at Thakurgaon also derived its legitimacy from the liberation war. Thus seizing their entitlement to take creative initiatives the youth in turn provided entitlement to literacy to the villagers which otherwise was not available and would not have been available in such a short time. There are countless other examples all over the world of people’s mobilizations or community action to innovatively create entitlements for the people in food, education, health, extension services, technology etc.¹⁰, as against the *state-versus-market* discourse that is usually prevalent and to which Sen has also

⁸ The *Upanishad* and *Sufism*, two religious traditions of the Indian subcontinent, have both equated the human being with the “Creator”.

⁹ As modern quantum physics has established, Man (the term is generically used to include woman) *creates the world itself* since reality does not exist independently of Man’s method of observing it. It is interesting to note that about the same time that Werner Heisenberg and Niels Bohr were debating with Einstein on a scientific level on this finding of quantum theory which Einstein could not accept, Tagore made the same point at a philosophical level in a private exchange with Einstein (Dutta and Robinson 1995, pp 294-295. See also Tagore 1931).

¹⁰ Literature on this abound. Only as examples, see Chavunduka 1985, Morse *et al* 1995, Rahman 1984 & 1993c, and Tilakaratna 1984 & 1989.

confined his own reflections. It is important, one would suggest, that the *third agency* – local communities and people's collectives – be considered as a serious alternative to provide some of the desired entitlements to the people¹¹. As argued above, this would with the same stroke provide entitlement to the people to express their creativity and thereby help them fulfil this primary urge as well, and thus to recognize them as the *subject* rather than the *object* of development. This is not to suggest that community action will in *all* cases deliver any particular entitlement more efficiently than the state or the market; but there are examples of colossal and costly failures of both the market and the state to provide a desired entitlement to the people, and of community action doing better, both in economic as well as in human terms. The literacy movement in village KK in Bangladesh is but one such example¹².

4. Creative engagement versus poverty alleviation

Development economics has been concerned with sufficiently remunerative employment for the people that reduce their pecuniary poverty without regard for the scope for creativity in employment. Economics traditionally views employment or work by itself to have negative utility, desirable only because of the income it fetches. Creative engagement on the other hand is engagement in work that by itself gives direct utility¹³. The neglect of the creative aspect or otherwise of human engagement has resulted in a sad labeling of people as "poor" simply because of their income or entitlement status irrespective of the fulfillment they may be getting from their life through creative engagement. A classic story of the rejection of such labeling by the concerned people themselves has been told by Wolfgang Sachs (1992) about his encounter with the *Tepitans* in Mexico. The Tepitans had been ravaged by an earthquake and were

¹¹ As Tagore observed (Tagore 1905 p 527-8): "today the state is looked up to to provide water, and one has to kneel to the state even for provision of education. The tree which once blossomed its own flowers is today spreading its emaciated branches toward the sky to make petitions for a shower of flowers. Even supposing that its petition were granted, what is its fulfillment from this ?" (translation by the author).

¹² Another outstanding example from Bangladesh is the *Self-reliance Movement in Rangpur* district: this movement during the famine of 1974 rejected all forms of relief as well as the gruel kitchens set up by the state, imposed community control upon surplus food in village households, and provided entitlement to food to distressed families against honourable work devised in community meetings. Thus entitlement both to *food* and human *self-respect* was ensured (Rahman 1993, ch.V, & Rahman 1998).

¹³ The traditional view of development has placed machines above people, losing sight of the fact that machines are also an expression of people's creativity, and of the point that the *act of creation* of the machine rather than its *use* is the more glorious human act.

engaged in a total community mobilization to come out of the disaster. Sachs looking at their impressive mobilization and collective engagement nevertheless slipped, and called these people "terribly poor". To this a Tepitan stiffened and said, "*No somos pobres, somos Tepitanos*" ("*We are not poor, we are Tepitans*"). A story worth telling a thousand times over to poverty watchers in the development profession and establishments¹⁴.

This is not to suggest that these people should not have more entitlements than they have – in fact, they should have entitlements not only to things like food, education and health services but also to the "surplus" that they produce and lose to *rentier* classes in the society, a question of entitlement that has not yet featured in the (non-Marxist) development discourse. These are undoubtedly questions of their *rights*. But it is also a question of their right as to how they are labeled – by their positive attributes or by what they lack, *to be admired and respected or to be looked at with compassion if not pity*. And the fact that they are fulfilled by their creative engagement in shaping their lives is more than what poverty alleviators can reasonably promise to most of the "poor" of any nation in their lifetime. Certainly, many of these "poor" will die as "poor" as they are doing, no matter what state policies are taken to provide material entitlements for them, simply because the eradication of mass poverty is a long-run question. Hence the operational question for many of the "poor" is: how much fulfillment can they have during the life that they will live? In an answer to this question the possibility of giving them fulfillment from creative engagement, deriving direct utility from such engagement in addition to whatever other entitlements that can be provided to them, should seem to merit serious consideration. And, as we have shown and argued, creative engagement by the people can add to the entitlements that the state (and the market) can provide to the multitudes of a county's "poor", and this possibility of *self-provision of entitlements as subjects* rather than as *objects* of development simultaneously bringing direct fulfillment from *creative labour* may not be overlooked.

5. Individual versus collective creativity

The examples given above of people's creativity are examples of collective creativity in which people have set tasks for themselves and worked together

¹⁴ See also postscript to chapter , this volume.

to accomplish them. In the process individuals thus engaged, of course, display individual creativity toward accomplishing the common task. This may be contrasted with individual creativity to accomplish individual tasks independent of any collective objective. In its Cartesian tradition development thinking has traditionally been concerned more with questions of individual development aggregated into measures of social development rather than with organic development of collective entities or "communities". The creativist view of development on the other hand has been more concerned with "collective development" within the framework of collective action. The principal motive for this bias toward collective creativity in the creativist view has been the consideration that individuals traditionally deprived of access to means of development need to join hands and act together to overcome structural obstacles to their development and to the liberation of their creativity¹⁵. However, in recent times a theory is gaining ground emerging from systemic inquiries in several disciplines leading to an alternative understanding of living systems and their evolution, a theory which lends additional support to the collectivist view of development derived from the notion of collective creativity¹⁶.

This emerging theory of living systems departs from Darwinism in explaining the evolution of life: while the role of random mutation and natural selection (competition) are still acknowledged, the focus in this theory is more on creativity, on life's reaching out into novelty, creating forms of ever-increasing diversity and complexity. Creativity referred to here is the collective creativity of a species whose members are interconnected through a special pattern of network¹⁷. It is being established

¹⁵ There is the very important question of what is preventing meaningful development of countries of the Third World. This question of the national and international political economy is a subject that is being discussed widely, but again, outside the mainstream of development economics. Sen has not analyzed this question in any detail (to the best of my knowledge) but has, indeed, taken the radical position that "*Much of the task of economic development consists of changing the entire structure in order to eliminate the conditions which are responsible for the injustice and exploitation that characterize the world today*" (Sen 1990, p 105; translation from Bengali by the present author. *Italics added*). Development economics, indeed, will remain a discipline of questionable value if not altogether misleading, if it cannot unite with analysis of the *political economy of development*.

Contradiction between man and nature also generates collective action. For a further discussion see the author's reflections in Rahman (1981), pp 46-47.

¹⁶ A lucid exposition of this emerging theory by way of a synthesis of findings in the various disciplines – e.g. biology, psychology, ecology and cybernetics – has recently been presented by Fritjof Capra (1996).

¹⁷ The pattern of network has been termed "*autopoiesis*", meaning "self-making" (as a network), a pattern in which the function of each component is to participate in the production or transformation ("development") of other components in the network (Maturana and Varela 1972 & 1980). The underlying concept has striking similarity with concepts of "building" and "sharpening" *each other* found in the vernacular language of Bantu tribes in South Africa as embodied in their words "*uakana*" and "*uglolana*"

that not individual existence but *relationships* are the essence of the living world – just as an objective reality does not exist independent of the observer, a component (an "individual") in a living system does not exist (*as a question of self-cognition*) except in relation to other parts (Bateson 1972,1979). A living system whose components are thus interconnected evolves – transforms itself – collectively and organically by creatively adapting to its environment and reaching out for novelty. A theory of evolution of living systems is thus emerging which gives vital importance to cooperation in the evolutionary process as against Darwinism which sees mainly competition in nature, and also points to *collective self-realization* as its internal motive force for evolution or *development* (creative unfolding).

However, components of a living system may enjoy various degrees of autonomy vis-a-vis the system (collective) which facilitate their creativity *as individuals*. This depends on the development of the *brain* of the species in question toward giving the components *power of individual conceptualization*. Such power enables an individual component of a species to create an *individual reality* or world to provide motive force for one's creativity and self-realization. The human brain being the most advanced among all species, individual members of mankind enjoy the maximum degree of (mental) autonomy for individual action. And this creates the great problematic of tension between individuals and "society" in the human race as individual realities differ widely, the problematic whose logical properties Arrow, Sen and others have sought to unveil in their works on *social choice*. This problematic changes its arena of discourse when people get engaged in collective social action. It is then no longer a question of aggregation of individual orderings for social choice; it gets transformed instead into a question of arriving at a collective *consensus* for collective choice. This question of collective choice is not merely a question of formal logic to choose the "collective optimum" with which the above discourses on social choice have been preoccupied, but also of agreed norms of democratic decision making as well as of processes and culture of interpersonal communication in which *dialogical exchanges* as well as *sensory communication* and their dynamics can play significant mediating roles. Instead of Pareto-optimal points the problematic may now yield a different set of "optimal" points in the sense of *points of consensus* which all members of the collective concerned accept, with or without reservation,

respectively. These are profound popular conceptualizations of the notion of non-hierarchical *collective development* in which no one goes "ahead" of others and thereafter turns to "develop" others (see Rahman 1990, section 4) – conceptualizations now finding support in evolution theory.

while superior points may remain to be explored. The acceptance gives such points an "equilibrium" character (the collective does not break down, and deviations would be censored by the collective by agreement), and makes these points "superior" to those Pareto-optimal points which may not be acceptable to one or other of the parties involved. In this sense the *field* of what one may call "cooperative equilibrium" points may be viewed as superior to the field of "competitive equilibrium" points which Pareto-optimum points are.

Many agree that the world today is facing a crisis of survival not only of the human race but of the planet itself, as a result of individuals (or small networks of individuals) channeling their creativity in directions against the vital interests of mankind as well as of nature. Indeed, the concept of modern civilization seems tilted more toward the granting and protecting of individual rights and encouraging competition within the human race than toward promoting cooperation and safeguarding vital interests of society, mankind and nature. The “dignity of the individual” is extolled with an almost total unconcern for the “dignity of human relationships” (Tagore’s phrase. see n18). Perhaps there is need for deep reflection here, to discover how a better balance may be attained, and an awareness can be kindled that the pain of any member of our race (and of nature) is my pain to which I must give a dignified response¹⁸. But this is a question not merely of rights but also of *practice*, to keep *connectedness and cooperation*, between people and between man and nature, as a live and active force.

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¹⁸ The “human development index” of the UNDP also misses this point, treating as it does the question of individual development as an individual question unrelated with one’s relation with fellow humans. This would certify some of the most “underdeveloped” humans as highly “developed” –e.g. Rudolf Hitler, Ferdinand Marcos, General Yahya, General Pinochet – insofar as they might score high marks according to the criteria of income, education (as conventionally assessed) and life expectancy. The missing criterion is *caring for fellow members of society* – to use an expression by Tagore referred to by Sen (1997), the “dignity of human relationship”. It should not be difficult to devise indicators of this criterion: e.g. for individuals, effective concern and care for fellow humans as testified by family, neighbouring community and wider society; for society, one could start with first approximation measures like the number of active “mutual help and care” organizations in the society in relation to its population.

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