

Sen's "Development as Freedom"*

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"I felt that I had found my religion at last, the religion of Man, in which the infinite becomes defined in humanity and came close to me so as to need my love and cooperation" – Rabindranath Tagore

1. The standpoint of the book is one held by some quarters mainly in the west, that the urge to satisfy one's "individualist" urges is the only (principal?) motivation of one's life. Development has been conceptualized as the expansion of "freedom" – a term that replaces prevailing terms like "access"/"entitlement" (Sen)/satisfaction of needs etc. - to satisfy this urge in all its dimensions.
2. Many will disagree with this standpoint, as an empirical proposition as well as a normative human value. Sen himself will, in both terms, to the extent that he has had an urge himself to spend much of his mental labour and time for the benefit of humanity and has spent a lifetime in pursuit of this urge, all the time seeking freedom and fulfillment in this direction.
3. An individual is born and brought up with both "individualist" as well as "collectivist" urges, the latter derived from identities with collectives like immediate family, kinship, community, a football team, society, nation, the human race as a whole. Different persons exhibit these several identities in different mixes of degrees, and this is also determined/influenced by one's experience of association with such various collectives.
4. For the great bulk of the human population these associations are quite strong. A large part of these associations take the form of such collectives assisting in the birth and development of an individual as long as s/he is unable to take care of oneself –e.g. the role and intense care of the immediate family (in many communities extended families) in the birth and initial nurturing of a child when the child is totally helpless in an alien world with undeveloped capabilities to face this world; and progressively expanding role of wider communities/society in helping the development of the child. Except for abnormal cases one develops senses

of identities with such collectives and gives "a part of oneself" toward "development" ("expansion of freedom") of such identity (ies).

My father used to have free boarding and food in any house on the 32-mile way from and to his school in Mymensingh to and from his village before and after vacations, without any introduction except that he was a student from such and such village. After he passed high school a gentleman from Calcutta who presided over the school's prize distribution ceremony and saw this barefooted poor boy walking out of the dais with a load of prize books, offered him free lodging in his house in Calcutta to study in the Presidency College. "In return" (a bad phrase - it should be "as a result of the identity with an wider collective that he developed") my father helped countless persons from his village and thana pursue their education and get established in their lives by hosting them in his own house or supporting their education in other ways, and in doing so he neglected the elementary needs ("freedom") of his own immediate family (wife and children) who often spent days without meat or fish which fell short as so many other non-immediate-family-mouths had to be fed or whose education and health care in distant towns where they were studying with my father's support had to be provided for.

Sen will agree that my father was no exception – a very typical case of community mutual support for development of each other, a culture which is still strong in many parts of the south and also in some communities in the north with associated indigenous perceptions of "development" – recall the south-African Bantu language term *uakana* meaning "**to develop/build each other**" which I have discussed in my book *People's Self-Development* (Zed books, 1993, p 221ff); also the meaning of the very term "development" given by villagers of Matabeleland, Zimbabwe in their own language as *vusanani*, meaning "**support each other to get up**" (*op cit*, p 135). What a great pity that such profound indigenous popular concepts of development encapsulated in such powerful vernacular vocabulary have been sidetracked by social scientists social philosophers and national and international development establishments, to force in concepts of development so totally alien to the life culture and thought paradigms of many real communities all over the world whose development we are trying to conceptualize! The foundational concept of development – at least a profound dimension of it - has already been given by these people themselves who are seeking the "freedom" to realize such development of their lives.

3. Sen asks for social commitment to promote individual (individualist) freedom. What follows from the above, and what is generally asked in such societies, is the opposite as well – i.e. individual commitment to promote "freedom" of such various collectives – family, kinships, communities, the football team, the wider society, seen as entities with organic lives that also seek freedom for self-expression. To the extent that an individual identifies (a part of) oneself with one or more of such collectives one is essentially seeking another dimension of one's self-expression, viz, as an organic part of a collective. Development, or in Sen's new terminology, expansion of freedom of such collectives is ultimately an individual's own urge to the extent that one has a strong sense of identity with such collective(s).

4. Different societies show different mixes in the (average) spread of people's senses of identities with such different collectives. The collectivist sense has generally weakened in the west, and some societies have become on the whole extremely individualist, identifying now mostly with the "nuclear family" only or even less ("quantum families?") with children leaving parental homes at a very early age and the high divorce rates, with the degree of "individualism" threatening to hit the 100 % mark. Sen's treatise on Development as Freedom seems (may be misunderstood as?) to address (addressing) the question of individual freedom of such societies only. The consistency of his proposition for social commitment to promote individual freedom in such an individualist society may also then be questioned – in a society with such individualist values as the only (or most dominant) value, there cannot be any "social commitment" to promote individual freedoms – members of corporate organs such as the "state", or an "NGO", have to be paid sufficiently to work to promote the "freedom" of others **as a purely business (market) proposition**. This makes organs like the state, or an NGO, essentially "private enterprises" for sale of services to members of the society. We know, indeed, that many states and NGOs are, indeed, virtually no more than private enterprises, using also all the arts of "advertisements" like slogans of "garibi hatao" and "democracy" and what not to capture the enterprise and extract the utmost from the citizens by fair means and foul. Such organs (agents), then, will provide education or health care to the citizens only if paid by the society not just the service costs but their "opportunity costs for doing so," (with outright criminal activity being one very lucrative alternative opportunity today –

in Bangladesh the criminal industry is the largest industry of the country with all the political parties of any worth as well-known paid patrons) and a "moral" invocation of social commitment that Sen provides has really no place in the values paradigm of his own treatise on Development as Freedom..

5. But fortunately, as I have said above, collectivist urges are still alive in most societies, and even in atomized societies like much of the west such urges are hopefully present in a dormant state if not immediately seen as active. The problem in such societies is that these urges are unable to control the relevant social structures like organs of the state (rules like that of Nelson Mandella, Jimmy Carter, excepted). The basic motivational challenge of development is not to ask social organs like the state and NGOs to serve the cause of individualist freedom (which is a contradiction of terms if individualist urges were seen as the only urges of individuals), but to strengthen and awaken the collectivist urges of individuals and promote the process of attaining a better balance between individualist and collectivist urges in agencies like the state and NGOs so that they look at their task as a little bit less of a "private enterprise" and a little bit more of realizing their own "freedom" of collectivist pursuits (serving the society as a part of one's own identity).
6. The concept of individual freedom itself should include the **freedom to retain the surplus** of the product of one's own labour to which Sen has not alluded in his book. Many "poor" people have become so by losing this freedom in the first place, and after their surpluses are being taken away mostly by fraudulent and now-a-days more and more criminal means they are being asked to be grateful to external credit giving agencies for providing them with credit at the creditor's terms. Many such credit-giving agencies are themselves doing middlemen's business with the products of their clients taking away their surplus further. The cause of freedom would be much better served if these people were helped in the first place - or at least simultaneously - to retain their surpluses thus arresting an important process of *creation of poverty – creation of "unfreedom"* - about which development discourses are usually silent. Otherwise even with the best of (collectivistically motivated!) intentions of such external organs wanting to promote the freedom of the poor they will only be *trying to walk up a downward-falling escalator* as "unfreedom" in the society will continually go on being created.

7. While the market is an indispensable means of promoting "freedom" in a general sense the poor and powerless cannot compete with the rich and powerful in the market game without enhancing their own bargaining/staying power. This may only come from their collective strength – e.g. through means such as collective /cooperative marketing/storage and collective bargaining, highlighting an important role of the collective identity of people to serve themselves as individuals as well. (Unfortunately, in Bangladesh I have tried very hard to make the NGOs work to promote cooperative marketing/storage of inputs/outputs/consumables of small producers toward making the market serve them better, without success – NGOs prefer to replace the middlemen themselves to appropriate the producers' surplus themselves – i.e. to expand their own "freedom" !! This is of course only consistent with Sen's (implicit ?) position of individualism as the only driving force in human behaviour.
8. To repeat, I suggest it is vital to recognize that individuals have their sense of identities spread out among a set of "collectives", starting from the trivial collective that the individual (family) oneself is, and embracing a set of others, and to extend the concept of "freedom" ("entitlement"/"elementary needs"/ urges) to embrace freedom for self-realization with all these different identities of oneself. There are naturally conflicts among these different identities as everyone knows within oneself – their resolution is ultimately a matter of coming to terms with one's various identities, in which process social discourses (education in the broadest term) also helps. Development as freedom is then the task of releasing the process of self-realization of individuals as complex personalities with a set of different identities – healthy identities, of course, not wanting to consciously harm or abuse such identities of others (principle of reciprocal rights or freedom).
9. It is widely held that the creation and perpetuation of poverty all over the globe as well the progressive impoverishment/destruction of nature (taking away the freedom of nature to live its own beautiful life in healthy exchange with the human race) is the result of structural dominance of the individualist (selfish; partisan) motivation in humans. A theory of evolution is also emerging that sees a strengthening of the sense of collective identity of humans as the hope of survival of the globe (Capra, F. *The Web of Life*, 1996). This points to the need for not merely enhancing people's entitlement (freedom) to education but also to reflect

very seriously on the **content of education**. This raises the question of the education content of the "Human Development Index".

10. When I first read about the **Human Development Index** of Mahbubul Huq I had exclaimed: according to this index persons like Hitler, Marcos, Yahya Khan and Pinochet all have to be declared as among the most developed human beings on earth! Obviously something fundamental is missing in the index. The authors of the index have themselves thought of the welfare of others in developing the index, but, paradoxically, this "altruist" value has not been wanted in the concept of human development! Shouldn't the value of caring for others' welfare that Sen (and Mahbubul Huq) exhibits in all his writings on development and welfare be included as a very desirable value that we want to see in all human beings, and shouldn't one's education be judged also by this very important standard?

This also calls for serious reflection on the method of education starting with education of the child in the family and moving on to insitutional schooling, insofar as values are best acquired through living practice and not just through class-room teaching. Recall Tagore's efforts toward combining class-room teaching with social practice.

In this connection we may recall that the "educated" in **Kerala**, to whose rate of literacy Sen has so often alluded, has a unique distinctiveness in their "science for social revolution" movement in which intelligentsia, professionals and the student community go to the people every year at their own expense in massive social mobilizations chosing one specific subject each year, to bring modern knowledge on that subject to the people. This gives a different meaning to education beyond mere class-room teaching and conventional "literacy" and "capability" training, a meaning deep and as a part of the concept of "development" (and "freedom") which Sen might wish to acknowledge and reflect upon.

11. The question of values is also important in the context of situations of **scarcity** in which freedom in Sen's sense cannot be immediately given to everybody, and the question of distribution of "freedom", therefore, becomes very important. The experiment that I made in 1974 with flood-stricken villagers in Brahmanbaria district in a flood-and-famine relief effort (*Aporito Bangladesh*, UPL 1993, pp 95-97) illustrates the point in its acutest form: who deserves relief first in a famine condition if access

to food ("freedom" in Sen's sense) is acutely scarce – *the family which has not eaten for two days or one which has not eaten for four days?* When I posed this question sharply to the villagers who were initially driven by their very understandable but selfish individualist urge for food, they all changed their position and pointed to the families who had been starving for the longest period – they revealed their "collectivist" - "humanist" if you like as distinct perhaps from "animalist" – identity. This is the crux of the question of distribution equity when freedom for all in Sen's sense cannot be given as there is not enough freedom to distribute. The answer to this question, and the responsibility for this, as I had decided in that relief experiment, may not be given/taken by outsiders but decided by the people themselves – i.e., through intense social discourse, with the moral question involved thrown to the people as a challenge to their humanity.

12. The association of poverty with unfreedom also needs deeper reflection. There have been, and still are, societies/communities economically poor but socially free, living their own lives without fulfilling what are considered today to be the elementary needs of humans. Old man "Adam" was a *free* man, living his own life and moving forward with his own labour and surplus - which he had the "freedom" to control himself - to build the foundation of the human civilization that we have today. Freedom as the general connotation of the term perhaps is, may be seen as a social state of **uncontrol by "others" on one's life and actions** rather than as lack of entitlements to/access to/fulfillment of needs and urges of humans enumerated by social researchers/intellectuals. (The concept of "others" in the above statement needs to be clarified as agents with whom one does not have any sense of organic identity as one may have with a community or such collective entity whose [democratic] decisions one accepts voluntarily as a willing member of the collective). It is also perhaps better not to mix up the concept of freedom with such concepts of access to/ entitlements to/ fulfillment of material-biological needs and urges etc., with their known problematic derived from scarcity and relations of social power to access such needs both of which need to be addressed frontally.
13. The tribute in the Preface to Wolfensohn's stewardship of the World Bank will give pain to southern "nationalists" who see the Bank as an instrument of ensuring the domination of northern establishments over the south with its big financier role, aimed at establishing client states in

the south to pursue policies of enhancing inequalities in their societies to promote markets for goods and expertise of the north. Its arrogant and childish prescription of the structural adjustment policy promised to work as a talisman irrespective of a nation's historical evolution, stage of development and indigenous culture and capabilities has done immense harm to the south. It has devastated Africa which the Bank seems to be realizing now, sadly too late. Some day it will recognize the immense harm it is doing to Bangladesh: this will also be too late – it already is. The departure from the Bank of Ravi Kanbur who had mobilized south-and-people-oriented social scientists from all over the globe to help formulate a more humane Bank policy needs badly to be explained.

14. For shortage of time I have not talked in this presentation of the many positive things that Sen has said in this book – in particular of his repeated position against GDP-fetishism in development discourse, of his valuable notions of and discussions on "capability" and "entitlement" and of his observations on famine which, however, are well known from his previous writings. Actually, upon reading the above paragraphs Wahid Mahmud pointed out to me that Sen did define "capabilities" as ranging from meeting basic needs to "complex and sophisticated ones related to performing a fulfilling social role", and it is possible that I have missed this concern lying somewhere explicitly or implicitly in *Development as Freedom* . However, capability to serve society is innate and does not rest on "development" (education/training in the modern sense) as is seen in most indigenous societies, although specific social service tasks may require specific education/training. In any case, I wish that this concern were in the front line of the discourse, as I fear that devoid of this as a dominant urge mankind is doomed to keep rolling down the path of increasing criminalization and self-destruction in the very name of "freedom", and the economic poverty of the great bulk of mankind will continue to remain a "marketable commodity" for most agents in charge of this "enterprise" than as a genuine social commitment. The development discourse badly needs to be cautioned that atomization of interests/identities may represent an element of regression in terms of **development of society as an organic entity** at the same time that individual freedom (development) may be promoted, and a synthesis between the two needs to be sought by continuous social dialogue and practice. In particular, development ("expansion of freedom") of societies of the south in a more meaningful sense than growth of GDP which Sen is seeking, badly needs to harness the indigenous mutual support cultures

of the south that western masters of today's development discourse born and brought up in atomized societies seem unable even to understand.

15. I hope that the above comments will help Sen, one of the world's foremost economic and social philosophers and one whose personal reputation for loyalty and care for his friends is so well known (see *My Story of 1971*, Liberation War Museum, Dhaka, 2001, p 53), to reflect further on the education and "freedom" each individual needs to serve not only one's isolated self but also humanity.

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