Book

An inclusive worldview: Amartya Sen's memoir

Amartya Sen's contributions to economics, social science more generally, and philosophy are so profound and wide-ranging that they defy easy categorisation. In addition to his technical work on the appropriate choice of technology in low-income and middle-income countries and on the axiomatic underpinnings of social choice theory, he has broadened the scope of enquiry to bring in more complex approaches to the idea of development, the explicit analysis of deprivation, how to capture and measure wellbeing and inequality, the nature of human freedom, our understanding of democracy, and much else.

Obviously, Sen has had huge influence within and outside the economics profession. But what influenced his own intellectual development? *Home in the World: A Memoir* provides many insights. This charming and absorbing book, which has the flavour of a relaxed conversation with a gifted raconteur, provides some idea. Sen's memoir traces the experiences, encounters, and relationships that determined his conceptual concerns and intellectual evolution. As the scion of a cultured and intellectual family of East Bengal—his father was a chemistry professor in Dhaka and Sen was born before the Independence that created India and Pakistan—he grew up in peaceful homes but in turbulent but fascinating times. Sen describes an early memory of "going to my father's laboratory, and the huge excitement of seeing that one liquid mixed with another in a test tube could generate something altogether different and unexpected". This fascination with transformation—or its absence—permeates the book.

Personal reminiscences are interspersed with more general reflections on history, society, the economy, and politics. Memories of childhood travels along the rivers of Bengal lead to a discourse on the importance of rivers for trade and economic development, their role in cultural life and sociological imagination, the implications of rivers changing course and their immense power to provide and destroy. A rumination on Aung San Suu Kyi, a friend of his youth, becomes a consideration of the power of propaganda in transforming a "gentle population" as hatred against the Rohingya was systematically whipped up by the military. Sen writes: "What is happening in Burma (or Myanmar, as it is now called, a name championed by the military) is, of course, particularly barbaric, but the effectiveness of agitations against particular minority groups can be seen in many countries in the world". Observing his fellow female students downplaying their own talents makes him ask whether "a psychology of modesty could be one of the factors contributing to the strong gender bias against women in India".

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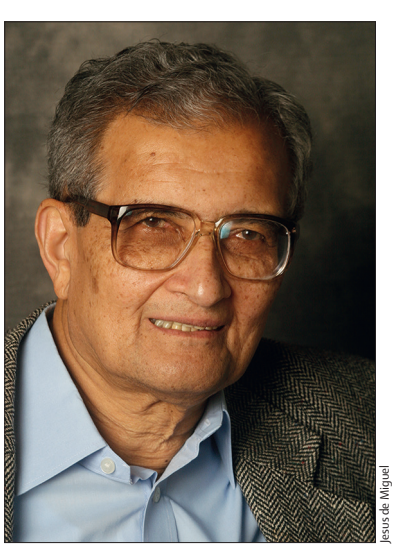
Predictably for someone with such a stellar career, Sen interacted with some of the most important intellectuals of the 20th century as teachers, friends, colleagues, and students. His descriptions of other scholars are usually generous and occasionally humorous. Yet it emerges that some of his most important research interests developed despite, or even in opposition to, those interactions. Sen recounts how his interest in social choice theory did not arise in the classroom, but was initially sparked by Kenneth Arrow's book borrowed for a few hours from his undergraduate classmate and close friend Sukhamoy Chakravarty (who in turn had borrowed it for the night from an indulgent bookseller on College Street in Kolkata). It then became a lifelong passion, despite the subsequent efforts of his teachers at Cambridge University in the UK to direct him into what they felt were more "productive" areas. Social choice theory concerns whether and how individual preferences—or opinions, interests, or welfare—can be combined to reach a collective decision that reflects social welfare. Sen's work in this area has broadened the theory of social choice to include the aspects of fairness, justice, compensation, rights, and even liberty.

The origins of several concerns that have animated Sen's work over the decades become evident in this book. Recognition of inequality is almost inevitable for



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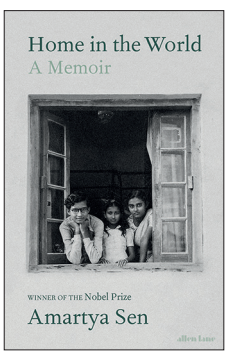
Amartya Sen



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a sensitive person growing up in such an unequal society as India. Childhood experience of the Bengal famine of 1943 exposed him to the possibility of desperate hunger and the implications of unequal access to food, driven by what he would subsequently describe as "failure of exchange entitlements". And perhaps his personal experience of receiving treatment for oral cancer when he was 18 years old and his subsequent intermittent battle with cancer informed his lifelong concerns with health and public health conditions. Sen's own privileged education made the condition of others around him who were deprived of schooling appear even more stark. Experience of student politics and subsequent ideological battles in university departments made him "suspicious of political piety" and deeply invested in promoting greater tolerance of plurality.

One leitmotif of the book is that of identity—or rather, identities, which have both informed and vexed Sen in different ways. This is why the book is appropriately titled: it is hard to think of anyone who is more a citizen of the world than Sen. The title conjures the Bengali novel by Rabindranath Tagore *The Home and the World*, but that story involved an often conflicting juxtaposition of the two that ended in personal tragedy. Sen's memoir, by contrast, is all about the felicities and harmonies of diversity: he describes the various phases of his extraordinary life as "engaging", "captivating", and "splendid". And he sees no real contradiction between home and the world; rather, he notes in the preface that his "sympathies are with an inclusive rather than a fragmentary understanding of what the world offers". He offers, "an explicit negation of any sectarian confinement, and an implicit celebration of the dignity of being broad-based rather than narrowly sequestered", as he explains later in the book when reflecting on a lecture by Tagore.

This capacious notion of identity, while certainly attractive and admirable, may well be the result of his particular life experience. It is possible that Sen is so comfortable as a citizen of the world precisely because he is also deeply rooted in the culture of his birth, even as his brilliance has made him valued and honoured around the world and given him access to an international community of scholars and thinkers. Growing up in Shantiniketan in rural West Bengal as the grandson of a renowned Sanskrit scholar, with the iconic Tagore as a family friend who even gave him his name, would have instilled both knowledge of and confidence in Bengali culture in ways not available to most others. So it is not surprising that he can say: "A Bengali identity has always been important for me, without being invasive enough to obliterate my other loyalties of occupation, politics, nationality and other affiliations, including that of my shared humanity with all others."

A different background, with less of that intellectual richness and cultural confidence, might create a more hesitant and cautious approach to the wider world, which could even be justified for some. Similarly, multiple identities are inevitable, but they need not always be pleasurable, as Sen would be the first to acknowledge. This has become much more widely accepted in discussions of intersectionality that identify multiple forms of deprivation and discrimination.

Yet there is a more profound implication of this idea of multiple—and shifting—identities. Sen notes that "less than a century ago, Europeans were hugely occupied in fighting each other along the lines not of religious division but of national identity. Differences of citizenship—British, German, or French—easily overcame the commonality of religion in the form of Christianity". He emphasises that being a worker cannot be the sole identity of any person. He approvingly quotes Karl Marx's critique of the Gotha Programme in which Marx castigates those who concentrate exclusively on workers' exploitation and their rights, thereby seeing human beings only as workers and nothing more, ignoring everything else in their lives. The recent political attempts in different countries, including India, to reduce people to their narrow religious or ethnic identities is obviously anathema to this more complex approach. It provides some hope that reliance on particular identities cannot last for very long as a defining and permanent social force.

Another theme in the book is a concept that Sen has grappled with in multiple ways in his work: that of freedom, and its necessary association with human capabilities. He is a champion of individual liberty, but has emphasised that freedom is not just a simplistic "freedom to choose" but a more complex freedom from the constraints on human functioning, which is intertwined with concepts of wellbeing and agency. Many forms of deprivation, discrimination, and exclusion, both material and social, then impinge on human freedom. It has been argued by the economist Amiya Bagchi that Sen's domain of analysis should be called a human science of development, as distinct from narrowly conceived economics or social science. This book of reminiscences reflects that. It is also a deeply humane appreciation of what life can offer, filled with respect and empathy for other humans.

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Further reading

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