

Amartya Sen, “The Argumentative Indian”: some impressions.¹

Obviously the author is scholarly and these essays of his are valuable, however in some respects I found the book quite wanting.

(1) For a man of letters to take sides, to turn a blind eye to one conspicuous set of scoundrels, is unforgivable. But that is precisely what the author does vis-à-vis those wearing the Congress label. Quite rightly he condemns—albeit only in his mild-mannered way—the excesses² committed by many under the aegis of the Bharatiya Janta Party in Gujarat and elsewhere, but he is strangely silent with respect to the equally gruesome acts³ perpetrated by many belonging to the Congress against the Sikhs. In fact his ‘no less a statesman than’ on p.358 shows his over-all opinion about the person who ordered the barbaric attack against the Golden Temple in 1984, and of the massacres carried out at the behest of her son to revenge her assassination later on in the same year, about all he has to say, on p.365, is that these ‘seriously tarnished Congress’s political record’. He bemoans the fact that a portrait of Savarkar—the author of “*Hindutva*”, the proponent of the two-nation theory 15 years before Jinnah, and the brain behind the assassination of 1948—now hangs in the central hall of parliament. But isn’t that so apt? This parliament counts amongst its previous leaders the two mentioned above, so their likenesses are also hanging in the self-same hall; and so high is the regard of the present regime for these two, that there is a virtually endless list of airports, arenas, universities, professorships, awards, etc., that are continually being named and re-named in their honour, thus commemorating the aforementioned horrible memories.

(2) Perhaps because of the inherent compulsions of his/her calling, a politician is prone to use quite different vocabularies and yardsticks while talking of ‘my scoundrel’ as against ‘your scoundrel’, but why should a man of letters? One of the reviewers says, ‘Sen is a rare example of an intellectual who has had a major effect on politics’ It may well be, but it seems that the political contacts Sen has cultivated and used to push many of his pet projects—this ground-level activism of his is well-known—has apparently led conversely to politics having a major and deleterious effect on Sen’s impartiality. One can’t help feeling that these essays would have been much more incisive and objective had he kept his distance from his subject-matter, not inter-mingled with it.

(3) I enjoyed Sen’s unmasking of the various antics of the Hindutva nuts, including the so-called intellectuals amongst them. For example, the re-telling of the ‘*Horseplay in Harappa*’ was delicious! Also, like him, I do think there is much more to Indian tradition than its justly famed contributions to religion, metaphysics and spiritualism. Like him, I am appreciative of Voltaire when he reminds his fellow-Europeans of the

¹These were written in 2005 for sharing with a cousin who, thanks to a corrupt judge, was then serving some time in jail, and who had recommended this book to me, *K. S. Sarkaria*.

² See, for example, <http://www.coalitionagainstgenocide.org/>

³ See, for example, <http://www.nov1984.org/>

important things for which they are indebted to India: 'our numbers, our backgammon, our chess, our first principles of geometry, and the fables which have become our own.'

(4) However, Sen goes completely overboard in his assessment of India's contributions in mathematics. These fade into near-insignificance in comparison with the unparalleled contributions—conspicuous by an almost complete absence of their mention in Sen's book—of the Greek mathematicians (600 B.C. to 300 A.D), for example those of Eudoxus, Euclid, Archimedes and Appollonius. Not only does their work pre-date that of Aryabhata and other Indian mathematicians by centuries, it is incomparably better and more rigorous. The Greeks *proved* things, their mathematics is 'modern' even today. As the Cambridge mathematician Littlewood remarked to his colleague Hardy—this is from the latter's, "*A Mathematician's Apology*"—the Greeks 'are not clever schoolboys ... but 'Fellows of another College''. The concept of proof, the heart and soul of mathematics, was almost absent from Indian mathematics. It is usually accepted that this great Greek mathematics came into India, but probably only in some watered-down version, in the wake of Alexander's invasion, and it was perhaps this infusion of ideas that stimulated the later work of Brahmagupta et al. Similar and contemporaneous work was being done also by other mathematicians in the Middle East and in Central Asia. These last also wrote detailed commentaries on the important Greek classics, and were bright enough to 'translate' some of the geometric statements in Euclid's "*Elements*" into symbolic language, thus creating algebra. It seems true that it was this second-hand work of mainly the Arabs and Persians, but also some Indians, that first made its appearance in re-awakened Europe during the Renaissance, but that is certainly no reason to forget the fountainhead of most of these great discoveries.

(5) Sen takes a justifiable pride in and gives a good description of the contributions of many distinguished fellow-Bengalis. These I found highly informative, for example, it was a revelation to learn about Tagore's refreshingly honest opinions on patriotism, which, it further seems safe to assume, are at heart shared by Sen. Indeed, from p.108, we learn that a collaborator and long-time close friend of his, Martha Nussbaum, used the following quotation from Tagore's novel, "*Ghare Baire*"—later, a Satyajit Ray film, "*The Home and the World*"—to initiate a scholarly critique of patriotism: 'I am willing to serve my country; but my worship I reserve for Right which is far greater than my country. To worship my country as a god is to bring a curse upon it.'⁴

(6) Sen also takes justifiable pride in the long tradition of secularism, pluralism, tolerance and heterodoxy, that can be discerned in many of the threads constituting the

⁴ This is in consonance with Tagore's opinion (from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vande_Mataram) of *Vande Mataram* as expressed in a 1937 letter to S. C. Bose: "The core of *Vande Mataram* is a hymn to Bharat Mata : this is so plain that there can be no debate about it. Of course Bankimchandra does show Durga to be inseparably united with Bengal in the end, but no Mussulman, Christians and Arya Samajis can be expected patriotically to worship the ten-handed deity as 'Swadesh.' This year many of the special Puja numbers of our magazines have quoted verses from *Vande Mataram* - proof that the editors take the song to be a hymn to Durga. The novel *Anandamath* is a work of literature, and so the song is appropriate in it. But Parliament is a place of union for all religious groups, and there the song cannot be appropriate. When Bengali Mussulmans show signs of stubborn fanaticism, we regard these as intolerable. When we too copy them and make unreasonable demands, it will be self-defeating."

history of India. This is in fact the motif of this book, and time and again, Sen returns to discuss the tolerant kings, Asoka and Akbar, to underline his theme. It is undeniable that this sub-continent of ours has been criss-crossed in space and time by many beliefs, many life styles, many faiths, many cuisines, the extent of this diversity is stunning. Yet, despite this diversity, it is undeniable too that a certain sense of sub-continental unity can be discerned throughout the history of India. Generally—that is, most of the time, in most of the places—tolerance has prevailed, different communities have lived in peace and harmony, or at least have wanted to live in peace or harmony. However, like any other equivalent chunk of land, time, and humanity on this globe, this history of ours has seen its statistically inevitable share of villainy, perfidy, wars, inquisitions and massacres. In the last category one could begin with the extermination of the Harappans, or else the much later massacre in Kalinga ordered by Asoka (before he became a good guy and a Buddhist), or the still later extirpation ordered by the Sankaracharya of the Buddhists, and find numerous instances, involving as bad-guys practically each and every community and religion, all the way down to 1947, 1984 and 2002.

(7) After taking all this trouble to paint a vivid picture of the diversity of this multicultural land, Sen shies away at the very end—on patently flimsy grounds, see pp. 355-356—from stating the obvious: that this here is a sub-continent, and that, therefore, a loose federal system of government is best suited to its needs. As remarked in (5), he is obviously not hung-up on ‘my country, right or wrong’ kind of patriotism, so what could be his reason? My guess is that his compulsion is again that conjectured in (2) above: he has failed to keep his distance, he is much too near his subject-matter, and does not want to utter that which is deemed politically incorrect in the company he is keeping, a company which he wants to keep on keeping.

(8) Notwithstanding these weaknesses, there is much in this book that deserves praise. Most impressive is the informative and authoritative essay, “*Women and men*”, recalling some important work on female infanticide. And, scattered here and there throughout this book, are numerous interesting tid-bits. For example, somewhere within the essay, “*India through its calendars*”, we learn how the great mathematician Laplace debunked the myth that the Kaliyuga calendar was actually instituted in its zero year—that is, in 3102 B.C.—by pointing out discrepancies in the reported astronomical observations allegedly made in that year. Or again, as Sen points out in many different places, we learn that even today the hero-king Ram Chander of “*Ramayana*” is conferred divinity only in the north and the west of India (even in these regions this might be of recent vintage, helped along by the fact that one of the invocations of the Almighty in these parts sounded almost the same as the name of this king). Or again, that the Pathan kings of Bengal were the first to get this great epic translated into Bengali, etc.