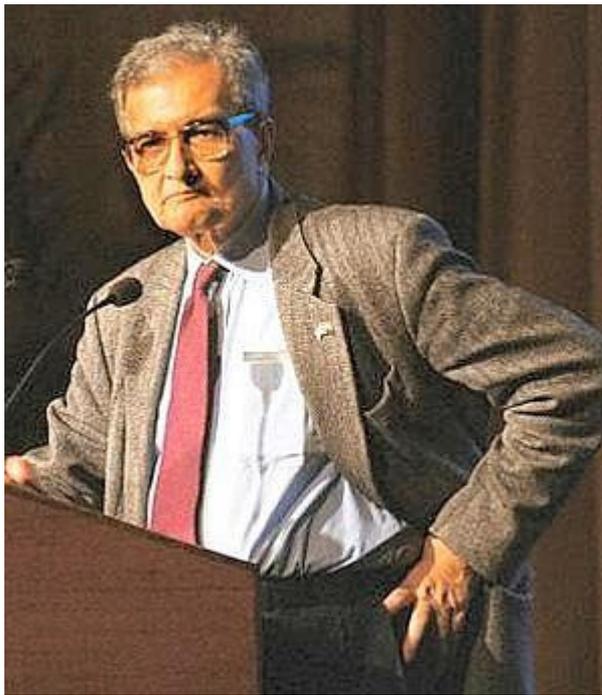


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Sen and the power of language



Amartya Sen uses simple--yet powerful--ideas to explain complex phenomena. In his new book, he offers 'public reasoning' to help us conceptualize development

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Amartya Sen. Manpreet Romana / AFP

One of Amartya Sen's less noticed contributions to development thought is the fresh and full-of-potent vocabulary he provides. Terms such as "agency", "friendly fire", "miniaturizing identity" have become part of our language—short cuts which describe particular phenomena perfectly. The term agency, for example, has become part of feminist language—to emphasize the freedom and power to decide, to act autonomously. There are also concepts such as capabilities and entitlements, apart from metaphors such as "patients". For example, in a lecture "Sustainability and Freedom on International Issues" given in Tokyo at the Inter-Academy Panel in 2000, he said: "We need a vision of mankind not as patients whose interests have to be looked after, but as agents who can do effective things—both individually and jointly."

In his new book, *The Idea of Justice*, he has "released", another important addition to our vocabulary, public reasoning—the key to his deeply argumentative book. "Open-minded engagement in public reasoning is quite central to the pursuit of justice," he writes.

“Public reasoning” can now replace “participation”, a concept used by those who worry or write about people-driven, democratically decided outcomes. It shifts participation from presence— which is usually physical—to thought. How people think on any issue, their ideas and debates are to determine outcome, not merely being there. Such a shift also reveals a reverence for the thinking capacity of people, a shift from numbers to ideas: put crudely, from the body to the mind, from “patients” to “agents”.

Another shift that he makes— though in this case not a linguistic or even a hierarchical one, but one of focus—is to use injustice as the fulcrum of his argument, not justice. To eliminate injustice needs to be the purpose, rather than or in precedence to, searching and striving to land that perfect system or goal of justice. He argues that there is so much tangible injustice around us, that just dealing with that, and if possible reducing that, could itself be justice.

This line of argument, dealing with injustice and not tethering it to a rigid legal concept, resonates in his earlier work, the Hiren Mukherjee lecture in Parliament on the demands of social justice, where he unfolded the difference between *niti* and *nyaya*. *Niti* roughly translated is law, rules as many of us understand it, but Sen defines *niti* as organizational propriety and behavioural correctness, and *nyaya* as realized justice. Sen of course is on the *nyaya* track.

Sen’s argument with theorists of justice, such as John Rawls, can be interpreted as a way of deconstructing justice, or constructing justice by removing injustices on the ground, as we experience them next to us, and not as derived from a structured ideal. It, therefore, encourages activism, typical of Sen, who is himself an activist.

In the preface to his book, he quotes Pip, the little urchin in Charles Dickens’ *Great Expectations*, who says, “In the little world in which children have their existence, there is nothing so finely perceived and finely felt as injustice.” Amartya Sen would be the first to agree that this statement could be made by women, by feminists, whose experience of injustice in its many forms he has often highlighted. In fact, feminist reasoning, derived from their explorations of knowledge construction, and feminist practice draw on public-reasoning, and a reverence for opinion.

Interestingly, as Sen uses injustice as the probe, the measure, rather than justice, feminists underline inequality even more persistently than equality. Their experience of inequality—like Pip’s evocation of injustice—is perhaps the most complex and comprehensive experience of inequality by any social group. It cuts across all other stratifications—class, caste religion or location—and enters not only the household and family, but even the womb.

Sen could have enriched his discourse by engaging more deeply with feminist philosophers and activists on their ideas of dealing with injustice; how they have always built their arguments and struggles through collective endeavours and the inclusion of public reasoning as the pillar of their construction of justice. It would have given him a vehicle to legitimize his ideas. He has, of course, brought the famous European feminist, Mary Wollstonecraft, into the book, but only to buttress his argument on the inclusive principle of justice. But he does not focus on the world

of knowledge and action of movements such as the feminist movement and how public reasoning has been a method used by feminists, even if not called that.

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