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A Window to the World from an Economist-Philosopher

By: Kaushik Basu

The breadth of Amartya Sen's memoir makes it in part a work of history. To read about his interaction with some of the great minds in the world is to read history in the making.

One hesitates to read the autobiography of a person one knows well. Amartya Sen is one of the world's most celebrated economists, and in the broad area, where economics overlaps with philosophy, he may well be *the* most celebrated intellectual in the world. I have known him well since 1974, when he became my PhD adviser, and over the years he has been a mentor and even friend.

I hesitated. Would there be revelations difficult to take? Would it shatter one's opinion and presumptions about the man? And, not least, would it disappoint? I feel glad I overcame my hesitancy: this is one of the finest biographical works I have read.

The making of an intellectual

Sen's book covers the first 30 years of his life. It begins from his earliest memories — of being awakened by the sound of a ship's horn, when as a three-year-old he travelled with his parents from Calcutta to Rangoon. His father, who taught chemistry at Dhaka University, was headed to Mandalay to spend three years as a visiting professor there. The book closes in 1963, with Sen's arrival in Delhi to take up a professorship at the Delhi School of Economics and with descriptions of the early days of his teaching and research at 'D-School', which was then a hub of intellectual activity comparable to some of the greatest institutions in the world.

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To describe the book as an autobiography is to do injustice to it. The book of course tells us about Sen's own life — the first 30 years of it, vivid description of his battle with life-threatening cancer at the age of 18; his early education in Santiniketan and Calcutta; his arrival in Cambridge, England, for further studies and doctoral work; his initial hesitancy breaking into the Western world, since, as he says, English was his third language when he arrived in England (his greater familiarity and comfort being with Bengali and Sanskrit); his early career breaks and the start of his research and writing on philosophy and economics.

But the book is much more than that. Its pages bear testimony to what was happening around him in the world. There are heart-rending descriptions of the Bengal famine of 1943, the partition of India, and the mindless killings during the Hindu-Muslim riots. The book is interspersed with his commentary on what was happening in Russia and China; on Mao, Lenin, and Stalin; and on the rise and decline of communism. He talks at length on early Indian history, on Hinduism as a religion and as a philosophy. Unsurprisingly, the book is also interspersed with economics and philosophy, his two most important intellectual engagements.

This wider scope of the book means that it is in part a work of history. To read about Sen's interaction with some of the great minds in the world — from Isaiah Berlin, Joan Robinson, Piero Sraffa, Tapan Raychaudhuri, K. N. Raj, and Romila Thapar, to Peter Bauer and Gilbert Ryle, taking place in Cambridge, Calcutta, and Delhi — is like reading history in the making. It evokes the same images that we have of the French intellectuals gathering in some Left Bank Paris cafe, or the ancient Greeks debating and discoursing on philosophy under some painted porch or stoa.

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What becomes quickly evident is the young Sen's intellectual confidence, despite the insecurities of breaking into the Western world and the Oxbridge life of Britain which still had the aura of Empire. Soon after he arrived in Cambridge in 1953 as a 20-year-old, he was invited to a party of the Cambridge University Socialist Club, which had as members some of the most prominent professors of the university. But, after the party Sen noted that (p.308): "There were a number of self-declared Marxists among its activists, but as a self-conscious intellectual snob from College Street [in Calcutta], I was slightly shocked by their rather limited reading of Marxist

classics, including Marx's own works.” He was also shocked by their tolerance of the authoritarianism that was happening in the Soviet Union and East Europe.

An aspect of the book which I enjoyed greatly was the intellectual history of Sen's research that he relates in several places. I am quite well-read in terms of Sen's books and papers. Given how prolific he is, this is a matter on which I take some pride. (I must admit, on occasions, I have wondered if anybody, apart from Sen, knows his work more thoroughly than me.) So, learning about the incubation of his papers and books was fascinating.

One of Sen's earliest works, which has been of great influence, is his paper jointly written with Garry Runciman, ‘[Games, Justice and the General Will](#)’ and published in the leading philosophy journal *Mind* in 1965. The paper is one of the earliest attempts to use game theory to understand some concepts and conundrums of moral philosophy; in this case, some ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. I did not know that the paper was written in 1959, six years before it was published, when Sen was 26 years old.

The idea first struck Sen, and the paper emerged from his collaboration with Runciman. They were delighted when the paper was promptly accepted by the editor of *Mind*, Gilbert Ryle. But then nothing happened. After three years they wrote to Ryle asking what was happening to the paper. To make sure he knew which paper they were talking about, they included a copy of the paper. Ryle had forgotten about the paper, and thinking this was a fresh submission, he read the paper again and wrote to Sen and Runciman accepting the paper. Hence, what I did not know but learned from this book is that this famous paper was accepted by *Mind* twice.

One also learns from this book that Sen's interest in social choice theory and welfare economics predated his interest and research on choice of techniques. At Cambridge, there was no one with enough knowledge of this new literature on choice, welfare, and voting, which began with the pathbreaking work of Kenneth Arrow. So, Amartya was persuaded to work on what was a more ‘Cambridge topic’: capital, investment, and growth.

A gentler world

The book is also a brooding commentary on how the world has changed. The world today is such a mishmash of cultures that it is easy to feel at home in any place. But that was not so when Sen arrived in England. His first landlady in Cambridge, Mrs Hanger, was thrown off seeing that the student who would be staying at her home was a coloured person. She was candid enough to tell Sen that she had told his college that she did not want a non-white student, but the college had disregarded her request. On this first day, helping him settle down in the new home, she asked him “Will your colour come off in the bath — I mean in a really hot bath?” His stay in Cambridge began with him assuring Mrs Hanger that his skin colour was durable.

Mrs Hanger turned out to be a touching reminder of human goodness. Soon she was determined to fatten up the young Amartya before he returned home. She began ordering full-fat milk for him to drink every day, and urged him (p. 257), “You must drink this, Sen, every morning, for me—at least one glass, please: we have to build you up.”

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How times have changed is captured in many other stories, such as a hitchhiking tour in Sweden with a fellow student from Cambridge, the now celebrated Bangladeshi economist, Rehman Sobhan. When no car seemed to respond to the hitchhikers' flailing arms, Sen remarked that it must be Sobhan's long beard that was responsible and he needed to shave it off if they wished to continue hitchhiking. Just then, a car that had gone past stopped and came back. The driver leaned out and said that his child in the back seat insisted on taking a better look at Sobhan's beard. To give the child a closer look, he picked them up. Soon a conversation too picked up, so well that he took Sen and Sobhan home for dinner and to continue the discourse on Hinduism and Islam.

There are prominent Indians who appear in several pages. We learn about Manmohan Singh's arrival at St. John's College in 1955 (p. 324), “Manmohan has always been warm, friendly, and easily approachable [...] He remained just the same even when he was leading the country as India's Prime Minister.” Sen goes on to note, “While being a great social virtue, modesty can be a disadvantage in active politics, especially in a world dominated by flame-throwers like many of India's present political leaders [...] But despite this reticence, [...] he was in fact an excellent political leader. He achieved many things including contributing to the highest rate of economic growth India has ever known — before or since.”

An unwavering humanism

A reason this book was essential for Sen to write is that it sheds clarity on his politics and political views. It is a shameful commentary on India that Amartya Sen has come under repeated attack. I am not referring to intellectual disagreements that are always welcome, but scurrilous personal attacks. Paradoxically, some of the attacks on Sen, who is a globally celebrated scholar, come from people perennially offended that the achievements of Indians do not get enough recognition.

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The book lays bare Sen's politics, from global, inter-country matters to everyday social conventions. It comes as quite a surprise to learn that he held that (p. 311) "it was a big social mistake for women to change their last name when they got married." This goes back to when he, in his twenties, met the pioneering sociologist Dorothy Cole, later Dorothy Wedderburn. He told her about his view on last names, to which she responded, "I understand what you are saying but there are surely more important problems to deal with first."

Amartya Sen's politics is best described as non-doctrinaire left-wing. He has been a champion of the underdog and the underprivileged. He has repeatedly stressed the need for greater equality and how we should be prepared to sacrifice growth for the sake of greater equity and to achieve a higher standard of living for the common person. His refusal to support totalitarian left-wing governments, clear disagreement with doctrinaire communists unable to see the horrors of some of the world's communist regimes, makes it clear that his left ideology cannot, however, be slotted into a party line. Indeed, after his student days, he has never been a member of any political party.

What comes out crystal clear, throughout the 425 pages of this memoir, is his deep distaste for all shades of fascism and religious and racial intolerance. He is unwavering in his global humanism. It is apt that his book is about finding a *Home in the World*.