

DEMOCRACY AS PUBLIC REASONING

-Amartya Sen _____

About the author

Amartya Kumar Sen (born on 3 November 1933) is a Bengali Indian economist and philosopher of Bengali ethnicity, who since 1972 has taught and worked in the United Kingdom and the United States. Sen has made contributions to welfare economics, social choice theory, economic and social justice, economic theories of famines, and indexes of the measure of well-being of citizens of developing countries. He was awarded the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences in 1998 and Bharat Ratna in 1999 for his work in welfare economics. He is currently the Thomas W. Lamont University Professor and Professor of Economics and Philosophy at Harvard University.

In the essay “Democracy as Public Reason,” Sen defends the idea that democracy is a universal value. Also he tries to distinguish between the “institutional structure of the contemporary practice of democracy,” which is “largely the product of European and American experience over the last few centuries”, and the political ideals that underlie it. By the former, Sen seems to have in mind the institutions of electoral conflict (competitive elections, secret ballots, political parties, etc.). But these institutions, Sen argues, are simply the latest effort to institutionalize certain fundamental ideals, ideals of “political participation, dialogue and public interaction”. These ideals, Sen suggests, are well-nigh universal in their appeal. But once one sees that the institutions are of use primarily as means to the realization of deeper ideals, and then one has reason to avoid running the former and the latter together.

Introduction to the text

“Democracy as Public Reasoning” is an extract from the fourth and the final part of Amartya Sen’s book *The Idea of Justice*. It is indeed a large book which deals with a few key ideas which are deeply important. This part of the book focuses on Sen’s views regarding the nature of democracy and of human rights. He speaks about the role and importance of public reasoning in approaching the issues of democracy, secularism and social justice in contemporary India. According to him ‘Democracy’ is integrally linked with public reasoning. In his book he stressed the importance of public discussion by understanding democracy in the sense of John Rawls and many other philosophers. His views about human rights are not very much in par with that of many political philosophers. And he also conveys that any significance that a state has should be earned by their contribution to human welfare alone. Sen’s writing style is easy and enjoyable. He puts across us his philosophic arguments by illustrating them with a rich set of anecdotes drawn from history, literature, and current events. While explaining his views the author effortlessly takes us to different realms of history and philosophy, giving validations to his arguments. Reference from the ancient Greek and Roman heritage, Indian Buddhists, Asoka and Akbar till the nineteenth century social choice theory and public choice theory can be found so systematically organised in text. Sen says, in the broader sense the understanding of democracy that it is going well beyond the freedom of elections and ballots has emerged powerfully, not only in the contemporary political philosophy, but also in the new disciplines of social choice theory and public choice theory. The text also emphasises the fact that Sen is a firm nationalist who takes pride in the rich legacy of our nation. Through this text he is in fact trying to convey the fact that the democratic system in our nation is not something entirely borrowed from our foreign visitors, but is something very much part our history and nationality.

Summary

Amartya Sen's book *The Idea of Justice* is about social justice. The chapter fifteen of this book is "Democracy as Public Reasoning". In this chapter Sen defends the idea that democracy is a universal value. Can democracy flourish outside the west? One reason for thinking it can't is that it has never done so before. To answer this, Sen distinguishes between the "institutional structure of the contemporary practice of democracy," which is largely "the product of European and American experience over the last few centuries" and the political idea that underlie it. Sen seems to have in mind the institutions of electoral conflict (competitive election, secret ballots, political parties etc).

But Sen argues that the things are simply the latest effort to institutionalize certain fundamental ideals, ideals of “political participation, dialogue and public interaction” . These ideals, Sen suggests, are well-nigh universal in their appeal. But once one sees that the institutions are of use primarily as means to the realization of deeper ideals, then one has reason to avoid running the former and the latter together. In particular, one should not assume that because a certain type of institutional structure is up and running (i.e., there are elections, the votes are counted properly, the loser concedes power to the winner) that a satisfactory level of democracy has been achieved. This has been done by many comparatives, such as Sam Huntington.

Sen believes that an overly-institutional focus on democracy has caused particular trouble at the global level. John Rawls and Thomas Nagel may be right that there are no democratic global institutions—indeed, no institutions at all comparable to states. But this need not mean that there is no way to realize democratic ideals such as public discussion internationally. There already exist tentative practices of global deliberation, and they are worthy of support and encouragement, whatever the proper scope and limits of international institutions.

Of course, globalized public deliberation is only conceivable if the ideal of public dialogue has universal appeal. Sen believes that this ideal does have deep roots all around the world, including in that have little experience with popular elections. Of course, Sen also suggests that the divide between western and non-western experiences with democratic institutions is not as clear-cut as the democracy-is-a-western-value story would have it. India was inspired by ancient Greece to experiment with formal democratic institutions (at least on a local level) long before the barbarian tribes of northern Europe. But societies have undeniably assigned value to public reason—the ideal underlying these institutions—for a very long time, and virtually everywhere. Sen illustrates this point using the Indian experience. He also discusses the Middle East in this context.

Critical Analysis

Public reasoning requires that the moral or political rules that govern the lives of common people must be justifiable and acceptable, at least in some sense, to all those people over whom they are imposed upon; and requires those who receive such services from higher authority to debate with each other in order to make a well-ordered constitutional democratic society.

In the fifteenth chapter of his book “The idea of justice,” Sen talks about ‘Democracy as Public Reason.’ Sen vilifies the thought that democracy was the firstborn child of the Romans and the Greeks, but instead labels it as a *universal value*. He goes even further and defines democracy within the confines of public reasoning:

*“The point, rather, is that democracy is intimately connected
with public discussion and interactive reasoning”*

Sen has repeatedly stressed upon the fact that democracy is a universal value. An intrinsic value that was developed as we grew together as a society. His tryst with democracy goes further back to the 80s where he talked about the relevance and importance of democracy in tackling and pressing hunger and famine.

The points laid down by him while proving his statement that India's ride with democracy does have a non-western front, though sceptic, scratches the surface of all the “major democratic” achievements in a patriarchal society. Nevertheless, the example of Buddhist councils, without doubt, substantiates the fact that the traces of democracy were indeed present in the Indian subcontinent before the visitors invaded it.

The importance of arguments for the proper functioning of the democracy is the centralized theme Amartya Sen's essay, defending the view of democracy as a universal value against the main argument that deals with cultural differences between regions.

In the essay Sen's argument are inclined towards democracy being more than just rule by the majority; he terms democracy as a demanding system and not just a mechanical condition of ruling by the majority. However, for such system to function, Sen continues, democracy must have a fair election along with a guaranteed protection of freedoms and liberties. The system of democracy will cease to exist if the elections are held in the absence of liberty.

One instance of a pragmatic democratic system mentioned in the essay is that of Ashoka's Empire.

*“He (Asoka) was firmly committed to making sure that public discussion
could take place without animosity or violence.”*

A corollary that comes out of the arguments laid out in the essay is the uncensored and free distribution of news and events. A well notable example of a country, which is ruling over its people by censoring any revolutionary moment happening across the country/globe, is China. We all are well familiar what happened at the Tiananmen Square in the early June of 1989. Perhaps that was the most significant public outrage in the mainland china that is known to the global media. Such is the power of controlling/censoring the media.

Such instances of oppression were also observed in India in the 70s “on the alleged grounds of the seriousness of the ‘emergency.’” It is to be noted that for the second largest populous country in the world, where the traditions, cultures, and even language changes as one travel

from north to south or east to west, the only glue holding together such array of differences is the democracy. From the revolutionary movements of Khalistan to the anti-English agitations of Tamil Nadu, the only thing that had prevented secession from India is the applicability of democracy where it was necessary. For example, allowing the states to have their own regional language as official language of that state in the latter case.

A very brief yet prominent part of the essay talks about the role of democracy in emergence of Indian form of secularism. He maintains throughout the essay that for the proper *and* transparent functioning of the government active participation of public in open discussions, as *“individual values can and do change in the process of decision making”*.

Conclusion

A layman's definition of democracy would be that it is a form of government where all the members of the decision making body of a state are elected by considering the opinion of each and every member of the state, precisely through balloting. As per the famous dictum of Abraham Lincoln, it is the government of the people by the people and for the people. In this chapter “Democracy as Public Reasoning”, the author Amartya Sen is trying to put across us a different and much broader perspective for democracy. The pioneer of public choice theory James Buchanan's definition of democracy as the “government by reasoning” is really able to communicate the deep meaning of the term by implicitly referring to its many nuances. Real democracy is not all about just doing polling once in awhile. It is really about each and every one participating actively in the decision making and policies of the state by making use of their right to express.

Another important point which the author would like to throw across us is a gentle reminder that we ought to be proud of being the citizens of India. Our country has got a commendable legacy of supporting and encouraging public reasoning. In spite of all the intolerances that we come across with regard to the respecting of each other's' opinions and identity, the soul of India has always remained a highly tolerant acceptor of every culture and every opinion. From the very ancient period onwards we find people of different languages, religions and thought patterns living together harmoniously in our country respecting and accepting each other in our own ways. Instance of the same can be seen in this text itself.

For us Indians the basic and the fundamental principles of democracy, that is, respecting the opinion and voice of each and every member and moreover giving space for each and every one to raise their voice is not completely foreign. Ours is the largest democracy of the world and we do not claim that it is flawless and perfect. But it is undisputed that it is a much better option than any other forms of governing currently known to us. The very reason being, here there is always room for constructive criticism and respect for public opinion. Need not think of it as a gift from the west, the very core of democracy has always been so close to our country's soul.