



The Amartya Sen interviews

Amartya Sen on justice and injustice

On tackling injustice

The main thing is to understand that the theory of justice has to be concerned with, the primary engagement of it in practice, which is how to remove, identifiable injustices in the world. What has happened however, is the bulk of the main key theories of justice now are concerned not with that question. Not at all. They are concerned...that is, not directly at all, but they are concerned with what would an ideally just society look like. And even more limitedly, what are the ideally just institutions that we need for a just society and then we will assume that behaviour would be compliant with those just institutions. So it's narrowing down first perfection and not comparison of imperfect alternatives. Secondly, er, not perfect society but perfect institution, behaviour would somehow, would become compliant. That assumption. So in two ways, it has moved away from the engagement. The people who were concerned with, er, removal of slavery as injustice, like Condorcet or Adam Smith. Or the removal of subjugation of women, like Mary Wollstonecraft or John Stuart Mill. They were not under any illusion that getting more equity for women and removing slavery would produce a perfectly just society, they never thought that. They thought they will reduce injustice. So they were making comparative points.

On the social contract approach to justice

Intellectually, there are two trends in the enlightenment, er, European enlightenment tradition and there are similar ones elsewhere which I also discuss in the book, particularly in the Indian, er, legal and philosophical history. The one trend which is well reflected by Thomas Hobbs, Locke, Immanuel Kant, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, is the trend of looking for social contract for ideal institutions. Ideal institutions for an ideal society and, combined with ideal behaviour obviously, but ideal. And then you try to construct it.

But the limitation of the approach is that you have a perfect understanding, if this – all this goes well, of what a perfectly just society would look like. But by no stretch of imagination, anyone is expecting the perfectly just society to descend on earth right now. And this system does not give you any direct guidance on how to remove injustice, because there are many injustices in the world. And there are many other issues which may not look like injustice but with the removal of it or advancement of something else would enhance justice. These are not matters that identification with a perfectly just society indicate. And to say that how – how close are you, that will give you a metric, is a mathematical delusion because there are many dimensions in which you could depart from a perfect society. And the dimensionalities preclude a simple index whereby you say, I'm closer if by removing this rather than that, etc. You still have to judge which would be the right thing to do. A limited amount of money, should you want to have a health care of, of the really perfect kind, or some basic healthcare for all and, spend more money in income support and other kinds of non healthcare things. We have to choose between them.

On ideas of social choice

So we need the theory of justice which is concerned with comparison. And there's a whole discipline of social choice theory. And that's the other enlightenment trend...and in which the major figures are the French mathematician who had started the social choice theory, particularly, Marquis de Condorcet who was also a great revolutionary, and others in, mostly in the French Academy of, of, of Sciences. And they were concerned with, with how to...take different people's ordering of society and combine them to arrive at some kind of a

social position that, er, that gives you an appropriate way of judging how well a society is doing. Now, that characteristic is...that way of approach, namely how to make a comparison, is also what Adam Smith pursued in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and in *The Wealth of Nations*, that's the kind of approach that Mary Wollstonecraft takes in talking about slavery, women's subjugation and so on. Not about perfect society but how to remove injustice in the world. John Stuart Mill in a big way, Karl Marx in a big way and in the current era, Kenneth Arrow, the reviver of the, of the mathematical contemporary social choice theory, a lot of my work has been in that area. And that gives us a better handle in understanding the challenges of justice. Not in the nature of advancing – not in the nature of what would the perfectly just society or perfectly just entities look like, but how do we judge how we might reduce injustice in the world, remove injustice in the world, and what is the role particularly of public reasoning in this.

On the universality of ideas of justice

These debates have occurred everywhere, in Europe, in, in... among the Greeks, among the, among the Romans, among the er, er, er among the Italian er intellectuals of the er, and all sorts, in a big way in the enlightenment but in India and in China and in Japan and in Africa and I... historical parallel doesn't prove a point but it's important to recognise that we are not dealing with a culturally bound, limited approach to justice where somebody said oh you're just too Western, now look at it our, our way, our way. There's no our way in India, our way, there are many ways in India just that there are many ways in Europe and er a lot of similarities within them and a lot of dissimilarities within them

If you look at ancient legal, erm, theories and philosophical discussions in India, there is a discussion between two – distinction between two words in, in Sanskrit standing for justice. There are about 25 words for justice but two of them are very prominent. "Niti" these are ideal behaviour rules, ideal institutions; and "Nyaya", is realisation, what kind of society is it that we have. Coming back to my book, I mean this is nothing as profound as what I've been discussing, but it is pursuing the "nyaya" perspective, what kind of life can people lead, what kind of capabilities and freedom do they have, what kind of opportunities that they do have, how can we judge the justice of one kind of social arrangement compared with another? That I think is the, the basic um subject matter of the theory of justice, not speculation about what an ideally just society would look like.

On democracy

Well I think the idea of democracy is very central to the idea of justice. The connection is this. If one thinks of democracy simply as institutions, then of course there's a big gap, it's about voting and it's about counting and, and etc but if you think about democracy as government by discussion, election plays a part because the discussion come into action through, through polls but people can win elections even when the polls are free by stifling discussion, nobody knows how dreadful the situation has been because the media is censored and the public excluded. We know that from the history of the world only too well alas. Now in so far as justice is concerned with public reasoning, in combining people's evaluations from different perspectives, from different ways of judging justice, not all of which are vanquished through an argument, some of them would be but some of them would survive and then we make a certain compromise. What is needed is reasoning and decisions by reasoning in a big way and government by discussion is part of the, the same process, namely how people can compare each other's reasoning, try to persuade each other. A political speech is a reasoning in the public domain, about do this rather and do that and so er in my book there are three chapters on democracy which fits in quite well and central to a arrival at an idea of how to enhance justice is public discussion and democracy and public discussion are very centrally related about the importance of er the channels, the media, the multiple parties, the forum in which we can discuss each other's views, all that becomes a part of the pursuit of justice, the pursuit of human right. There's a really integral connection between democracy and the idea of justice that I try to develop in my book.

