

THE CONCEPT OF FREEDOM IN AMARTYA SEN: SOME OBSERVATIONS

NGAHPI LHOUVUM AND L. BISHWANATH SHARMA

The idea of modern or modernism in the western world is connected the awakening of the right to freedom, the charm and the enigma embedded in the idea of freedom. The birth of a new idea has spawned a number of theories and writes ups on the issue of freedom. One of the most enduring concepts of freedom was given by Jean Paul Sartre, a French Existentialist philosopher who maintained that human beings are necessarily free and it is impossible for a human to fail to be free. His eyes opening slogan goes as such that Man is condemned to be free. To fail to be free, in his view, is the same as to cease to be. So, he equates 'to be' with 'to act' and 'to act' with to be free. Thereby he concludes that our consciousness is nothing but our freedom of choice to act something. He considers freedom is emergent property of consciousness. In a somewhat similar way, Bertrand Russell also understood freedom as the freedom to do something, to have something.

Amartya Sen is also following the Sartrian conception of consciousness as freedom. He quoted in the introductory chapter of his book *Freedom and Rationality* a couplet from William Cowper "Freedom has a thousand charms to show, that slaves, however contented, never know" (Sen, 2005, p. 9). The concept of freedom includes a diversity of concern and there is no one authentic characterization of the basic idea of freedom. In his theory of development, Sen equates development with expansion of freedom. Having come to the conclusion that none of the traditional theories of development satisfactorily capture a complete picture and explanation of development, Sen proposes the capability approach to development. This approach requires having the substantive freedom to achieve the kind of life one values. This theory is an attempt to see development as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. In his theory of development as freedom, expansion of freedom is viewed as both the primary end and the principal means of development. According to Sen, they may be called as the 'constitutive role' and the 'instrumental role' of freedom in development.

Constitutive role of Freedom: The constitutive role of freedom relates to the importance of substantive freedom in enriching human life. The substantive freedoms

include elementary capabilities like being able to avoid such deprivation as starvation, undernourishment, escapable morbidity and premature mortality as well as the freedoms that are associated with being literate and numerate, enjoying political participation and uncensored speech and so on. In this constitutive perspective, development involves expansion of these and other basic freedoms (Sen, 2006, p. 36).

Viewed in this perspective, the process of development is not essentially different from overcoming such unfreedoms as famines, under-nutrition, having no access to healthcare, ensuring clean water or other sanitary arrangements, doing away with inequality between men and women and other deprivations of freedom like political liberty and basic civil rights. Amartya Sen is emphatic that political participation and dissent are constitutive parts of development itself. So, the question of whether they are conducive or not to development is a defective question. Sen very clearly states that even a very rich person who is prevented from speaking freely or from participating in public debates and decisions, is deprived of something that she has reason to value. The process of development, from the perspective of enhancement of human freedom, has to include the removal of this person's deprivations. Even if there is no immediate interest in exercising the freedom to speak or to participate, it would still be a deprivation of one's freedom if one is not given a choice on these matters.

The usefulness of wealth, argues Amartya Sen, lies in the things it allows us to do – the substantive freedoms it helps us to achieve. So, the concept of development must go beyond the accumulation of wealth and the growth of gross national product and other income-related variables. Economic growth is, therefore, although a very important component of development should not be treated as an end itself. Development has to do more with enhancing the lives we lead and the freedoms we enjoy. Expanding the freedoms that we have reason to value not only makes our lives richer and more unfettered, but also allows us to be fuller social persons, exercising our own volitions and interacting with – and influencing – the world in which we live. Political liberty and civil freedoms are directly important on their own and do not have to be justified indirectly in terms of their effects on the economy. Even when people without political liberty or civil rights do not lack adequate economic security, they are deprived of important freedoms in leading their lives and denied the

opportunity to take part in crucial decisions regarding public affairs. The constitutive role of freedom clearly shows the evaluative importance of freedom as an objective of development. Human freedom therefore has to be considered an end in itself apart from its instrumental role in contributing to development.

Instrumental role of Freedom: The instrumental role of freedom concerns with the way, different kinds of rights, opportunities and entitlements contribute to the expansion of human freedom in general, and thereby, promotes development. The effectiveness of freedom as an instrument lies in the fact that different kinds of freedom interrelate with one another and freedom of one type may greatly help in advancing freedom of other types. Amartya Sen makes a list of five types of freedom which he feels is extensive, though not exhaustive in the instrumented perspective. These five distinct types of instrumental freedoms are (1) Political freedom (2) Economic facilities (3) Social opportunities (4) Transparency guarantee and (5) Protective security (Sen, 2006, p. 38).

Political Freedom: Political freedoms refer to the opportunities that people have in choosing and having a say in the governance of the state. Political freedoms and civil liberties are essential for development. Amartya Sen therefore emphasizes the necessity of having a well functioning democracy. According to him, developing and strengthening a democratic system is an essential component of the process of development. The use of democratic institutions as devices for development is conditioned by our values and priorities and by the use we make of the available opportunities of articulation and participation. Public debates and discussion permitted by political freedom and civil rights can also play a major part in the formulation of values. Political freedoms include the political entitlements associated with democracies in the broadest sense (encompassing opportunities of political dialogue, dissent and critique as well as voting rights and participatory selection of legislators and executives) (Sen, 2006, p. 38).

Economic Facilities: According to Amartya Sen, economic facilities refer to the opportunities that individuals respectively enjoy to utilize economic resources for the purpose of consumption or production or exchange. The economic entitlements that a person has will depend on the resources owned or available for use as well as on

conditions of exchange, such as, relative prices and the working of the markets. It should be obvious that in the relation between national income and wealth, on the one hand, and the economic entitlements of individuals (or families), on the other, distributional considerations are important, in addition to aggregative ones, How the additional incomes generated are distributed will clearly make a difference (Sen, 2006, p. 38-39). For a state or a country to be developed, economic growth is essential. However, it cannot be taken as an end in itself because development has to be more concerned with enhancing the lives we lead and the freedoms we enjoy. The usefulness of wealth lies in the things it allows us to do. Therefore, it is not adequate to take as our basic objectives just the maximization of income or wealth.

Social Opportunities: Social opportunities refer to the arrangement that society makes for education, healthcare and so on, which influence the individual's substantive freedom to live better. These facilities are important not only for the conduct of private lives (such as living a healthy life and avoiding preventable morbidity and premature mortality), but also for more effective participation in economic and political activities (Sen, 2006, p. 39). The extent and amount of social opportunities, that the people enjoy is an important yardstick for measuring how a nation or a state fares on the development front. The better the facilities a state provides to its citizens the more developed it is considered to be. Poverty or the impoverished state in which a person actually lives is because of lack of opportunities. The basic objective of development as the expansion of human capabilities has been admitted but the focus of modern development literature has been mainly on the generation of economic growth.

Education and health are distinctive influence that can promote or constrain the freedom that individuals have, including their ability to make use of economic opportunities. Illiteracy can be a major barrier to participation in economic activities that require production according to specification or demand quality control. Similarly, the inability to read newspapers or to communicate in writing will hinder people to participate in political debates, discussion and other activities. Therefore, illiteracy and physical unfitness can be major stumbling blocks in the political process and economic endeavours.

Transparency Guarantee: In social interactions, individuals deal with one another on the basis of some presumptions of what they are being offered and what they can expect to get. In this sense, the society operates on some basic presumption to trust. *Transparency guarantees* deal with the need for openness that people can expect: the freedom to deal with one another under guarantees of disclosure and lucidity. When that trusts in seriously violated, the lives of many people –both direct parties and third parties – may be adversely affected by the lack of openness. Transparency guarantees (including the right to disclosure) can thus be an important category of instrumental freedom. These guarantees have a clear instrumental role in preventing corruption, financial irresponsibility and underhand dealings (Sen, 2006, p. 39-40).

Protective Security: On the issue of protective security Amartya Sen says that no matter how well an economic system operates, some people can be typically on the verge of vulnerability and can actually succumb to great deprivation as a result of material changes that adversely affect their lives. He therefore opines that protective security is needed to provide a social safety net for preventing the affected population from being reduced to abject misery, and in some cases even starvation and death. The domain of protective security includes fixed institutional arrangements such as unemployment benefits and statutory income supplements to the indigent as well as ad-hoc arrangements such as famine relief or emergency public employment to generate income for the destitute (Sen, 2006, p. 40).

By material changes, Sen means changes that take place as a result of famines or any other crises like the Asian economic crises. He attributes the problems of East Asia and South-east Asia in the late 90s to the neglect of two instrumental freedoms, viz., “protective security” and “transparency guarantees”. The development of the financial crises in some of these economics have been closely linked with the lack of transparency in business, the lack of public participation in reviewing financial and business arrangements. Amartya Sen therefore emphasizes the need for democratic governance. The positive role of political and civil rights applies to the prevention of economic and social disasters. Democratic governance, including multiparty election and open media, makes it very likely that some arrangements for basic protective security will be instituted.

Freedom and Rationality: Rationality has been understood by Sen as the discipline of subjecting one's choices – of actions as well as of objectives, values and priorities – to reasoned scrutiny. “There is a reciprocal relationship between rationality and freedom” .” Even though the idea of freedom is sometimes formulated independently of values, preferences and reasons, freedom cannot be fully appraised without some idea of what a person prefers and has reason to prefer. Thus, there is a basic use of rational assessment in appraising freedom, and in this sense, freedom must depend on reasoned assessment of having different options (Sen, 2005, p. 5). Therefore, rationality with its demand for reasoned scrutiny can serve as the basis for interpreting the concept of freedom where reasoning and reasoned choice play an important role.

Rationality, in its turn, depends on freedom. This is not merely because without freedom of choice, the idea of rational choice would be quite vacuous, but also because the concept of rationality must accommodate the diversity of reasons that may sensibly motivate choice. To deny that accommodation in favour of conformity with some preselected mechanical axioms or with some pre-specified “appropriate” motivation would involve, in effect, a basic denial of *freedom of thought*. Our motives are for us to choose – not, of course, without reason, but unregimented by the authoritarianism of some context-independent axioms or by the need to conform to some canonical specification of “proper” objectives and values (Sen, 2005, p. 5-6).

Rationality, thus, helps us in the understanding and assessment of goals and values which in turn helps us to make systematic and rational choices. Hence, rational choice will help us to create better societies and eliminate intolerable deprivations of different kinds. Sen takes up three approaches of rational choice in main-stream economic theory which leads to development. The first approach assesses the relation between choices in different situations comparing what are chosen from different sets of alternative available for choice. Here choice is compared with choice and not with objectives, values, preferences etc. So, there is no external reference in this approach and choice is seen entirely in terms of choices themselves. The second approach sees rational choice as selecting those alternatives that promote the person's own interest most whereas the third sees maximization in general. Both the second and third approaches approach involve external reference since what is to be

maximized must invoke something external to the acts of choice such as goals, values and objectives. So, rational choice is an important part of social choice theory.

Social choice theory is traditionally concerned with welfare economics and voting theory. Sen feels that the traditional approach to social choice theory has neglected other equally important concerns and interest in the world such as the subject of freedom. So, he goes beyond the traditional scope of social choice theory and extends the use of the discipline to the analysis of freedom. Freedom is a plural concept having different facets. So, Sen chose the social choice approach to analyze freedom since he believes that this approach can address certain questions that needs to be explored and help to clarify the nature and significance of the critical components of the complex idea of freedom. However, before Sen goes on to proceed with a discussion on values, ethics, behavioural norms and so on, he discusses three grounds for scepticism of the possibility of reasoned progress under the following headings.

Impossibility and Informational bases: The point is sometimes made that given the heterogeneity of preferences and values that different people have. It is not possible to have a coherent framework for reasoned social assessment. There can be, in this view, no such thing as a rational and coherent social evaluation (Sen, 2006, p. 249).

What is at issue here, it turns out, however, is not the impossibility of rational social choice but the use of an inadequate informational base for social judgements and decisions. The Arrow's theorem in effect establishes not the impossibility of rational social choice but the impossibility that arises when we try to base social choice on a limited class of information. Besides, leading to certain inconsistencies, a majority rule would pose a serious problem as a mechanism for resolving economic disputes. In theory, nothing seems to be wrong as the goal for majority improvement is achieved as it certainly adds to the kitty of the other two. But the question is whether such method of improving social outcome is really acceptable especially if the person thus victimized happens to be the poorest of the three. In the name of making a majority improvement more and more can be taken away from the share of the poorest person and dividing the loot between the richer two. This process of

“improvement”, Sen observes, can go on until the poorest has no cake left to be taken away. Therefore, we cannot make social judgment with so little information.

Intended changes and Unintended consequences: The second of the identified reasons for scepticism of the idea of reasoned progress is the alleged dominance of unintended consequences and the related doubts about the possibility of reasoned and intentional advancement. It is true that most of the time unintended consequences of human action are responsible for many of the big changes in the world. Things do not go as we plan and sometimes also it turns out better than expected (Sen, 2006, p. 254). This does not however mean, Sen is quick to point out, that motivated programs are not successful. There are plenty of examples of success in social and economic reforms guided by motivated programs such as universal literacy in various countries, yielding positive results in combating epidemics and diseases etc.

The theory that many good things that happen are typically the unintended result of human action was allegedly advocated by such thinker as Adam Smith, Carl Menger and Friedrich Hayek (Sen, 2006, p. 255). Adam Smith’s “unseen hands” is supposed to be originating seed of this theory. He was deeply sceptical to the morals of the rich and thinks that they pursue only their vain and insatiable desires. And yet others can in many circumstances benefit from their actions since the actions of different people can be productively complementary. He argued that the selfish and the rapacious are led by an “invisible hand” to advance the interest of the society without intending it and without knowing it. Such line of thinking is what is called the unintended consequences. It may also be the case, according to Sen, that sometimes the consequences that occur were not only, not intended but were not anticipated either. What this shows is that human expectations are fallible and the failure to anticipate also provides inputs for learning for future policy making. The anticipation of unintended consequence should be treated, as part of a rationalist approach to organizational reform and social change.

Social values and public interest: The third scepticism relates to the claim that human beings are uncompromisingly self-interested and as such the possibility of broader social values is doubted by many. Sen however thinks that such scepticism could be quite unjustified. He argues that although self-interest is also an important

motive, many of our actions reflect values which have social components that take us well beyond the narrow confines of purely selfish behaviour. In Sen's own words "the emergence of social norms can be facilitated both by communicative reasoning and by evolutionary selection of behavioural modes" (Sen, 2006, p. 261). Socially responsible reasoning and ideas of justice are concerns that often move people in exercising their freedom. But the basic ideas of justices are not alien to social beings who worry about their own interests but are also able to think about family members, neighbours, fellow citizens and other people in the world. Social values can play and have played an important part in the success of various forms of social organizations including market mechanisms, democratic politics, elementary civil and political rights, provisioning of basic public goods and institutions for public action and protest.

Individual freedom as a social commitment: The importance of having a sense of collective responsibility has already been established. However, this in no way can substitute the role of individual responsibility. In fact, the sense of collective social responsibility brings into focus the importance of individual responsibility. If we collectively are to take responsibility for all events that lie within our power, then the concerned individuals will be robbed off their responsibilities for their action. If the responsibility of a person's action falls on another, then that person will lose out on many important things like motivation, involvement and self-knowledge. In short, this will be sapping individual initiative and effort and even self-respect. Therefore, to try to replace individual responsibility with social responsibility will be counterproductive. In order to carry out his responsibility as a rational human being, an individual need to have the requisite freedom. The substantive freedom that we enjoy to exercise our responsibility are extremely contingent on personal, social and environmental circumstances. Sen feels that a child who is denied the opportunity of elementary schooling is not only deprived as a youngster but also handicapped for life. He will not be able to do certain basic things that require reading, writing and arithmetic. The adult who lacks the means of having medical treatment for an ailment from which he/she suffers is not only prey to preventable morbidity and possibly escapable mortality but may also be denied the freedom to do various things that she may wish to do as a responsible human being.

When Sen talks about individual freedom of choice, he is talking in terms of creating more opportunity for choice and for substantive decisions for individuals who can then act responsibly on that basis. He disapproves of too much involvement of the Government in people's lives and too much protection may result in limiting the freedom of the people. Thus, by individual freedom, Sen does not mean the kind of freedom provided by the so called 'nanny state' (Sen, 2006, p. 284). Although he is against too much involvement of the state in people's lives, he nevertheless admits that the state does have a role to play in committing to individual freedom. Other institutions like political and social organizations, non-government agencies, the media, community-based organizations etc. should also be socially committed to ensuring individual freedom.

Opportunity and Process aspect of Freedom: The relevance of the social choice approach in understanding freedom is evident when we analyse two features of freedom which Sen identifies as the opportunity aspect of freedom and the process aspect of freedom. The opportunity aspect of freedom is concerned primarily with our ability to achieve while the process aspect is concerned with the process through which that achievement comes about.

In assessing the "opportunity aspect of freedom", the focus has to be on the alternatives that a person has reason to value or want. The importance of freedom and of opportunity would be hard to motivate if the focus were not on the options or processes that one has reason to value or want, but rather on alternatives one has no reason to seek (Sen, 2005, p. 257).

The process aspect of freedom focuses on the freedom involved in the process itself. That is to say whether others intruded or obstructed the process and so on. Just as freedom depend on reasoned assessment of having different options, reasoned assessment or rationality plays an important role in the values people attach to the process of freedom. Though the opportunity aspect and the process aspect are distinct from each other, there is also a point of convergence. The basic connection that these two aspects of freedom have is the mechanism of preferences that is to say our preferences link the two. For, we may value objectives related to the outcome but we can also value the process of choice through which we arrive at the outcomes. Just as

there is a relation between preference and the opportunity aspect of freedom, there is also a connection between preferences and the process aspect of freedom. Systematic process concern reflects beliefs about social propriety whereas personal process can be entirely self-centred. Both personal process concern and systematic process concern are relevant to social evaluation and to the understanding and appraisal of freedom. Personal process concern has an immediate relevance in assessing the nature and extent of personal freedom.

From the foregoing discussions on the various aspects of freedom, it is amply clear why Amartya Sen insists that freedom should not be treated merely as a means to achieve our goals but is something to be treated as an end itself. Only when barriers to freedom such as poverty, inequality, illiteracy, violations of basic civil and political rights and any other such unfreedoms are removed, can a person be said to have the capability to act out of his personal choice. Unless a person is empowered to exercise his choice, he cannot be considered to be free in the true sense of the term. Greater freedom enhances the ability of people to help themselves and also to influence the world, and these matters are central to the process of development (Sen, 2006, p. 18). In his theory of development, Sen equates development with freedom because he believes that there is a convergence point between development and freedom. It is this particular aspect of development which will be analysed in the next chapter.

References:

- Sen, Amartya (2005). *Rationality and Freedom*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Sen, Amartya (1999). *Resources, Values and Development*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Sen, Amartya (2006). *Development as Freedom*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Sen, Amartya, and Dreze, Jean (1999). *The Amartya Sen Jean Dreze Omnibus: India: Economic Development and Social Opportunity*, (Third impression). New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Sen, Amartya (2005). *Rationality and Freedom*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.