Amartya Sen was born in November 1933 in Bengal, then part of British India. His family were residents of Dhaka, now the capital of Bangladesh. As a child, he studied at Santiniketan (not far from Calcutta), where he was heavily influenced by the school’s founder, Rabindranath Tagore, who had won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. It was during those early years that Sen developed a passionate interest in the plight of the poor and society’s underdogs. He has never forgotten an incident during the Hindu-Muslim riots in the 1940s, when a Muslim laborer, seeking a day’s work in Sen’s largely Hindu area in Dhaka, was knifed. Sen has said that watching his father drive the bleeding man to the hospital made him aware of the “dangers of narrowly defined identities and also of the divisiveness that can lie buried in communitarian politics.” The incident also alerted him to “the remarkable fact that economic unfreedom, in the form of extreme poverty, can make a person a helpless prey in the violation of other kinds of freedom.” In 1953, he moved to England to pursue his studies at Trinity College, Cambridge. Ever since, his feet have been firmly planted on academic ground. He has taught at a dozen of the world’s most prestigious universities, including Cambridge, Oxford, and Harvard, and the London School of Economics.

The man who flirted with the idea of becoming a Sanskrit scholar before settling on economics draws both praise and criticism for his extraordinary range of work. He moves with ease from highly technical studies filled with advanced mathematics (he once served as president of the Econometric Society) to studies filled with morality and ethics (he is a professor of both philosophy and economics at Harvard). Some people worry that he spreads himself too thin, thereby lessening his potential impact. However, Sen is not so sure—each field offers its own insights—and he continues to ignore such career counseling.

Sen’s hero for the past 20–25 years has been a true Renaissance man, Adam Smith. And others see a similarity between the two. Richard Cooper—a fellow Harvard professor—wrote in a book review in Foreign Affairs (January/February 2000): “Most economists these days eschew moral philosophy—namely, the consideration of social justice—because they consider it too ‘soft’ for rigorous analytical treatment. But Amartya Sen harks back to the older and richer tradition of evaluating the considerations of economic efficiency—which dominate most modern economic analyses—with respect to their general social consequences. Such judgments require an ethical framework.”

Social choice theory

Of all the work he has done, Sen stresses that the most satisfying has been his contribution to the field of social choice theory, which, he tells F&D, “goes to the very foundations of democracy” (see Box 1). The field goes back to the 18th-century work of a French mathematician and theorist of the revolution, the Marquis de Condorcet. But it was in the early 1950s that the theory took its modern form, thanks to Stanford University’s Kenneth Arrow (who shared the Nobel Prize for economics with Sir John Hicks in 1972).

For Sen, the beauty of social choice theory was not only that it was analytically exciting but also that it gave him a framework for tackling practical political issues—most notably, the best way to measure social progress. Traditionally, the economic community relied on national income statistics, such as GNP and GDP, which measure the total income or output of a society. However, Sen dismissed these figures as totally insufficient for two reasons: first, they failed to capture income distribution issues; and, second, a...
person’s well-being and freedom depend on many nonincome influences, such as disability, propensity toward and exposure to diseases, and the absence of schools. He also took strong issue with the head-count method of measuring poverty. Do you count only the heads of people who fall below the poverty line, or do you take a more sophisticated view that looks at how far below or above the line they are and how much inequality there is, including among the poor?

In 1976, Sen proposed a new measure of poverty that would take into account the “relative deprivation” of individuals; it has been widely used in academic circles (if not by many policymakers) and reignited interest in this issue. In 1989, he was asked by his good friend Mahbub ul Haq to help develop a measure of social welfare for the newly planned Human Development Report, published by the United Nations Development Program. Sen says that Haq wanted just one number, as opposed to a vector or set of numbers, that would go beyond GNP and take account of the different influences on human well-being and opportunity. Recalling the exchange, Sen says with a smile, “I told him that this would be very vulgar. And he replied, ‘Yes, I want a measure that is just as vulgar as GNP except it is better.’” In the end, Sen helped develop the Human Development Index, which draws on observed features of living conditions. Over time, this index has become the most widely accepted measure of comparative international welfare. “If you see the Human Development Index as asking a question about GNP, but if you don’t stop there,” he says, “the index has done its work.”

Sen also broke new ground in the study of famines, a subject that had long interested him after he witnessed the 1943 Bengal famine as a child. His work focused on the understanding that people starve when they do not have money to buy food—a seemingly obvious point, except that most commentators and policymakers were convinced that the problem had to be related to a decline in food supply. In his 1981 book Poverty and Famines, which examined famines in India, Bangladesh, and sub-Saharan African countries, he proved that there had been many famines in which the food supply had not declined—such as the one in Bangladesh in 1974, a peak year of food production. He also showed that the people who suffered were not only those on the lowest rung of the economic ladder but also those whose economic means had suddenly declined for one reason or another. As a result, governments have since concentrated their famine interventions on replacing the poor’s lost income rather than on simply distributing food. Another famous finding was that no famine had ever occurred in a democracy. For example, communist China succumbed to a disastrous famine between 1958 and 1961 in which some 30 million people starved to death. However, postindependent India, although poorer,
Second, social choice theory helps us measure social progress. For years there has been a heated debate in India over whether poverty has fallen over the past decade and, if so, by how much. It is clear, Sen says, that poverty has come down, but it’s unclear to what extent the decline has involved only people already close to the poverty line. He still believes that it is vital to come up with overall welfare measures that take into account what is happening with income inequality. In fact, it is especially important for India to do so, as it takes a bigger role in the globalized world—and yes, Sen is proglobalization (see Box 2). India’s policymakers, he insists, will have to be able to demonstrate that the benefits of globalization are being far more widely shared. And for that to happen, India will need much deeper health and education reforms.

“In a democracy, information spreads more quickly and public criticism comes more easily, making a quick response by the government to extreme events essential.”

Sen has been trying to help advance basic education, basic health care, and gender equity by using his Nobel Prize winnings to establish two trusts, one in India and one in Bangladesh. The Pratichi India Trust recently probed why schools were so poorly governed and absenteeism was so high among students and teachers. One finding that emerged was a lack of parental influence in running the schools, especially when the parents came from the lower classes. As a result, the report recommended that there be a parent/teacher committee with effective power at every school—a proposal that he immediately put in the public domain, as he intends to do with all of the Trusts’ proposals. In fact, Sen is actively involved in the work of both Trusts, often visiting India and Bangladesh to help guide the work.

Understanding democracy

Does social choice theory have any practical use today? Absolutely, Sen says. First, it helps us think more clearly about the meaning of democracy. “I don’t take the view of my [Harvard] colleague Samuel Huntington that democracy is just about elections. Of course, elections matter, but so do public discussions.” Take India’s recent election, when India surprised the world—and itself—by voting out the incumbent coalition, led by the Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), and voting in a coalition led by the former main opposition party, the secular Congress Party. “The fact that the former political coalition led by the BJP emerged as being rather divisive, economically and politically (especially along religious divisions), was a big factor in public discussion,” he tells F&D. “However, people didn’t see how powerful the opposition to this divisiveness would be in terms of voting.”
Among the hundreds of things he admires Adam Smith for, he notes, is that Smith was very concerned about distribution issues and felt there wasn’t any reason why development had to be “a nasty, bloody process rather than a happy, joyous one.”

For Sen, the key is to let people make decisions about their own lives so they can choose the kind of life they value. In his 1999 book Development as Freedom, he writes that development should be seen “as a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy.” Hence, “development requires the removal of major sources of unfreedom: poverty as well as tyranny, poor economic opportunities as well as systematic social deprivation, neglect of public facilities as well as intolerance or overactivity of repressive states.”

A very full plate
What’s next? At 70, Sen has no intention of slowing down. Perhaps it helps that, when he won the Nobel Prize, he was awarded lifetime passes on Air India and the Indian railroad. In early 2004, he resumed teaching at Harvard, leaving his post of Master of Trinity College in Cambridge. However, the self-described peripatetic is constantly criss-crossing the globe to give lectures, speak to nongovernmental organizations, stay connected with his homeland, and spend time with his wife—Emma Rothschild, Director of the Centre for History and Economics at King’s College, Cambridge, who will be teaching history at Harvard for the next few years—and four children (from two previous marriages).

An extraordinary prolific man—author of some 25 books and more than 250 journal articles—he has four books in the works. One of them, The Argumentative Indian, due out in early 2005, explores the long-held tradition of argument in India and how it affects everything, including democracy and secularism. Another is a collection of essays on freedom and justice—some already published, others now being penned, such as the one that will more fully elaborate his own theory of justice. A third book explores democracy, looking at how public discussion operates, why it is so effective, and how it relates to such issues as human rights.

More immediately, Sen is working on a book that focuses on the concept of identity. In it, he harks back to his favorite theme of tolerance—the loss of which he witnessed as a child when preindependence India degenerated into religious violence. He explains that we see ourselves as members of different groups and thus as having plural identities. “A person can be a U.S. citizen, of Mālayāsaian origin, of Chinese racial roots, a Christian, a vegetarian, a tennis player, a good cook, a heterosexual but supportive of gay rights, a lover of classical music, a hater of opera, and a believer in creatures from outer space with whom it is ‘extremely urgent’ to talk—preferably in English!” Each of these identities might be very important to an individual, he says, but a problem can arise when others use these identities to typecast the individual or to persuade or pressure him or her into being recruited into sectarian groups that are belligerent toward other groups. Identity-based thinking might seem innocent, he argues, but repercussions can be tremendously harmful.

What we need, Sen counsels, is “clearity of thought” to make the world a better place. It is particularly important to emphasize the role of choice in deciding what relative importance we would like to attach—“have reason to attach”—to our competing multiple identities. A Hutu who is being recruited to a group that tortments Tutsis can try to see that he is also a Rwandan, an African, a human being. He can resist, Sen insists, “smallness being thrust upon him.”

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