

Preppo inquires!

Six questions for Professor Amartya Kumar Sen and his answers:

1. Professor Sen, last October we reviewed your recently published [book](#) “To Share The World. Six Lessons On Justice” including six essays and speeches from the years 2001 to 2014. The foreword expresses your high respect for John Maynard Keynes, the British economist. You speak of social tension and feuds in India triggered by the crippling dissymmetry among the people, which could be countered by forming the opinion of the public in terms of Keynes’ ideas. However, don’t you think you may overestimate the possibility of forming public opinion to reduce injustice in the world in times of the internet and social media?

Answer:

It could indeed be the case that public discussion, however intense, may not resolve all the differences on the conceptions of justice and the social tension they might generate. But Keynes’s recommendation of trying to resolve differences through arguments is still important to use. This is partly because some disputes can certainly be resolved in this way, with better understanding of each other’s positions. It is also because when it is clearer what our real differences are, we can think more sensibly about a just and acceptable compromise.

2. You were born in British India in November of 1933. After doing research and teaching for many years at various universities in India, England and the United States, you currently take turns living in Cambridge, Great Britain, and Cambridge, United States. Your winter break you frequently spend “at home” in West Bengal. In 1998 you won the Nobel Prize in Economics, and in October of 2020 the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade. You are married for the third time; your first name Amartya means “immortal.” Keeping all these diverse accomplishments and influences in mind, have you reached your destination yet?

Answer:

Thank you for placing together a number of diverse features of my life in front of me. They don’t really conflict with each other. Nor do they, even taken together, resolve the ultimate priorities I may decide to have in my life. The world in which I was born had a lot of misery, in the form of suffering from illnesses, hunger and pain, and there were also deprivations of good living because of the very limited opportunities some people had. I had always hoped that I might be able to do something to remedy these different adversities, but I fear that despite my efforts, I cannot claim to have reached that destination yet.

3. In your speech for the Peace Prize you urge people to read more, to discuss, to debate, to talk to each other more. Simultaneously you advocate a free market economy and democratic values such as freedom in general and freedom of the press in particular. It seems that currently in many countries people are going in the opposite direction. You claim that “A people is not inherently capable of democracy, but rather democracy makes a people capable.” So what would you recommended to people, especially those in power, to avoid running into a cul-de-sac?

Answer:

To be exact, it is not my belief that people are not inherently capable of democracy. In fact, I believe that people do have this capability which they can use given adequate opportunities in individual and social living. But you are right that I do believe that the practice of democracy itself contributes to the development of our capabilities to make use of democratic institutions and values. For that it is very important that people have freedom of thought as well as freedom of speech, and also freedom to discuss problems openly with others without being penalized for it. The pursuit of these goals is really important.

4. In your essays and speeches one finds many references of great European minds such as Francis Bacon or Marcel Proust, but also Immanuel Kant and Heinrich Heine. The latter wrote the poem "Nachtgedanken" (Night Notions). Other than the Peace Prize, is there something in particular that ties you to Germany and its culture?

Answer:

I do believe that the civilizational characteristics of the world are best seen as diverse manifestations of a globally interrelated civilization that we share. Goethe may have been thrilled by the poetry and plays of the 5th century Indian writer Kalidasa, and the 20th century Indian writer Tagore may, in turn, have been strongly influenced by the creative writings of Goethe and Kant. Different parts of a world civilization tend to be comprehensively interrelated. There is nothing surprising in these connections.

I have had the opportunity to talk to a great many Germans (going beyond reading Kant and Heinrich Heine) who have influenced my thinking. And sometimes influences have come from ordinary people, rather than great writers. In my recently published book, *Home in the World*, which I believe will be published in German by Beck, I have many examples of how we influence each other in different ways. A number of influences, in my case, came from my conversations with German students and visitors. Interdependence is a wonderful feature of human civilization, influencing science and mathematics as well as poetry and literature.

5. In reference to climate change—regardless of whether or how much is manmade—there are ideas of a revenue-neutral CO2 tax and equilibrating mechanisms for cross-border trade. This discussion has already been started during the election campaign in the United States in 2016. Revenue-neutral means that the entire revenue generated by this tax would be given back to the citizens according to social aspects. Thus the controlling function of higher prices wouldn't be compromised initiating animated competition to develop the best methods and technology to reduce CO2 emissions. What is your opinion on this as an economist?

Answer:

The complex relations you discuss are indeed important, and your drawing our attention to these linkages is excellent. But over and above these fine calculations and the accounting of connections, we have to add to your illuminating picture the importance of a moral commitment to take care of the future along with the present in a way that negates a narrow minded selfishness. The linkages to which you draw our attention can be further enriched by integrating moral concerns with prudential thinking that human beings can clearly understand.

6. As you mention in your sixth essay, you had in January 2014 the opportunity to present seven wishes—one for each day of the week—to “the goddess of medium-sized dreams.” Should you meet her again by chance, what would be your most urgent wish in terms of the international community of the world?

Answer:

This is a very hard question, but I am delighted you have asked it. We see many diverse ways in which human beings can make the lives of others less pleasant and more problematic. These unwelcome interventions (manifestations, for example, of racism, ethnic hatred, tyranny over the weak, disruption of democratic arrangements through internal or external interventions) can be at least partly restrained by our ethical convictions. I don't know whether “the goddess of medium things” can influence our actual ethical thinking, but she may consider encouraging people in that direction since we are all influenced, ultimately, by ideas of each other.

Thank you very much, **Professor Sen**.

