Thoroughly Engaged

Sunday 30 April 2006, by BASU Anasuya, SEN Amartya (Date first published: 19 April 2006).

Nobel laureate Amartya Sen speaks to Anasuya Basu about his latest book, *Identity and Violence*, and his future projects.

Planning for the future

With *The Argumentative Indian* and *Identity and Violence*, Amartya Sen seems to have ventured into a different genre of writing. Was it a conscious decision prompted by recent developments?

Sen: These two books deal with rather different problems from most of my earlier work. I recognized that I was getting into other territories. But it was a deliberate decision. It is not the case that I wouldn't have done these studies - respectively dealing with Indian intellectual heritage and the confusion generated by identity politics and communitarian theories - without there being the Hindutva-oriented violence or Islamic terrorism in the world and so on. But I had conceived of them as primarily intellectual, if not academic, projects. I didn't see them as being immediately relevant for policy here and now.

I was going to try to explore the long intellectual background to contemporary India. But because of Hindutva violence, as well as the miniaturization of the idea of India that happened in that politics, the focus had to be not just on historical interpretation in the context of understanding contemporary India and Indian modernity but also on those sectarian and rather divisive issues which Hindutva brought out.

As a matter of fact, it turned out that the broader intellectual project I was following had a lot to say (or at least so I think), and was a response to precisely these subjects of divisiveness and sectarianism. So I think if

politics hadn't intervened, *The Argumentative Indian* would still have come out. But I brought it forward in my programme of work and pushed back my book on *Theory of Justice* that Harvard University Press has been promising to publish over the last ten years. But I had to postpone it given the urgency of the politics in India.

The same thing happened with *Identity and Violence*. I pulled that forward into immediacy because of 9/11 and the violence that we have seen since then. Three years before that, in 1998, I gave a talk in Oxford called 'Reason Before Identity'. This was my *Romanes Lecture* in Oxford, quite an old series, originally given by William Gladstone in 1892. That came out as a pamphlet. My intention was to pursue the issue of identity as a philosophical question at leisure. I brought it forward and I think the casualty was the *Theory of Justice* book again because I had to postpone it, sadly. Now that the second book has been published also, I am back to working on the *Theory of Justice*, which is a rather ambitious project in moral and political philosophy.

Q: In *Identity and Violence*, you say that the tendency to classify people according to their religion or civilization is wrong. Why are you equating religion with civilisation? Is not civilization a much broader category to which people must belong and identify with?

Sen: Civilizational partitioning need not be identified with religious identification, in general. But, unfortunately, that's the way civilizational "classifiers" have tended to see it. Like Samuel Huntington. His categories are Hindu civilization, Muslim civilization, Buddhist civilization, Western or Judaeo-Christian civilization and so on. These have ended up largely as religious categorizations. This, I believe, is one of the problems in Huntington's thesis.

Second, even if civilization is more broadly categorized, we still have a further problem. Take Indic or Arabic or Chinese civilization. They have a lot of interconnections between them. So the idea that they have evolved separately and are competing for our attention and indeed will undermine each other, given an opportunity - that view is not a good way of understanding

civilization. But it is the view you get from theories of 'civilizational clash'.

Third, a person's identity includes many things, all of which cannot be put into the basket of civilization as such. Like class, gender, political belief, profession, literary taste, language, interest in sports or games. And all these would take a variety of forms in any country, culture or civilization or among followers of any religion. In some ways, a very basic mistake is to see a human being in terms of only one identity, the civilizational identity, no matter how civilization is defined.

Q: You have devoted a chapter to West and anti-West. Is not anti-West a product of post-colonialism?

Sen: Anti-West attitude and post-colonialism are both products of imperial history. If you look at the history of the world over the last few centuries, some people have been extraordinarily powerful - some white people - and some coloured or non-white people have been subjected to Empires. This has changed the landscape in which we see countries and the people. There is here a reality of power difference and there is also a perceptual difference that goes with it. Now in that context, those who contrast themselves with the Western people react to it sometimes in the form of great admiration for the powerful West, great envy - how can we be more like it. A good example is what we call in Bengali 'Anglicization'. But there can be, also, much hostility to the West.

Another more dialectical feature of anti-West attitude is found in Asian values. The attitude, as I have discussed in my book, of Lee Kuan Yew, the architect of east Asian resurgence. He says, "You say you people (the West) have a great history of liberty and freedom. We in Asia don't. All right, we accept that. But we have something much better, namely discipline." That is an anti-West attitude. We cannot lose the tradition of thinking about freedom in Asia so easily. You cannot even begin to think about Buddhism without bringing Mukti into the story. That is diminution.

Similarly, what Akeel Bilgrami, quoted in my book, discusses that the people living in

colonies tend to think of themselves as 'the other', not the sahibs as it were. That again is a result of the imperial past.

The sense of great anger and getting even, not imitate them but defeat them, which is reflected in the terrorism of the anti-Western kind and particularly of the Islamic anti-West terrorism, also comes out of the general anti-West idea. This, too, is much influenced by the real history of imperialism and takes a particular form.

These different forms of being 'anti-Western' may be easy to understand or at least explain, but they all involve diminishing ourselves by a self-vision only in the light of our relations with the West, parasitic on the West. It is an odd way of seeing oneself, not in terms of what we stand for, but as people who have been maltreated by the West.

Q: Will you tell us about the health programme for India that you are involved with, along with the support of Manmohan Singh's government?

Sen: It is a programme of a collaborative kind. We are very grateful for Manmohan Singh's support. It is an interactive programme involving an initiative to make a change in the public health situation in India. It is a quite dreadful situation which many people active in the field of public health had been agitated about for a long time. And I too got involved, insofar as I got into it and partly in terms of my writing about Indian society, its people, and its economy. But partly also after I set up the Pratichi Trust - our studies were concerned with the delivery of not only basic education but also basic health services. It became clear how imperative it was to change the situation. So a lot of us became involved. It is going to be a combination of certain individuals, foundations, the government and some private firms, hopefully more than has emerged so far.

The project must involve public health personnel in India, who will have a dedicated and informed understanding of the nature of public health problems and how they can be addressed and dealt with. Besides, a lot of organizational changes are needed in the delivery of public healthcare. For example, to make sure that doctors turn up

when they are needed, patients, particularly poor patients, are not referred to private medication which they cannot afford and get thoroughly exploited by a combination of quackery and crookery. We want to make a change in the way public health delivery functions in India, especially for the rural poor.

Q: How often will you be coming to this part of the country now?

Sen: I used to come six times a year when my mother was alive. She died at the age of 93. I visited this part partly due to her and partly for other work. The latter has not changed. So I expect I will be coming here four to five times a year. I don't see that changing radically.

P.S.

* From "The Telegraph", April 19, 2006. Circulated by South Asia Citizens Wire | 28 April, 2006 | Dispatch No. 2243.