

Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny

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Amartya Sen, Allen Lane, 2006, 215 pg.

At a time when the US-led so-called 'War on Terror' is terrorizing thousands of innocent people around the world just because they happen to be or look like Arabs or Muslims comes a book by well known Indian economist Amartya Sen on 'Identity and Violence'.

The book, essentially a collection of a series of lectures delivered by Sen on the subject at various venues around the world since 2000, looks at the link between popular perceptions of who represents what and violence of different kinds.

Sen's central thesis in his book is that "the same person can be, without any contradiction, an American citizen, of Caribbean origin, a Christian, a liberal, a woman, a vegetarian, a long-distance runner, a historian, a feminist, a heterosexual..."

In other words, everyone on this planet has multiple identities and prioritising one identity e.g.. 'Indian or Pakistani or Muslim or Christian' over the others can result in a very simplistic understanding of the person and what he/she really represents. Sen argues that reductionist, one-dimensional notions of X or Y religion being a promoter of 'terrorism', certain communities being made up of 'usurious money lenders' or yet again people from certain countries being 'rabid communists' often lie at the heart of sectarian violence.

Sen touchingly tells the story of how as a child he was witness to the mindless killings that accompanied the Hindu-Muslim riots in the run up to the Partition of India. One incident in particular, the murder of Kader Mia, a day labourer, just outside his home in pre-Partition Dhaka made a deep and lasting impact on Sen, who was just eleven years old then.

Sen passionately rails against what he calls the 'solitarist' approach, under which people are neatly but very wrongly partitioned into Western or Eastern, Muslim or Christian or Hutu and Tutsi and even as being Pro-Globalisation and Anti-Globalisation - with no space for the assumption and exercise of other identities. "The hope of harmony in the contemporary world lies to a great extent in a clearer understanding of the pluralities of human identity, and in the appreciation that they cut across each other and work against a sharp separation along one single hardened line of impenetrable division" he writes.

At the level of popular discourse there is no doubt at all that Sen's plea for the recognition of multiple identities and diversity of differences as a way of increasing tolerance between people is very appealing.

This especially at a time when George Bush Jr., the leader of the world's only superpower constantly talks in the dumb rhetoric of 'good versus evil' or 'if you are not with us you are against us' with obviously horrific consequences. Just in the past couple of years or so, the US war on Afghanistan and Iraq has resulted in the deaths of thousands upon thousands of innocent civilians whose multiple

identities were first unfairly conflated into the category 'terrorist' and then their persona blown to pieces by the blind rage of some so called smart bomb.

But is it really possible to pin the blame for all sectarian, communal and nationalist violence the globe witnesses today on the inability of people to perceive the multiple identities of others? Would that not be as simplistic and reductionist an approach to take towards the phenomenon of violence as the perpetrators of violence take towards identity? How are identities really formed and very crucially how are they linked to more tangible, real-life processes that go on in the world? Again, while it is true that everyone has multiple identities what else, apart from sheer mental laziness, compels one person to prioritise one of these many identities over all others?

Unfortunately for the reader Sen refuses to engage his brilliant mind to these important questions, leaving a feeling that the subject has been dealt with much passion but insufficient depth. For the Indian reader in particular a glaring omission in the book is the lack of analysis of the country's caste system - arguably the world's most horrendous example of how identity and socially engineered labels are linked to violence. The caste system by associating certain identities - upper caste denominations like Brahmin and Kshatriya with power and privilege while disempowering others - 'untouchables' and 'shudras' - has in fact institutionalised violence on a daily basis in Indian society.

But to blame the caste system on 'perceptions' of individuals alone or promote the recognition of 'multiple identities' as a solution would be highly misleading too. For while it is easy to argue, as Sen proposes in his book, that a Dalit is also a human being, a father, a neighbour and a wonderful singer, the fact is that to accept him as equal in society has implications in terms of sharing of wealth and power. After all, at the root of this reified hierarchy of identities in the Indian caste system is really the quest for hegemony over resources in the real world.

The upper castes of India possess not just abstract 'prestige' but also very tangible assets, wealth, weapons and control over political power - all of this won over the centuries with a mix of raw violence, religious and cultural sophistry. Identity in this case is the culmination of a long process of violent struggle, even before it acquires a power of its own and becomes the cause of new bouts of violence.

The brutal wars and conflicts that mark the birth or partition of nation states is another example of how identities are by-products in the more fundamental battles over geographical and other strategic assets. It is not a coincidence at all that in many struggles for national independence even today natural resources like oil, gas, minerals, water and forests play such a crucial role in the very construction of identity.

All this leads to the intriguing possibility that identity and the way it is used in the real world may in many cases be merely an expression of property and power relations in any society - an idea that somebody of Sen's calibre could have easily elaborated to great effect.

For example, while the popular media is agog everywhere with stories of the Clash between Civilisations - interpreted purely in religious terms - the real ongoing war in the world may be in terms of lifestyles and use (or misuse) of resources. In a world of limited resources, the drive for consumption by some can very well be the death knell for others who happen to be merely sitting on top of valuable resources. A prime example of this is the US war on Iraq prompted to a large extent by the unquenchable thirst for oil of the American public.

In one of the chapters of 'Identity and Violence' Sen - taking on for once the mantle of an economist - dwells at length on the issue of how the labels of globalisation and anti-globalisation are fraught

with gross simplifications of positions and perceptions. Some aspects of globalisation, he argues, can actually result in benefits for the underdog and need not be imperialist while the anti-globalisation movement is in fact fighting for a better 'global' order and can thus be seen as a part of globalisation itself.

Without commenting on the merits or demerits of Sen's position on globalisation, I would like to point out that the way he approaches the discussion - merely analysing the semantics of the term 'globalisation' - is not in keeping with the rest of the book's focus on identity and violence. What would have been far more fruitful, for example, is the exploration of violence engendered by seemingly innocuous economic identities such as 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' or 'market-friendly' and 'pro-reform' in the perpetuation of certain kinds of violence in the world.

In fact, it can easily be argued that the greatest violence in modern history - as evidenced by all of Western colonialism - has been perpetrated by the so called 'civilised' preying upon the resources of the 'primitive' and 'barbaric' using the latter terms as excuses for such looting.

Identities such as 'developed', 'developing', 'progressive' and 'backward' have played a key role in the shaping of economic and social policies in country after country with all the negative consequences of such policies being brushed aside as a 'trade off' for achieving 'prosperity'.

For example, most middle class urban dwellers in much of India cannot understand why the 'backward' and 'underdeveloped' populations of the Narmada Valley in central India or the jungles of Orissa do not want to make way for large dam and mining projects that will result in 'national development'. Here, of course, using the apartheid logic of the caste system, most of them identify the interests of the 'nation' with their own 'development'.

The alleged 'backwardness' of the Dalits and Adivasis, on the other hand, becomes a justification for the use of force by the state machinery to oust them from their traditional lands on which they have lived for centuries but do not possess 'identity' (read 'ownership') papers for. Here it is not the absence of multiple identities but the absence of any identity at all that facilitates the most barbaric acts of violence against people 'invisible' to the eye of elites with overgrown identities.

P.S.

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