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DEVELOPMENT AS FREEDOM: AN INDIA PERSPECTIVE

Amartya Sen

The paper highlights that Development as Freedom proceeds from the basic recognition that freedom is both (i) the primary objective and (ii) the principle means of development. Prof. Sen classifies diverse freedoms into five different categories, namely economic empowerment, political freedoms, social opportunities, protective security and transparency guarantees. These freedoms are important individually and are also interlinked as they can assist as well as complement each other. The role of democracy and the issue of Freedom, Rights and Public discussion is analysed then in the paper. Prof. Sen argues that the commonly made generalisation that democracy slows economic growth is incorrect as empirical evidence shows otherwise.

INTRODUCTION

I should confess that I am both happy and embarrassed that my book, *Development as Freedom*, published just under four years ago, has received more attention than I had any reason to expect. I am elated not only because it is nice to be read, but for a further reason connected with the nature of the book. In writing the book, I was shameless in taking the whole world as the domain of application, and it is, therefore, particularly pleasing that the book has, in fact, been distributed across the world. I have tried to argue

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in the book that across the world, we all share some common aspirations and problems. Our successes in dealing with these problems vary greatly, as do our failures. There is no ideal country which got everything just right, but each country can benefit from learning from the successes and failures of other countries. It is particularly gratifying in this context that the book, with all its limitations, has been read in different parts of the world, and has been translated — I do take some childish pleasure in this fact — into more than twenty-five different languages, varying from the standard territories of French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese, to the less usual lands of Bahasa Indonesia, Korean, Greek, Turkish, Romanian, Serbian, Farsi, Vietnamese, and others. This has given me at least the illusion of being somewhat vindicated in my attempted universalism.

Turning now to the theme of this seminar¹, given the globally undivided nature of the basic approach, there can be, in a foundational sense, no specifically 'Indian perspective' of 'development as freedom'. The Indian perspective has to be — and that is clearly the intention of the organisers of the seminar — only one part of a larger global perspective. The approach I have tried to pursue involves a universalism, which finds expression in different ways in the book, including the diagnosis of a set of common concerns and basic aspirations that we share across the world, despite the diversity of their manifestations in different countries, cultures and societies. For example, the food we like to eat, the clothes we want to wear, the entertainment we seek, the uses we make of our liberties vary greatly between one society and another, and yet the general freedom of being well-fed, well-clothed, well-entertained and well-emancipated is, I have argued, a shared objective. This point is important to me in my attempt to resist the separatism generated by political nationalism and also the growing influence of cultural sectarianism. Our robust uniqueness can, I would argue, go hand in hand with our shared commonality, without any conflict whatsoever.

Along with the happiness in receiving attention, I am also, as I mentioned earlier, somewhat embarrassed, since the basic approach presented in my book is not really new. Indeed, very far from it. In one form or another, they have figured in the thoughts

of people across the world over thousands of years. They were prominent, for example, in the deliberations of Gautama Buddha — arguably the greatest Indian of all times — when, twenty-five hundred years ago, he left his princely home in search of wisdom. Gautama was deeply bothered by the unfreedoms of ill health, disability, mortality and ignorance which he saw around him in the foothills of the Himalayas but which he knew existed all around the world. The questions that moved him — and sent him in search of enlightenment — throw significant light on a great many subjects, including the need to overcome unfreedoms that motivate the pedestrian approach of ‘development as freedom’. Even though Buddha himself went on, as we all know, into rather abstruse issues involving the nature of life and the transcendental predicament of living beings, nevertheless, the nature of Buddha’s motivating questions remains profoundly relevant for practical public policy as well. In the transcendental context it may appear trivial that some of the earliest interregional meetings to settle differences of views were arranged by Buddhist intellectuals (respectively in Rajagariha in the sixth century BCE, in Vaishali in the fifth century BCE, in Pataliputra in the third century BCE, and in Kashmir in the second century AD), and that every early attempt at printing — in China, Korea and Japan — was undertaken by Buddhist technologists (the first printed book in the world was a Sanskrit Buddhist text, *Vajrachedikaprajnaparamita*, translated into Chinese in early fifth century and printed in 868 AD). But these were major steps in the development of a deliberative and communicative tradition in the world and in enhancing the reach of public reasoning, a proper history of which is yet to be written.

Similar connections can be identified in the immensely diverse writings of such thoroughly disparate thinkers as Kautilya, Ashoka, Shudraka or Akbar, in our country or of Aristotle, Adam Smith, Condorcet, Mary Wollstonecraft, Karl Marx or John Stuart Mill, in the West (to name just a few writers). Valuing substantive freedoms is not at all novel, nor is the search for the ways and means of advancing these freedoms through public deliberation and social organisation. Many of these earlier authors paid specific attention to the inequality of the adversities we face, related to class, gender, race, location, community, and other stratifications

that divide us. The need to address these structured inequalities is a critically important part of development as freedom.

FREEDOMS AS ENDS

Development as Freedom proceeds from the basic recognition that freedom is both (1) the primary objective, and (2) the principal means of development. The former is a normative claim and includes the understanding that the assessment of development must not be divorced from the lives that people can lead and the real freedoms that they can enjoy. Development can scarcely be seen merely in terms of enhancement of inanimate objects of convenience, such as a rise in the GNP (or in personal incomes), or industrialisation, or technological advance, or social reforms.

These are, of course, valuable and often crucially important influences on our lives, but they are not valuable in themselves; their importance depends on what they do to the freedoms of the people involved.

Even in terms of being at liberty to live reasonably long lives (free of escapable ailments and other causes of premature mortality), it is remarkable that the extent of deprivation for particular groups in very rich countries can be comparable to that in the so-called 'third world'. As I discuss in the book, in the United States, African Americans (that is, American blacks) as a group have no higher — indeed have a lower — chance of reaching an advanced age than do people born in the immensely poorer economies of China or Jamaica, or Costa Rica or, for that matter, substantial parts of India. The freedom from premature mortality is, of course, helped by a larger income (that is not in dispute), but it also depends on many other features of social organisation, including public health care and medical security, the nature of schooling and education, the extent of social cohesion, and so on. It is critically important, therefore, to take an adequately broad view of development.

INTERDEPENDENCE OF FREEDOMS

The starting point of our analysis is the nature of our ends: the capacious freedoms that we have reason to seek. However, we

cannot stop there. Freedom of one kind tends, by and large, to help the advancement of freedoms of other kinds, so that each type of freedom, while an end in itself, is also a means to other freedoms. These connections require empirical investigation and scrutiny, and the bulk of the book, *Development as Freedom*, is concerned precisely with establishing these linkages.

Freedoms can be of many different kinds. In *Development as Freedom*, I tried to make the tasks more manageable by classifying diverse freedoms into five different categories, namely, economic empowerment, political freedoms, social opportunities, protective security and transparency guarantees. There is nothing particularly sacrosanct about this classification, but it does cover the ground, and since the programme of this seminar includes, I am happy to see, discussion of each of these aspects of overall freedom, I am greatly looking forward to the results of those deliberations.

I now want to comment on the interrelations between these distinct kinds of freedoms — how they can assist as well as complement each other. I start specifically with one particular issue that has figured prominently in Indian debates as well as international discussions in recent years. Doubts about the merits of Indian democracy — and about democracy in general — have been aired with much frequency recently. These doubts can be, I believe, well addressed in the perspective of development as freedom.

DEMOCRACY AND THE ENDS AND MEANS OF DEVELOPMENT

The first point to note in assessing Indian democracy is that democracy cannot be evaluated in primarily instrumental terms. Political freedom and civil rights have importance of their own. Their value to the society does not have to be indirectly established in terms of their contribution to economic growth or other such economic or social achievements. Politically unfree citizens are deficient in freedom even if they happen to enjoy a very high level of income.

The second point goes beyond this purely valuation issue. Despite the commonly made generalisation that democracy tends

to slow down economic growth, extensive cross-country comparisons- by Robert Barro, Adam Prezeworski and others – have not provided any empirical support for this often- repeated belief. More specifically, when comparative statements are made that try to show the failure of Indian democracy, it is typically assumed that had India not been a democracy, it would have had experiences rather similar to South Korea, Singapore, or China, rather than other non-democratic countries such as North Korea, Afghanistan, or Sudan. In fact, the proximate comparison of India with a not-always democratic country must be with Pakistan, and somehow that does not tend to be the focus of the rosy portrayals of the non-democratic alternative that India is supposed to have missed.

There is, however, a deeper issue of methodology there. The policies and circumstances that have led to the economic success of Asian economies to the east of India—whether South Korea or Singapore or China—are by now reasonably well understood. A sequence of empirical studies have identified a general list of ‘helpful policies’ with much internal diversity, which includes the role of economic competition, use of international markets, a high level of literacy and school education, successful land reforms, easier availability of credit (including micro-credit), good public health care, and appropriate incentives for investment, exporting and industrialisation. There is absolutely nothing to indicate that any of these policies is inconsistent with greater democracy and actually has to be sustained by the elements of authoritarianism that happened to be present in South Korea or Singapore or China. The basic point is that economic growth is helped by the friendliness of the economic climate, rather than by the fierceness of the political regime. If India has failed to do enough to create such a favourable climate and to learn from the positive experiences of China or South Korea, the blame can hardly be put on the shoulders of political freedoms of citizens. Indeed, more engaging public discussion on what needs to be done can help to change India’s deficiencies. This calls for more democracy not less.

Further, it is not sufficient to look only at the growth of GNP

the lives and capabilities of the citizens. For this it is particularly important to examine the connection between political and civil rights, on the one hand, and the prevention of major disasters (such as famines), on the other. The availability and use of political and civil rights give people the opportunity to draw attention forcefully to general dangers and vulnerabilities, and to demand appropriate remedial action. Governmental response to acute sufferings of people often depends on the political pressure that is put on it, and this is where the exercise of political rights (such as voting, criticizing, protesting) can make a real difference. The role of democracy in preventing famines has received attention precisely in this context, including the fact that India has not had a real famine since independence (despite continued endemic undernourishment and often precarious food situation), whereas China had the largest famine in recorded history during 1958-61, when the ill-calculated public policies that led to the disaster were continued by the government without any substantial emendation for three years, while nearly 30 million people died. The association of famines with authoritarianism can be seen also in the experiences of Cambodia in the 1970s, Ethiopia and Sudan in the 1980s, North Korea in the 1990s — and indeed even today.

At a less extreme level, the recent experiences of the so-called 'Asian economic crisis' during 1997-99, which affected many of the economies of east and south-east Asia, bring out, among other things, the penalty of undemocratic governance. Once the financial crisis led to a general economic recession, the protective power of democracy — not unlike that which prevents famines in democratic countries — was badly missed in these countries. The suddenly dispossessed in many of these countries did not have the voice and the hearing that a democratic system would have given them. Nor surprisingly, democracy has become a major issue in many countries in East and South-East Asia Today.

INDIA AND CHINA

Democracy gives an opportunity to the opposition to press for policy change even when the problem is chronic and endemic rather than acute and disastrous (as in a famine). So the limited reach of Indian social policies on education, basic nutrition, health

care, land reform and gender equity reflects the weakness of democratic practice in India. It is, in fact, as much a failure of the opposition parties as of the governments in office in India's post-independence history, since the opposition need not have allowed those in power to get away with gross neglect.

Comparison of the experiences of China and India brings out some interesting lessons, which can take us well beyond the frequently repeated simple generalisations. The comparative perspectives in life expectancy, which is quite central to the approach of development as freedom, can throw interesting light on a complex reality that requires a more discriminating analysis. In the middle of the twentieth century, post-revolution China and newly independent India had about the same life expectancy at birth, not much higher than 40 years. The Chinese leaders were immediately more successful in rapidly expanding health care and life expectancy than their Indian counterparts were, and in these fields (leaving out the temporary interruptions in famines), China clearly got more from the egalitarian commitment of its authoritarian leadership than India did from its democratic system. When the economic reforms were introduced in China in 1979, China had a lead of 14 years or more over India, with the Chinese life expectancy at 68 years while India's was less than 54 years.

The speed and composition of Chinese economic growth were, however, in many ways in great need of improvement in the pre-reform period. Radical economic reforms, which were introduced in 1979, ushered in a period of extraordinary growth in China over the last two decades. We run, however, into an odd conundrum as far as life expectancy is concerned. China's life expectancy, which is now just above 70 years, compares with India's figure of 63 years or more, and the life expectancy gap in favour of China, which was 14 years before the Chinese reforms,

even more obvious to me than it was earlier. Not only do two-thirds or more of the surveyed population get no assistance at all from the public health services, a high proportion have had no

Indeed, if we look at Kerala, which has had a long history of egalitarian politics not altogether dissimilar to the kind that China had in its early period, but also has the benefit of democracy and oppositional politics, we find a life expectancy of about 74 years, which is significantly ahead of China's 70 years. The contrast is even sharper if we look at specific points of vulnerability, such as infant mortality rate, in which Kerala's figure now is less than half of China's. While India has much to learn from China's past experience in rapidly expanding health care and basic education which led to speedy expansion of life expectancy in the pre-reform period, and also from its post-reform experience in pursuing intelligent and undogmatic economic policies that make excellent use of global economic opportunities (in both these China has been a world leader), there is a little that India need learn from China on the alleged virtues of authoritarian politics.

FREEDOMS, RIGHTS AND PUBLIC DISCUSSION

It can, in fact, be argued that India can get much more from its own democratic system. If freedoms are important, then their implications in terms of people's rights — and the duties of others to help in safeguarding and advancing those rights — must call for probing public discussion. Democracy is not merely a system of elections, but also one of public reasoning, which can play a ~~valuably constructive role in bringing about changes in policies~~

very ambitious schemes of food guarantee for the undernourished in India through appropriate variations in public policy. But more modestly, much can be achieved even by such humble programmes as the serving of mid-day meals to all Indian school children — an arrangement that is already in operation in parts of the country. This would generate, simultaneously, a great many benefits: enhance nutrition, increase school attendance, raise the proportion of girls who go to school, help to break down caste barriers through communal eating, and reduce the common syndrome of attention deficit that standardly affects a considerable portion of the poorer school children who come to the school underfed.

The policy reform that is needed is largely a matter of clarity of economic and social thinking, and here public reasoning can certainly help. The Supreme Court has already identified the entitlement to a cooked mid-day meal as a right of Indian school children, but that right has been very partially implemented across the country. To proceed further, it is extremely important to generate political pressure about remedying the deprived state of Indian children. Public concerns can be made more effective through greater use of the opportunities that democracy offers, including quality newspapers and other media, which we are very fortunate to have.

Similar issues of public reasoning arise in a number of other problem areas, including the neglect of school education in general (despite the achievements of specialised technical and higher education in India), the poor state of basic health care (despite the quality of expensive private medicine), the deep insecurities suffered by vulnerable minorities (despite the secular form of the Indian polity), continued neglect of the interests and freedoms of women (despite the prominent role of many women leaders in politics and the professions), and so on. Political freedoms and transparency guarantee (particularly in the form of freedom of information) are direct requirements of democracy, but they, in turn, can be immensely powerful in expanding economic empowerment, social opportunities and protective security. There is nothing as contrary as grumbling about the limitations of democracy without trying to do what we can to extend its reach. Since I do know that many of the participants in this seminar

have made great contributions to expanding the scope and effectiveness of democracy, I am sure we will have the opportunity of benefiting enormously from the fruits of their experience.

The point is sometimes made that democracy cannot help those who do not form a majority. This thesis, based on a mechanical identification of democracy with just majority rule, is not only a mischaracterisation; it also profoundly underestimates the role of public reasoning in politicising social failures. Democracy is more than majority rule, and goes also beyond legal guarantees of minority rights (though making these guarantees effective can indeed be extremely important, as we know from recent events). Democracy must, in addition, include the availability and use of the opportunity of open public reasoning based on public knowledge which helps us to understand and value the freedoms of all members of the society without exception.

In illustrating the reach of public reasoning, I might consider one of the well recognised successes of the democratic system, namely, the absence of famines in democratic countries. In fact, the proportion of famine victims in the total population is always comparatively small — very rarely more than 10 per cent. If elections are hard to win after a famine, and if criticisms from newspapers and the other media, and from the opposition parties, are difficult to brush off, the effectiveness of this mechanism lies in the ability of public discussion to make the predicament of famine victims generally understood by the population at large. Indeed, even the knowledge of a relatively small number of starvation deaths, as in say Kalahandi, can immediately generate massive public concern. It is the reach of public reasoning on which the effectiveness of democracy depends, and it is for us to make the reach as wide and extensive as possible.

I will end here, except for recounting a small event. Some years ago, shortly after completing the manuscript of *Development as Freedom*, I was talking with and trying to entertain a young child by telling her about *Alice in the Wonderland*. I thought she would be amused by Alice's question: "What is the use of a book without pictures or conversations?" The child was indeed amused and readily agreed with Alice, but went on to retaliate by asking me

whether my own books had pictures and conversations. I told her that, alas, my books did not really have anything that she would accept as a proper picture (I expected her to be skeptical of the picturesque quality of my statistical charts), but I added that my