

Professor Sen, Identity and Democracy

Now, “Professor Amartya Sen of Harvard, India’s most eminent economist” turns to “Philosophy, Identity and Islam”, and refers to his works “primarily on ethics, to some extent on Epistemology” in a talk with *The Statesman’s* Contributing Editor Dr Subroto Roy. Here he presents himself in “multiple identities” belonging to “many different groups”: “I’m an Indian citizen, I’m a British or American resident, I’m a Bengali, the poetry I like is Bengali poetry, I’m a man, I’m an economist, I belong to all these groups. Nothing complicated about that...”¹ Then we read a review by Arkraprabha Deb about Amartya Sen’s *Identity and Violence The Illusion of Destiny* upholding a point that “we are primarily human and secondarily a member of a group ... divisions are chimeras created by ruling elites or traders of death”.

This needs correcting. First, groups and classes are realities, not “chimeras”. They are created not “by ruling elites or traders of death” but by relations of production based on social division of labour coupled with private property. Rather, the “ruling elites or traders of death” themselves are also creation of the same historical process that created the “divisions” in the first place. Secondly, all Sen identifies himself with are the outcome of merely a few hundred years now out of some 3,500 years in India of the self-same alienating and class-dividing historical process which has been around for only some 10,000 years out of about 195,000 years of cooperative kinship based human existence on their mother planet – Earth.

Right now, the “human” is divided in the main into two great classes – the collective capitalist class ruling over and exploiting the collective working class. May I, therefore, break the professor’s “silence” about his one most practical “identity”, asking which side he is on in a class-society of ours? Is he not a wage-slave earning his coins in Britain or America or elsewhere selling his “market entitlements” to the capitalist buyers on the global labour market? What are the determinants of relations between capitalists and workers after all, the personalities of those involved or their economic and social relations?

“We are primarily human”, fine, but we find that the first casualty in our survivalist exigencies as classes – past and present – has been our human identity as a whole on either side of the divide. Class division of society has robbed human community of its human identity and dignity with class identities in accordance with the historical evolution of social division of labour corresponding to various forms of property – titles, prizes, codes, statuses, hyped icons, heroes, idols, celebrities, dignitaries, etc. Today, in so doing, “The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honoured and looked up to with reverent awe. It has converted the physician, the lawyer, the priest, the poet, the man of science, into its paid wage-labourers.”² They have dehumanized the human within us, turning the great producing species into a contemptible being. Like any idealist – economist, politician or philosopher – Amartya Sen interprets in many lips – too often “the poor”, often “the labourers”, at times “workers”, seldom “classes”, then great men of “tolerance” in the East, now “we are primarily human”, but never the one single action to restore our human by eliminating classes and thereby class identities from the society of humanity.

Now the bourgeoisie have to lay their ‘democracy’ trap in the ‘East’ to avoid even the

West's bourgeois democratic battle-cry in the French Revolution 1789 – "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*" (*liberty, equality, fraternity*). They have to, lest their 'people' look forward to the finally evolved Paris Commune Principles of Democracy (revocably delegated participatory bottom up democracy) by the working class. Remember the historical principles of human emancipation after 1789 and then on a superior bottom-up edifice since 1871 waiting as the historical task of the working class to emancipate itself in order to get back our human.

"Democracy nowadays is communism,"³ said Engels in 1845. "Again we say to them, 'Stand back! Give the working class a chance of a turn,'"⁴ he urged in 1881.

Of course, political democracy cannot go beyond universal suffrage first demanded by the Chartists and then introduced by the Paris Communards, our class forerunners. However, the capitalist class ultimately seized it and turned into an instrument of trickery via national "citizenship" with one ballot for all irrespective of "individualistic personalities" – so-called high or low, privileged or deprived – all supposedly having equal power in politics. Yet, what is lacking is *economic democracy* or equality that is Communism or Socialism, which remains up until now obscure, but which we have to disclose by arresting political power to end politics and economics for the last time.

As Engels has elucidated the interconnection:

"To the extent, however, that this class [the working class] matures for its self-emancipation, it constitutes itself as a party of its own and elects own representatives, not those of the capitalists. Thus, universal suffrage is the gauge of the maturity of the working-class. It cannot and never will be anything more in the present-day state; but that is sufficient. On the day the thermometer of universal suffrage registers boiling point among the workers, both they and the capitalists will know where they stand."⁵

Actually, democracy in itself is not a system of society, but the language of a social relation and the *form* of an organization and action. Nevertheless, the language or the form is nothing without content. The *content* of democracy is equality, i.e. equal human life. It is human nature to live socially, and democracy is the spontaneous social expression of human nature.

You cannot have democracy in class societies. Ruling classes sabotage human nature and abuse human behaviour in their narrow class interests. Thus, theirs were and are class 'democracies' – sham 'democracies'. When the capitalist class fought for 'democracy', it fought for its own class-democracy only and constituted the same by removing political anachronism of feudal aristocracy and absolute monarchy, but they could not do it without the support of their slaves – the working class, hence the battle-cry: liberty, equality, fraternity. In respect of protecting it for all their class factions when the ruling faction goes astray, others oppose, hence 'freedom' of expression and organization. As to the extension of their 'democracy' to the working class, the truth is that it did not come from the capitalist class as a present in basket with a bouquet of roses. Instead, the working class initiated it with universal suffrage at a price of their blood and sweat, and then the capitalist class grabbed and turned it into an instrument of trickery. It came about as the outcome of the struggle between

the capitalist class and the working class, obviously a different one from the feudal aristocracy and the capitalist class. It remains a ‘democracy’ of capitalism.

Today the struggle for democracy is bound up with the struggle for Socialism.. Thus, why not start “combined action and mutual discussion”⁶ to implement the bottom up principle of participatory democracy based on economic and social equality and free access and an all-round development of all human potentials within our realized global community? In this respect always, keep abreast the lesson that a hairbreadth deviation from the principle of participatory democracy in organizing or administering affairs of life would keep us alienated from the means of production and distribution, and thereby transform our delegated functionaries into de facto owners and exploiters.

Prof. Sen’s “traditional values of tolerance of plurality” have ultimately evolved into a higher stage in “the West” with the emergence of working class consciousness of universality of humanity that inspired Marx and Engels urge on: *Workers of all lands unite!* Why then should we ask our children and fellow workers to “Look East” for whatever? We will ask them – the global class of ours – to go global breaking through all East/West North/South divide to make our own history..

To reach the stage of class-for-itself objectively workers must become class conscious to relegate all divisive self-defeating sectarian demands and raise the one single object: “The establishment of a system of society based upon the common ownership and democratic control of the means and instruments for producing and distributing wealth by and in the interest of the whole community.” Only this movement can unite all sundry sections of the class – the employed/unemployed, productive/unproductive, useful/wasteful, civilian/armed, etc. Common, i.e. universal ownership implies abolition of private property in the juridical forms of individual, joint stock, state, multinational etc. terminating the value-price-profit system altogether and organizing the society anew.

The problems for which we seek solutions are rooted in our own life principles. We all are at the mercy of our unconscious compulsion to repeat the forgotten past. We can never make any significant progress until we confront our enemy intellectually and organizationally. Revisit pre-history of a few thousand years through slavery and serfdom to the present-day wages-slavery to see the only solution awaiting recognition and action is Socialism.

Notes:

¹ *The Sunday Statesman*, May 14, 2006, 8th Day, p. 1 & 8

² Marx-Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, Progress, p.38

³ Engels, *The Festivals of Nations in London*, 1845, Collected Works, Vol. 6, Progress, 1976, p.5

⁴ Engels, *Social Class – Necessary and Superfluous*, written in early August 1881, First published in *The Labour Standard*, No. 14, London, August 6, 1881, as a leading article, Collected Works, Vol. 24, Moscow 1989, p. 418

⁵ Engels, *Origin of Family, Private Property and State*, Selected Works, Vol. 3, Moscow, p. 350

⁶ Engels, *Preface to the English Edition of 1888, Manifesto*, Collected Works, Vol. 26, p. 515