

Social and Cultural dimensions of Development through Amartya Sen's lens

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ABSTRACT: Sen's capability approach differentiates between "being and doing"- with doing defined as what individual is capable of doing. And since individual's capability is dependent on as diverse factors as political voice, education, health, and social facilities, in this way culture turns out to be one of the primal factors affecting behaviors and capabilities of individuals, and that in turn can lead to economic and social development.

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From Charles Darwin's theory of evolution examining the shifting patterns of social organization to Herbert Spencer's theory of naturalism, Emily Durkheim's retribution to those who disengage from the well-integrated societies, Talcott Parson's technocratic social divide of individuals, Max Weber's theory of rationalism and Protestant ethics, and Asia's or more precisely Confucian ethics, all have explained the importance of social and cultural dimensions of development. Sen highlights the importance of not only the culture but also the ways through which culture can influence development. Going beyond the limited views of defining development on GNP/Capita thresholds, he encapsulates culture with all its interconnections and intricacies to complement the technocratic measures of development. Sen's capability approach differentiates between "being and doing"- with doing defined as what individual is capable of doing. And since individual's capability is dependent on as diverse factors as political voice, education, health, and social facilities, in this way culture turns out to be one of the primal factors affecting behaviors and capabilities of individuals, and that in turn can lead to economic and social development.

Sen, rather than jumping onto the conclusions, though implicitly but averts the ways through which cultural values and resulting behavioral norms can adversely affect the social and economic development as well. He is quite right because if cultural pluralism, and tolerance defines the term ethno development for Malaysia and Singapore then anti-territorialism, overtly disdainful nationalistic approach and most importantly cultural singularism also give birth to horrendous examples of genital mutilation and tearing out of fetus from expected Muslim women's bellies in Gujarat pogrom (India-2002) and premeditated killing of Chittagong hill tract people by military coups in Bangladesh.

Sen's analysis of culture influencing behaviors, and both in turn influencing development is the main crux of the subject matter. Weber's Western ethics provides us with insights into the German Capitalism proliferations. According to Max Weber there is a rationale or reasoning to everything that a person does or thinks. Despite the importance of reason and power to analyze, a person never undermines the importance of religion in his life. According to which if a person puts aside his own benefits for the sake of God-human eternal relationship; he will be rewarded with the long term economic progress. Severely denounced by most of the contemporary theorists who see religion as an impediment to development and more importantly with the emergence of non-Protestant and Catholic countries showing good economic performance, avenues for Asian ethics (Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Confucianism) were viably opened. Again criticizing the Weber's social evolution as

sanctimonious and self-reinforced, Asian ethics in general and Confucian ethics in particular explained the unprecedented success that Japan has shown. Releasing itself from the hard clutches of historical hardships Japan, soon after independence, inclined towards ways through which development could be ensured. With good governance, excellent entrepreneurship, trust worthy financial markets, and effective macroeconomic policies, Japan joined the club of highly industrialized countries. But, as Sen explains, behind these successes were the close harmony between the cultural values and behavioral norms- that few people link with Samurai code of honor, others with radical educational movements, and most with the Confucian ethics. But if these culturally (ethically) influenced strong forces provide an explanation of the “then” known Japanese strong position then why “present” Japan is criticized for its inefficiency and corruption. Presumed influence of Confucian ethics over the rapid industrialization in Japan provides interesting insights. Capricious nature of variable cultural values (based primarily on trust), providing a reason for Japan’s economic growth can be the result of varying ethical influences as well.

Sen’s assertion is apt that if Protestantism is subject to criticism for its eurocentricism then why the influence of Confucian ethics is so heavily concentrated over the Asian ethics. Sen’s critical innuendo is quite conspicuous because if Confucian ethics highlight emphasis on education, saving, grassroots progress, and business ethics (all factors contributing to good performance of economic institutions) for long term development, then Confucianism also upsurges hierarchy, and despise for merchants and craftsmen (detrimental to the good performance of economic institutions) leading to underdevelopment. China is also a Confucian society but the way it has modified its cultural values and ethics, and kept its pace steady with the pace of the ever changing time is remarkable. Hence if culture influences development, then development also influences culture- a binary relationship.

Perhaps that is why Sen highlights the importance of investment in development projects for culture uplifting programs that not only provide with income/employment generating opportunities to poor people but also encourage cultural indigenesness and pluralism (Sen’s reference to Nalanda University for which he is named its first chancellor in July-2012). It can be exemplified with sustainable tourism or what we usually call the “ecotourism”; it focuses on promoting indigenous cultural practices providing job opportunities in such an enabling atmosphere where no environmental degradation takes place. Bunun Cultural and Educational Foundation, in Taiwan, promote Bunun indigenous group providing entertainment and information to the foreign and local visitors through dance performances and traditional craft techniques. Similarly, Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) in Nepal, adding on to the social and economic development through absorbing more people in jobs, also brings forth the issue of deforestation by the local and foreign mountain trekking groups, for that reason ACAP charges entrance fees to trekking tourist which are then used for the betterment of local people and environment. Sen also expounds how cross country movement of goods, services, people, and even ideas adversely affect the roots of any culture. Rightly said so because mcdonaldization and coca-colaization (to name a few) have seriously put the relevance, integrity, decorum, and authenticity of various deep rooted cultural values and traditions into jeopardy.

In doing so Sen does not explicitly consider the economic and environmental aspects (read issues) related to Globalization. The relevant example we can think of in this particular dimension is the destruction of Mangrove forest in Thailand due to shrimp farming. As a result of rise in international demand (USA, China, and Europe) for shrimps, 11500 new shrimp farms were formed in a period of ten years. On one hand it led to absorb many people in labor market and increase foreign exchange earnings (economic gains), but on the other hand the replacement of major forest area for shrimp farming also led to disturb the Mangrove ecosystem by complex aquaculture, and soil erosion (environmental issues). Though environmental concerns were shown by the government but again the economic gains through trade were so accentuated that whatever perceived to be done for environmental up gradation proved out to be quite antithetical to what actually happened (the loss of 191000 hectares area of mangrove forest in three decades).

In complacency with what Sen cites, individuals who make social decisions should never forget the depth and intensity that culture, with all its share of positives and negatives, presses upon them, particularly in the context of democratic states. Just for instance when he clarified the untrue but mostly believed notion of higher growth associated with the non-democratic states (South Korea, Singapore, China to name a few) and lower growth associated with democratic states (India, and Jamaica), Sen explained factors other than conventional economic ones that define economic growth.

Particularly in the context of democratic systems, political and civil rights define socio-economic fabric of the society on one hand, and gives people the chance to have their own say, on the other hand (DEMOCRACY AS A CORE VALUE- UNICEF (1999), SEN). And for that people need to be well informed and educated. Perhaps, for that reason, Sen purposefully stresses upon the need for infusing cultural dimensions into development for the fact that in West, Asian cultural values are seen as stiff, skeptical, and defiant to political freedom in general, and individual (ultimately social) choice in particular.

Sen always treads the untrodden path, from incorporating freedom, equality, gender, ethnicity, and political voice into development to the main thrust behind Alkire -Foster measure of multidimensional poverty, Sen has always taken the unconventional path and broken away the shackles of monolithic and polyolithic economic orthodoxies. Capitalism (Sen refers

to Montesquieu- a philosopher who staunchly advocated the good deeds resulting from Capitalism) or anti-Capitalism (again Sen's incredibly original didactic allusion is breezy when he refers to Jerry Rubin (a social worker who advocated social evils like greed and corruption as a result of Capitalism)), he stresses on the need of pulling the most disadvantaged out of the quagmire of issues they all are in, and trickling the benefits from the advantaged down to the disadvantaged. And if it all happens keeping the cultural dimension of development intact, it will complement the economic, political, and ecological dimensions of development with minimum divergent views and conflict.