

AMARTYA SEN'S PERSPECTIVE ON CAPABILITY APPROACH & WELL-BEING

Sucharita Mitra Dutta

Department of Philosophy, Jadavpur University, India

Corresponding Author's Email: sucharitamidtradutta@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

A society develops in a certain way to ensure the flourishing of its members. By eliminating injustice, the citizens of the society draw a full proof plan to establish justice. This is not about the formation of a completely just society; it is the formulation of a society in which its citizens can eliminate injustice to the furthest extent. So, the theory of justice becomes so important and relevant in this context. John Rawls in his *A Theory of Justice* explains equality in terms of distribution of primary goods to establish justice individualistically. His idea of well-being helps to develop the position of least well offs in the society so that it brings a concept of equality and justice among the citizens of the society. In contrary, twentieth century philosopher Amartya Sen illustrates his notion of justice based on capability approach. His contention here is to explain the idea that human beings have the freedom to choose his own life path by his ability to achieve certain things. The contrast between these theories show different approaches towards justice and establish well-being for the citizens of the society. Sen's idea has been considered here not only as a critique of Rawlsian theory but also it is a further development of the same. Moreover, the author tried to raise some very admissible queries regarding practicality in Sen's theory in the conclusion section of this paper which in my view demand our attention.

Keywords: *Justice, Difference Principle, Equality, Freedom, Individuality, Well-Being*

INTRODUCTION

Human beings are an integral part of a society. They have immense possibilities and their actualization nurture the society to grow. A society, on the other hand, needs to ensure a full-proof development for its members to flourish their hidden nature. We are quite affected by manifested injustice. We have the natural ability to eliminate remediable injustices around us rather than the realization that the world is not completely just. No one is trying to achieve a perfectly just world, but we want to remove clear injustices to the extent we could. The identification of the remedy for injustice is not only to discriminate between justice and injustice, it is also central to the theory of justice. So, the diagnosis of injustice would be the starting point of the theory of justice. Twentieth century Noble Laureate and eminent political philosopher Amartya Sen in his famous work *The Idea of Justice* advocates that "This is evident enough in our day-to-day life, with inequities or subjugations from which we may suffer and which we have good reason to resent, but it also applies to more widespread diagnoses of injustice in the wider world in which we live." The aim of this paper is to establish a theory of just society by discussing the concept of well-being in close connection with the development of capability. The concept of well-being is attached with

the concept of equality, fraternity, social freedom, economical prosperity etc. To fulfil this goal a theory of justice is essential to clarify how we can proceed to address the questions of enhancing justice and eliminating injustice, rather than to offer the characterizations of perfectly just societies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To justify the title of the paper and to address the issue raised in this paper, the author has reviewed some important books and articles. These literatures guide to formulate the arguments in a very critical way and provide new insights to shape research design.

1. Sen (2010) developed his insights of establishing justice and connects it with the concept of well-being in a way that it Helps to formulate the issue.
2. Sen (1979) illustrated that as human beings are the integral part of the society, their well-being is the prior concern of the society and societal development also depends in a way on the position of the citizens, their understanding, equality, fraternity etc. So, the concept of equality has a far-reaching consequence to maintain justice in a society. In this context, individuality turns out to be the most valuable concept where each person has the freedom to choose his own goal and tries to achieve it.

3. When Sen tried to illustrate his theory of individuality in a certain way, his predecessor Rawls (1999) provided a different kind of notion on individuality. Starting in contrary to the classical utilitarianist, Rawls is concerned with equal liberty principle in terms of distribution of primary goods. But in his difference principle, he moves towards the equality of the worst-off group of people. Here a kind of inconsistency has taken place where he considers them as an inferior group in the society and starts fighting for their rights.

4. Freeman (1999) found that Rawls tries to establish justice as fairness in terms of distribution of benefits and burdens.

5. Contemporary philosopher Murphy (2010) in his article pointed out that Sen retains some of Rawlsian thesis, but Rawlsian concept is somewhat defective when he tries to establish equality in terms of principles.

6. The defects of Rawlsian thesis drive Sen (2010) to think in a completely different manner. In this context he illustrates the concept of freedom and draws the attention towards maintaining equality in terms of capability. With various instances he formulates his conception of capability. The 'hard cases' of Rawls is catered by Sen and includes these cases in the mainstream formation of capability.

Although, Sen's approach shows a new dimension in this burning issue, but there are some problems of practical applicability in Sen's approach also. Thus, the author tries to raise these inquiries which might be addressed in further research.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the field of Philosophy, the method that is predominantly used to proceed the research work is known as the critical analysis method through argumentation. There are mainly two different ways to collect knowledge: one is sense experience which is the source of our knowledge from external world and the other is reason that is higher than sense experience and usually can be applied upon the raw materials acquired from our senses and formulates knowledge. As Philosophy is a study of reason, it is not confined into the sphere of sense experience. However, we, human beings, are not at all satisfied by our limitations; we always try to overcome it and go beyond to acquire more and more accurate knowledge. So, to acquire proper knowledge we analyse relevant data i.e. theories in a very critical sense e.g. to critically analyse a theory, we need to frame it in an argumentative form and to formulate criticism of that theory in the same way.

Argumentation provides proper logic of understanding of a theory with various relevant instances. This is how we can compare one theory to other and point out the difference in principle. Thus, in Philosophy, one can address an issue like justice and well-being in this present paper and formulate a proper research work.

RESULT & DISCUSSION

There are clear distinctions with pre-eminent theories of justice in contemporary moral and political philosophy (Barker, 1951). Sen's theory is not only an extension of John Rawls' ideal of justice, but it is also considered to be a critique of Rawls' work *A Theory of Justice*. Prior to Rawls, classical utilitarianists advocate their thesis of equality in collective sense. They are more concerned about the well-being of the society by establishing greater happiness for greater number of people (Mill, 1863). But we should not damage the interest of a single individual for attaining well-being for all the citizens of the society. Rawls' theory of justice explains the concept of equality in terms of distribution of primary social goods (Rawls, 1999). He starts his theory by securing the equality of individuals, though by introducing the difference principle he focuses on the worst-off people to bring them to the same status with others. Rawls, in discussing the concept of equality, takes the stand against the classical utilitarianists and aims of maintaining individual's interest (Freeman, 1999). But people's needs vary in relation to their health, work, location, climate, longevity. Rawls' liberty means getting social primary goods, not the liberty of choice to decide his own choice. The process of Rawls is neither correct nor relevant in the context of maintaining equality. Because distribution of benefit and burden cannot establish equality in terms of making a just society. His goal of sustaining individual's interest in terms of social well-being is unique but the process he advocates is not at all acceptable. Professor Tim Murphy in his article points out that Sen retains a version of Rawls's foundational idea that justice must be seen in terms of fairness, but he insists that, "some of the main planks of the Rawlsian theory are seriously defective", including its focus on the conceptualising of justice in the form of principles (Murphy, 2010). That is why Sen illustrates his theory of justice by introducing the concept of freedom in which both the opportunity aspect and process aspect should be considered to address the wellbeing of individual. By developing a situation of Kim, he establishes the individuality of justice. Comprehensive approach rather than culmination approach illustrates his theory of capability approach that takes into consideration both the process and the consequence.

Through the example of Annie, Bob and Carla Sen discusses the problem of conflicting claims that are valid (Sen, 2010).

Now to understand what justice is, we have to first differentiate it from injustice. When a person experiences injustice, he understands the concept of justice. If something wrong is happened or if something wrong has done by the author, then only one can realize what is wrong in injustice and be able to understand the concept of justice. Justice is an active process that can rectify and obstruct the path of injustice (Barker, 1951). People can understand the flavour of justice if we know what freedom is. The concept of freedom is very well associated with the ideal of justice in Sen's illustrations. The term 'freedom' has different interpretations regarding human activities. As in morality, it is regarded as the freedom of will where it is the power of acting without the constraint of necessity or fate; the ability to act at one's own discretion (Lillie, 1967). It brings the same definition in political philosophy as not to be compelled by any physical, mental or ideological force. Compulsion of any kind should not be included here. So, it advocates individuality and liberty of choice. Political philosophy mainly deals with justice, liberty, rights, law of the society. Freedom of choice brings with it the sense of responsibility of the member who is willing to act on his own (Barker, 1951).

Amartya Sen thinks that human beings can choose their own life path. This means that we have the liberty to choose our well-being in our own terms and conditions which is based on our capability to justify our claim. Freedom, for him, is valuable for two different reasons. First, opportunity aspect helps us to identify our objectives in life. Here freedom focuses on the thing we value much, not the process we choose. Second is the process aspect by which we achieve the end decided by us according to our capacity and not forcefully imposed on us (Sen, 2010). So, freedom helps us to choose our goal and the process to achieve it. Freedom provides us the ability to achieve which reason decides as valuable in our lives. Sen clarifies this distinction more clearly by an example: Kim decides to stay at home on Sunday rather than going out of his home on that day. We can imagine here three situations. In the first situation, Kim stays at home on Sunday without any disturbance. This is the ideal situation where the objective of Kim and the process to acquire that goal are satisfactorily achieved by Kim. It is the situation where the agent Kim achieves successfully what he wishes to achieve without any hindrances. But then Sen makes the situation trickier. In the second situation, an armed terrorist enters his home and forces him to go out and stays outside his home. In

this case Kim cannot achieve the objective of staying at home and, he is forced by an external person. Both the opportunity aspect and the process aspect get violated as Kim is doing something else which he does not value for himself and has the compulsion to follow another person's will. These two cases are very clear and can be treated in the same way. Now Sen brings a twist in this situation to prove that opportunity aspect is not enough, but the process aspect is more vital to understand the real sense of freedom.

In the third situation, Kim is threatened by the terrorist to stay at home and not to go out of his home (Sen, 2010). The end matches with Kim's wish, but not the same way as Kim wants. The end is same with the first situation, but these are not at all same. The end that Kim wants are same in both the cases, but the process is different. In the first case, the agent chooses the end willingly whereas in the third case, he is doing it under the compulsion of some other person. So, the achievement of the end is not enough. If we consider opportunity in narrow sense, then we consider both the cases as same. But opportunity is not only fulfilling the end that the agent set for himself, it is the process that matters the most, i.e., how he is going to achieve it. To judge opportunity properly, we have to judge the process by which the opportunity is achieved. From this we can say that Sen is a deontologist as when we realize our wellbeing, we must have the knowledge of the whole process through which we are going to achieve it (Murphy, 2010). Like Kant (1948) & Sen (2010) also thinks that freedom of choice is a duty to a responsible agent and well-being has proper value if we know the process by which we are going to achieve it. Sen calls it 'comprehensive outcome' that is different from 'culmination outcome' (Sen, 2010). Human beings are not passive observers. As rational beings, they can participate and act in a proper way. Human agency cannot be withdrawn from rational agents only by emphasizing on the end. 'Passing the exam' cannot be the goal of a responsible agent, but 'passing the exam fairly' should be his aim. Culmination outcome only verifies the result whereas the comprehensive outcome also considers the effort that brings the result. So, freedom to decide our well-being is not enough, but how we achieve it is more important. Based on this, Sen develops his theory of capability that advocates the development of our ability to achieve our well-being.

Here we must clarify one thing that Sen focuses on comprehensive outcome which does not mean that he is not at all bothered about the result (Murphy, 2010). He is just refusing the evaluation of the end only. In Sen's view, to understand social justice we have to take a

comprehensive outlook which includes both the process and the consequence. We cannot disregard anything only because it is a consequentialist approach and focus only on the deontological aspect. Both the process and consequence are equally important. Like Kant he does not accept *good will* as the only good where the result is futile. (Kant, 1948) to understand this point clearly, he elaborates the position of Krishna and Arjuna in *Bhagawatgītā*. Arjuna, the great warrior, refuses to take part in the battle against Kouravas and feels sad to see his near and dear ones standing against him. He thinks that killing his teachers, cousins and relatives demoralize him as a human being. But Krishna, the friend, philosopher and guide of the Pāndavas motivates him to do his duty as a king. For a king, it is his primordial duty to do whatever it needs to save his kingdom. Arjuna here takes the position of the consequentialist who is worried about the devastating consequences of the battle whereas Krishna takes the position of the deontologist who is more concerned about the duty rather than the result. Krishna is not advising Arjuna to play fair, but to play forward. Sen thinks that Krishna's attitude is affected by some limitations for which he is ignoring the consequences of the war (Sen, 2010). But it is quite justifiable to the rational thinking of a person about what Arjuna is thinking. He is quite concerned about uncountable deaths, the moaning of widows that is going to affect the whole environment. So, Krishna should be very careful about the consequences before motivating Arjuna to take part in the war. To promote a good consequence is also vital apart from securing the process. That is why Sen is considering the comprehensive approach which includes both the process and the result to understand social justice.

The culmination outcome, according to Sen, is the narrow sense of opportunity aspect of freedom whereas the comprehensive outcome accommodates both the process and the consequence is the broad sense (Sen, 2010). In the context of capability this distinction is very important. The question is should we judge the well-being of a person only based on culmination outcome i.e., by the actual end or should we consider the broader sense that includes the process of choice in achieving the end. We all have abilities, conditions of life. So, it is not easy to distribute wellbeing following a single law when we have different capabilities. A capability reflects a person's ability to achieve what he wants to do or to be. Sen thinks that any unique impartial resolution to establish justice must cope up all the competing and rival reasons provided by individuals for their wellbeing. Human wellbeing includes several things and an overall conception of

justice cannot arbitrarily arrange or dismiss one for the sake of other as all are founded on strong arguments. Sen addresses the issue of conflicting claims by using an example (Brown, 2010). Three children Anne, Bob and Carla are fighting for the possession of a single flute for which each of them has strong reasons. Anne claims the flute since among three of them she is the only one who knows how to play the flute. Bob justifies his claim by saying that he is the poorest among the three and he does not have anything to play. If he gets the flute life would be pleasurable for him. Carla thinks that she has a strong ground to possess it as she has made it with her labour. The argument provided by each of them is quite convincing and seems right from their individual point of view. Different theories here make the mistake as they focus on one horn of the problem and prescribe a straight forward solution. Utilitarianism supports Anne as she knows how to play it and thus brings the maximum utility. Economical egalitarianism supports Bob as this would remove the gap between the rich and the poor. And libertarianism support Carla as the theory admits that the producer has a right on the object he produced. But practically speaking, we cannot remove any one of the claims as each of them has their own reasons for wellbeing – the claim for fulfilment, remove poverty and the right to enjoy the fruit of own labour. Here differences of arguments do not represent divergence of wellbeing as each of them try to use the flute for their own enjoyment. The difference is in principle since we have to think about which should be followed to address the problems in general.

Critique to Rawlsian Theory of Justice - Amartya Sen criticises Rawlsian concept of equality which describes equality in terms of distribution of primary social goods. Rawls is aware of individual's right of liberty. In his two principles of justice he announces, "each person has an equal right to the most extensive scheme of equal basic liberties compatible with a similar scheme of liberties with other." According to Rawls (1999) the demand of rational person is rights, liberties, opportunities, income, self-respect etc. His view supports individuality and not the sum of unity. In his theory primary goods are basic and every person has a right to get these things in equal proportion like others. But his theory of justice also incorporates the concept of inequality which is accepted for resisting further inequality. His second principle of justice, i.e. the 'difference principle' addresses that we should give priority to furthering the interests of the worst-off people for bringing them on the same state with others (Rawls, 1999). But Rawls's concept of primary goods ignores the difference between persons. It does not take into consideration the personal needs of every

individual. Each person has needs according to their health, work, location, climate, longevity etc. If we cannot consider these important factors and bluntly try to judge the primary goods overlooking the individual needs, then the theory will go in vain. Rawls's liberty means liberty of getting social primary goods equally to others, but not the choice of deciding his own goods. He is also not emphasising the procedure of liberty rather he is framing the difference principle which is furthering the interest of the worst offs. The condition of the people is not judged by his own needs but by the index of social primary goods which focuses on the social and economic status of the individual. It is not actually possible to compromise the concept of liberty. Rawls's theory may be granted if people are truly similar and their needs are fulfilled alike. If people are of same nature the index of their primary goods can be judged. But they have some differences in their primary goods. As a person is pleased by something and another person is not pleased by that. He needs something else to please him. So, people have different needs which has ignored in this theory.

CONCLUSION

It is the time to construct a new theory of equality to understand the development of the society. To maintain the equality of the citizens it is needed to focus on the non-discrimination and non-exploitation factors. This requires information about the needs and the pleasures that is not covered in the basic needs. Need has a greater scope and the information about utility and primary good are not adequate to cater all the needs. Sen has explained it with an example: It is a comparison between two persons – one is physically handicapped and the other is fit in all spheres. The crippled person needs fewer amounts to make himself happy. But the other person requires just the double income that makes him fulfil all his needs and to enjoy maximum utility. Now Rawls's difference principle does allow the crippled person to get neither more nor less based on his physical disability. Rawls thinks that the requirement of primary goods is similar for all and everyone has an equal right to avail the basic needs. So, physical disability is irrelevant for Rawls as he does not focus on the differences of needs between people; he only concentrates on the equal distribution of primary goods according to a general index. The aim of the difference principle is to distribute goods among all in greater amount to the worst-off. But it does not try to know the special needs of the crippled person or to make him more able to acquire his own needs. Rawls himself is excluding such cases from his discussion of justice and named it as 'hard cases'. He adds hard cases distract our

moral perception because such cases compel us to think about people who are distinct from us. Fate of such people emerge anxiety, pity and compassion in us for them, but it cannot enter the discussion of justice. However, we cannot avoid such cases as these are engrossed into the society and avoidance of such cases cannot produce or maintain equality and justice in the society. Any kind of physical or mental disability cannot be irrelevant in social scenario. Sen thinks there are some other things also that are needed to consider utility of a person. Marginal utility is not the only thing to increase the condition of a person. The crippled person may not be in a worst-off position other than his physical disability. He might have a low aspiration in his life, and he becomes happier to see rainbow in the sky. His marginal disability does not affect his utility of becoming happy. Rawls's theory is more focused on this marginal utility and not concerned about maintaining equality of complete utility. His theory is focusing on the surface but not going deep into the problem.

But the utility of the crippled person cannot be understood in terms of marginal utility or by distribution of primary goods. The idea that is missing in this theory is called basic capabilities. Needs of a person can be estimated properly by his ability to do certain things. Social development of a person is dependent on the needs for food, clothes, shelter and these needs can be addressed by the ability to achieve all those things. Rawls's theory is focusing on getting primary goods but does not consider a more important thing that is what these good things do to human beings. Sen thinks that the basic capabilities of a person can explain the need of a person. This need should be fulfilled for the development of the person. Equality can be maintained if needs are fulfilled. This kind of equality is termed as 'basic capabilities equality' by Sen. He considers his theory as the extension of Rawlsian theory of primary goods. It is just a shift from goods to what goods do to human beings. Rawls's theory will be fruitful and a great success if all people belong to a homogeneous class. But practical life proves that human beings are mainly heterogeneous – they differ in their needs, interest, desires, dispositions, capabilities. It means that the equality of good cannot ensure equality of capabilities. Indexing of capabilities is necessary to establish the equality of basic capabilities and it will be done based on culture. In case of judging whether a society is just or not, we have to judge how much a person gain advantage in comparison to other persons of the same society. Because in the process of capability approach encounters that a person's capability to do all his valuable things is the most

primordial criterion to judge how far an individual is advantageous. A person, by his capabilities, is free to choose the most valuable thing to grow in a society. If a person has less capability, then he loses his opportunity to achieve those things that are justifiable for him to acquire. Moreover, this theory focuses on the freedom of the person to do what he values for himself.

Concluding Sen's theory of establishing equality among the citizens of the society, it cannot go very far as it seems at the beginning. His theory is truly an extension of Rawlsian ideas but in my opinion there lies some problem of practicability. Firstly, it is not very practical in its application. When we are going to apply it in practical situations, there does not seem any foundation from which one can start with. Each theory must have a basic principle on which the theory would stand. Sen talks about indexing of capabilities which can be considered as the basis of culture. But culture specific indexing would be problematic to apply any principle in the practical situation. Secondly, the objective principle of measurement would be necessary by which the society can decide whose intentions, desires should be met and who's not. Sen has given a solution of conflicting situations, but in practical life how far it is going to effect would be of a prime concern. Lastly, Sen's capability approach in sustaining individuality and well-being of the citizens of a just society is indubitably a new approach in contrast to the pre-eminent theories of this era, however the problem lies in the very basic formulation of the development of capability. To maintain a peaceful society, everyone's personal interest, desire, intention should be maintained, and this only would bring equality, fraternity, justice in a society.

REFERENCES

- Barker, E. (1951). *Principles of Social & Political Theory*. Oxford University Press. UK.
- Brown, C. (2010). On Amartya Sen and *The idea of Justice*. *Ethics & International Affairs*, 24(3), pp 309-318.
- Freeman, S. (eds.) (1999). *John Rawls: Collected Papers* (pp. 47-72). Harvard University Press. Cambridge: MA.
- Kant, I. (1948). *Groundwork of The Metaphysic of Morals*. HarperCollins Publishers Inc. US.
- Lillie, W. (1967). *An Introduction to Ethics*. Allied Publishers Private Ltd. India.
- Mill, J.S. (1863). *Utilitarianism*. 1st Edition. Parker, Son & Bourn, London.
- Murphy, T. (2010). A Review of Sen, The Idea of Justice. *The Irish Jurist*, 45, pp 256-258. Retrieved From: https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2178251
- Rawls, J. (1999). *A Theory of Justice*. Oxford University Press. UK.
- Sen, A. (1979). Equality of What?!, McMurrin, Sterling M. (eds.) The Tanner Lecture on Human Values, Stanford University, 22nd May. Retrieved From: http://www.ophi.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Sen-1979_Equality-of-What.pdf
- Sen, A. (2010). *The Idea of Justice*. 1st Edition. Penguin Books, UK.