

Appendix

Indian Backgrounds and Multiple Identities

Although we know that persons may enjoy many identities, three are of particular concern for Amartya Sen – religious identity, national identity, and Indian identity. Many of the religious widows whose plight we have been considering share these identities. We remain perplexed, however, as to just what sharing identities might come to. For many of us believe that a person has a unique identity only.

Given the tragic history of India's partition sixty years ago on August 15, 1947 when the British Raj came to a murderous end, Sen's own Bengali and Hindu although heterodox heritage, the further tragic partition of Pakistan itself in 1971, and the persistence to this day of fanatically violent religious nationalism such as the 2002 Gujarat riots in which fundamentalist Hindus murdered roughly 2000 Muslims, Sen has narrowed his focus sharply.

That is, Sen has focused his attention mainly on an idea of Indian identity that embraces multiplicities.⁷⁴ For what sustains

beloved husband, Indira, and continuing to grieve his loss while refusing to immolate yourself, why do you think it reasonable that many people including your own children treat you as a public disgrace, insist that you shave your head, wear a white sari, not remarry, and do penance chanting *bhajan* as a destitute pilgrim widow in Vrindavan? How could we ever understand them to be acting rightly? And how could we ever understand you to be acting rightly in accepting this treatment?" [After a short pause] "Well, Peter, please be careful not to spill your tea."

⁷⁴ On contemporary India see, among others, Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy* (London: Macmillan, 2007); on the 1947 partition of India, see Yasmin Khan, *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan* (London: Yale UP, 2007); on the 1971 partition of Pakistan see Sen's personal recollections in *IdV*, pp. 171-172, and Henri Tincq's well-informed and graphic short account in his "*La monstrueuse vivisection de l'Inde*," *Le Monde*, December 5-6, 2007; on the historical contexts of the Gujarat riots *Le Monde's* special envoy, Frédéric Bobin's article, "*Guerre de castes au Rajasthan*," *Le Monde*, July 10, 2007, and Martha Nussbaum's *The Clash Within: Democracy*,

so much human tragedy and violence today, he believes, are the illusions and conceptual confusions involved in holding that a person has a unique identity only.

Writing of Indian identity in his 2005 collection of essays on Indian history, culture and identity entitled *The Argumentative Indian*, Sen speaks of a “capacious identity” and of an “inclusive identity.”

“In the early years after independence,” he writes, “the broad and inclusive concept of Indian identity which had emerged during the long struggle for freedom commanded sweeping allegiance. The determination to preserve that capacious identity was strengthened by the deep sense of tragedy associated with the partitioning of the subcontinent, and also by considerable national pride in the fact that despite the political pressure for ‘an exchange of people,’ the bulk of the large Muslim population in independent India chose to stay in India rather than move to Pakistan. This inclusive identity, which acknowledged and embraced internal heterogeneity and celebrated the richness of diversity, went with an adamant refusal to prioritize the different religious communities against each other. It is this spacious and absorptive idea of Indianness that has been severely challenged over recent decades.”⁷⁵

Note that Sen takes identity here in an admirably rich sense. He speaks of a “capacious identity,” a “broad identity,” an “inclusive identity,” a spacious identity, and an absorptive identity.

Thus, the initial idea of identity here is a generous one. For Sen believes that, generally, identity needs to be construed in large enough terms to encompass “internal heterogeneity” and quite various “diversity.” One implication for our more narrow concerns with personal identity is the possible fruitfulness for

Religious Violence and India's Future (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2007) that begins with the Gujarat murders. For a brief and recent overview see Pankaj Mishra, “Exit Wounds: The Legacy of Indian Partition,” *The New Yorker*, August 13, 2007.

⁷⁵ *ArI*, p. 51.

construing personal identity in similarly larger terms than philosophers are usually accustomed to do.

Writing in particular of religious identity, Sen remarks that “while the statistics of Hindu majority [in India today] are indeed correct, the use of the statistical argument for seeing India as a pre-eminently Hindu country is based on a conceptual confusion: our religion is not our only identity, nor necessarily the identity to which we attach the greatest importance.”⁷⁶

Again, considering the situation of many religious Hindu widows today, the remark may suggest that some such women may choose to attach lesser importance to their identities as religious Hindu widows than to their identities as bereaved single women.

In these remarks Sen alludes to what he had discussed both in his 1998 Romanes Lecture, “Reason Before Identity,” and in his later, 2006 book, *Identity and Violence*. The central idea is what he calls “the far reaching role of plurality and choice in the idea of ‘identity’.”⁷⁷ And this idea he opposes to “the Hindutva philosophy of militant Hindu nationhood,”⁷⁸ that is, the Hindu nationalist idea of “the congruence of a Hindu identity with a more general Indian identity.”⁷⁹

Indian identity for Sen is not the identity of the Hindutva “small India” – as in “no Buddha, please, nor Ashoka nor Akbar nor Kabir nor Nanak” – but the identity of the “large India.”⁸⁰

This large India is Sen’s India. And this is the India, he writes, of “Nagarjuna’s penetrating philosophical arguments, Harsa’s philanthropic leadership, Maitreyi’s or Gargi’s searching questions, Carvaka’s reasoned scepticism, Aryabhata’s

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, note.

⁷⁸ This is David Arnold’s apt phrase from his informative review of R. Guha and M. Nussbaum’s books mentioned above, “Sixty-Year Views,” *TLS*, August 24 & 31, 2007.

⁷⁹ *ArI*, p. 63.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

astronomical and mathematical departures, Kaladas's dazzling poetry, Sudraka's subversive drama, Abul Fazl's astounding scholarship. Shah Jahan's aesthetic vision, Ramanujan's mathematics, or Ravi Shankar's and Ali Akbar Khan's music..."⁸¹

It is also, we may add, the India of some Indian pilgrim widows' ongoing spiritual explorations as ethical agents in a still mysterious world.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*