

Does Democracy Avert Famine?

By Michael Massing

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Few scholars have left more of a mark on the field of development economics than Amartya Sen.

The winner of the 1998 Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Science, Mr. Sen has changed the way economists think about such issues as collective decision-making, welfare economics and measuring poverty. He has pioneered the use of economic tools to highlight gender inequality, and he helped the United Nations devise its Human Development Index -- today the most widely used measure of how well nations meet basic social needs.

More than anything, though, Mr. Sen is known for his work on famine. Just as Adam Smith is associated with the phrase "invisible hand" and Joseph Schumpeter with "creative destruction," Mr. Sen is famous for his assertion that famines do not occur in democracies. "No famine has ever taken place in the history of the world in a functioning democracy," he wrote in "Democracy as Freedom" (Anchor, 1999). This, he explained, is because democratic governments "have to win elections and face public criticism, and have strong incentive to undertake measures to avert famines and other catastrophes." This proposition, advanced in a host of books and articles, has shaped the thinking of a generation of policy makers, scholars and relief workers who deal with famine.

Now, however, in India, the main focus of Mr. Sen's research, there are growing reports of starvation. In drought-ravaged states like Rajasthan in the west and Orissa in the east, many families have been reduced to eating bark and grass to stay alive. Already thousands may have died. This is occurring against a backdrop of endemic hunger and malnutrition. About 350 million of India's one billion people go to bed hungry every night, and half of all Indian children are malnourished. Meanwhile, the country is awash in grain, with the government sitting on a surplus of more than 50 million tons. Such want amid such plenty has generated public protests, critical editorials and an appeal to India's Supreme Court to force the government to use its surpluses to feed the hungry.

All of which has raised new questions about Mr. Sen's famous thesis. In an article critical of him in *The Observer* of London last summer, Vandana Shiva, an ecological activist in India, wrote that while it is true that famine disappeared in India in 1947, with independence and elections, it is "making a comeback." The problem, she added in an interview, "has not yet reached the scale seen in the Horn of Africa," but if nothing is done, "in three or four years India could be in the same straits."

To Mr. Sen, though, it is not the thesis that needs revision but the popular understanding of it. Yes, famines do not occur in democracies, he said in a phone interview, but "it would be a misapprehension to believe that democracy solves the problem of hunger." Mr. Sen, who is the master of Trinity College at Cambridge University, said his writings on famine frequently noted the problems India has had in feeding its people, and he was baffled by the amount of attention his comments about famine and democracy had received. The Nobel committee, in awarding its prize, did not even mention this aspect of his work, he said, adding, however, that many newspapers had seized on it and misrepresented it.

Mr. Sen's views about famine and hunger have recently been put to the test by Dan Banik, an Indian-born political scientist at the University of Oslo. Mr. Banik has spent much of the last several years in India, studying the parched,

desperate Kalahandi region of Orissa. In that area alone, Mr. Banik said by phone from India, he found 300 starvation deaths in six months. And they are hardly unique. "I have collected newspaper reports on starvation for six years in Indian newspapers," he said, "and there's not a state where it hasn't happened. Starvation is widespread in India."

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He quickly added, however, that the toll was nowhere near the hundreds of thousands that constitute a famine. In fact, Mr. Sen's theory about famines not occurring in democracies "applies rather well to India," he said. "There has not been a large-scale loss of life since 1947." At the same time, he said, "there have been many incidents of large-scale food crises that, while not resulting in actual famines, have led to many, many deaths."

While the Indian bureaucracy responds well to highly visible crises like famine threats, Mr. Banik observed, starvation "occurs in isolated areas and so isn't very visible." India has done an even poorer job of addressing the problem of chronic malnutrition, he said. "It's so shocking," Mr. Banik added. "There's so much food in the country, yet people are starving."

India's huge food stocks reflect the power of the farm lobby. It has pressed the government to buy grain at ever higher prices, making bread and other staples more and more expensive. To help the hungry, the government has a national network of ration shops, but they have been undermined by widespread corruption and distribution bottlenecks. What's more, the government, under pressure from the World Bank and other institutions, has reduced its once-generous food subsidies.

On a visit to New Delhi in early January, Mr. Sen participated in a forum to publicize the recent starvation deaths and to promote a new "right to food" movement. While such events show how democracies can provide opportunities for "public agitation" to redress injustices, Mr. Sen said, they also highlight how poorly India has done in meeting basic social needs. "We must distinguish between the role of democracy in preventing famine and the comparative ineffectiveness of democracy in preventing regular undernourishment," he observed.

That Mr. Sen would end up as the foremost thinker on this subject is somewhat surprising, for he initially paid little attention to the link between hunger and democracy. When the International Labor Organization asked him to look into the causes of famines in the mid-1970's, Mr. Sen decided to focus on the Great Bengal Famine of 1943, in which as many as three million people died. As a 9-year-old boy in a privileged Bengal family, he had seen the suffering first hand. At the time of his research, it was widely assumed that famines were caused by sudden food shortages. Examining records, however, Mr. Sen found that food production in Bengal had not declined. Rather, food prices had soared while farm wages had sagged, making it hard for rural workers to buy food.

Examining more recent famines in Ethiopia and Bangladesh, Mr. Sen found that they, too, were caused not by food shortages but by lagging rural incomes. In his landmark "Poverty and Famines" (1981), he argued that most famines could be readily prevented by mounting public works projects for those most in peril.

That book did not consider the role of democracy. Soon after it appeared, however, Mr. Sen began hearing reports about the Chinese famine of 1958 to 1961. The full dimensions of that calamity had remained hidden from the outside world, but after Mao's death it became clear that tens of millions had died. To Mr. Sen the reason seemed clear: the absence of a free press and opposition parties meant there was no one to sound the alarm. By contrast, India had been free of famine since independence. In a 1982 article for *The New York Review of Books*,

Mr. Sen argued that even a fraction of the Chinese death toll "would have immediately caused a storm in the newspapers and a turmoil in the Indian parliament, and the ruling government would almost certainly have had to resign."

The question of food and starvation, he wrote, could not be divorced from "the issue of liberties, of newspapers and ultimately of democracy." Since then, though, Mr. Sen has frequently referred to India's failures in combating everyday hunger. In his book "Hunger and Public Action" (1989), Mr. Sen (along with the co-author, Jean Drèze) noted that nearly four million people die prematurely in India every year from malnutrition and related problems. That's more than the number who perished during the entire Bengal famine.

It is Mr. Sen's writings on democracy, not famine, that have troubled some scholars. Throughout his prolific career, the 69-year-old economist has been very bullish on democracy. In "Development as Freedom," for instance, he wrote that "developing and strengthening a democratic system is an essential component of the process of development." The book had little to say about the high rates of malnutrition, illiteracy and infant mortality that persist in India and many other democracies, and how they can be overcome.

This has led some to conclude that Mr. Sen is naïve about how democracies work in the real world. "Democracies are often run by ethnically based groups prepared to do terrible things to other ethnic groups," said Frances Stewart, a professor of development economics at Oxford University. "Or they can be very corrupt, dominated by elites." She added: "Capitalist, democratic states put the emphasis on the private sector, which doesn't always deliver on social goods. The free press is good on major disasters like classic famines, but it tolerates chronic hunger as much as anyone else." To be fully represented, she said, the poor need institutions like trade unions and political parties that speak for them.

Stephen Devereux, an economist at the Institute of Development Studies at Sussex University who specializes in food security in Africa, faulted Mr. Sen for not dealing with the "big political questions." "For him," he said, "public action consists of public works programs -- limited transfers to the poor to help them through a crisis. It's important to look more at fundamental reforms, like land reform." Currently, Mr. Devereux said, more than a half-dozen countries in Africa face a famine threat, including such democracies as Ethiopia.

There, he said, conditions are "as bad as in 1984," when famine deaths were estimated at one million. Ethiopia was then ruled by a Marxist dictator. Today it is democratically governed, but as many as six million people remain dependent on food aid from abroad. "Having a free press and a democratic process is important for all kinds of reasons," Mr. Devereux noted, "but that doesn't address poverty and the conditions that lead to famine." With the spread of laissez-faire economic policies, he added, governments have less ability to "step in and provide food security."

Other scholars, however, say that government itself is the problem. T. N. Srinivasan, a professor of economics at Yale University, says that political freedoms, to work, need to be complemented by economic freedoms. Mr. Sen, he said, "doesn't emphasize enough the importance of free markets, trade and access to world markets and capital." The reason authoritarian China has grown more rapidly than democratic India, he said, is its embrace of economic liberalization. Mr. Sen, he added, "seems to have a much dimmer view of globalization than people like me, who see open markets as the best opportunity of the last century" for countries to grow and develop.

What unites Mr. Sen's liberal and conservative critics is their belief that democracy, while desirable, is no cure-all for problems like hunger and illiteracy. In fact, in his more recent writings, Mr. Sen has paid more attention to the

shortcomings of democracy and how they can be addressed. The key, he said, is not to jettison democracy but to find ways of making it work better for society's underdogs.