

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS BY PROF. AMARTYA SEN

PROFESSOR AMARTYA SEN: I feel deeply privileged and honoured by the opportunity to speak here at our parliament, on the invitation of the distinguished Speaker, giving the Hiren Mukerjee Lecture, in memory of a political thinker and leader for whom I have very great admiration.

In probing the idea of social justice, it is important to distinguish between (1) an arrangement-focused view of justice, and (2) a realization-focused understanding of justice. Sometimes justice is conceptualized in terms of certain organizational arrangements-some institutions, some regulations, some behavioural rules-the active presence of which indicates, in this view, that justice is being done. This approach has strongly influenced the leading theories of justice in contemporary political philosophy. In contrast, a realization-focused understanding of justice broadens the evolution of justice to the assessment of the actual world that emerges, which includes the institutions and arrangements that are present, but also much else, including – most importantly – the lives that the people involved are able to lead.

Two distinct words – “niti” and “nyaya”- both of which stand for justice in classical Sanskrit, actually help us to differentiate broadly between these two separate concentrations. Among the principal uses of the term niti are organizational propriety and behavioural norms. In contrast with niti, the term nyaya stands for actual social realizations, going beyond organizations and rules. For example, classical legal theorists in India talked disparagingly of what they called matsyanyaya, “justice in the world of fish”, reflecting the kind of society we can see among the fish, where a big fish can freely devour a small fish. We are warned that preventing matsyanyaya has to be an overwhelming priority. Realizations of justice in the sense of nyaya is not just a matter of judging institutions and rules, but of judging the societies themselves.

In the lecture I shall illustrate the distinction by examining the varying roles of two important institutions in the Indian context *viz.* (1) democracy, and (2) trade unions of organized labour. I will discuss how the realization of justice is critically influenced by the alterable ways in which these institutions actually work and impact on the society.

A realization-focused perspective of nyaya also makes it easy to see the importance of preventing manifest injustice in the world (like matsyanyaya), rather than dreaming about achieving some perfectly just society, or about instituting some flawless set of social arrangements. When people agitated for the abolition of slavery in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they were not labouring under the illusion that the abolition of slavery would make the world perfectly just. It was their claim, rather, that a society with slavery was totally unjust, calling for immediate removal. It was on that basis that the anti-slavery agitation, with its diagnosis of intolerable injustice, saw the pursuit of that cause to be an overwhelming priority.

That historical case can also serve as something of an analogy that is very relevant to us today in India. There are, I would argue, similarly momentous manifestations of severe injustice in our own world today in India, such as appalling levels of continued child undernourishment (almost unparalleled in the rest of the world), continuing lack of entitlement to basic medical attention of the poorer members of the society, and the comprehensive absence of opportunities for basic schooling for a significant proportion of the population. Whatever else nyaya may demand (and we can have all sorts of different views of what a perfectly just India would look like), the reasoned humanity of the justice of nyaya can hardly fail to demand the urgent removal of these terrible deprivations in human lives.

A government in a democratic country has to respond to on-going priorities in public criticism and political condemnation. The removal of long-standing deprivations of the disadvantaged people of our country may, in effect, be

hampered when the bulk of the social agitation is dominated by new problems that generate immediate and vocal discontent, to the neglect of the gigantic older problems of persistent deprivation of human lives, tolerated without much political protest. Justice demands that we make a strong effort to identify the overwhelming priorities that have to be confronted with total urgency. We have to ask what should keep us awake at night. (*For full version of Prof. Amartya Sen's Lecture, see: (Video)*)