

Sen-sational Economist

“Food for Thought” by Jonathan Steele, in *The Guardian* (Mar. 31, 2001), 119 Farringdon Rd., London EC1R 3ER, U.K.; “Portrait: Amartya Sen” by Meghnad Desai, in *Prospect* (July 2000), 4 Bedford Sq., London WC1B 3RA, U.K.

Although a celebrity in his native India since winning the 1998 Nobel prize in economics, Amartya Sen is otherwise little known outside academic circles in Britain and the United States. Yet his ideas have had a global impact. By the reckoning of a fellow economist, Sudhir Anand of Oxford University, Sen “has made fundamental contributions to at least four fields: social choice theory, welfare economics, economic measurement, and development economics.”

Born just north of Calcutta in 1933, on the campus of a university founded by poet Rabindranath Tagore, Sen went to study at Trinity College, Cambridge, in 1953, returning a little more than a decade later to teach at the Delhi School of Economics. His serious scholarly attention in those days was given to social choice, the abstruse, mathematically oriented field opened up by RAND Corporation economist Kenneth Arrow in a 1951 essay showing how hard it could be for democratic mechanisms to reflect a majority’s true preferences.

Grappling with Arrow’s paradox, Sen “returned to first principles on the nature of choice,” explains Desai, who teaches economics at the London School of Economics. A person choosing to buy fish rather than meat may not be asserting a simple preference for fish, Sen pointed out. He may be acting on a whim, or perhaps participating in a meat boycott in support of a meatpackers’ strike. “Sen showed that we must take into account notions of sympathy or commitment in order to understand voting behavior, paying for public goods . . . and so on.” In short, he brought economics closer to the real world. Sen’s 1970 book, *Collective Choice and*

Social Welfare, marked the end of a decade’s work on social choice and “a definitive advance on Arrow’s work,” Desai says. The next year, Sen left Delhi and joined the London School of Economics.

In *Poverty and Famines* (1981), Sen studied the 1943 Bengal famine (and several others). By detailing the weekly arrivals of food grains in Calcutta, he showed that it was not a scarcity of food but the lack of money to buy it that caused the mass starvation. In short, says Desai, “Sen showed that a functioning market economy could leave millions dead.”

In the mid-1980s, Sen left Britain for Harvard University. With Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq, notes the *Guardian*’s Steele, he created “the Human Development Index as a rival to the World Bank’s system of ranking countries by classical macroeconomic criteria such as savings rates and GNP [gross national product].” On the new index—which incorporated measures of life expectancy, adult literacy, and income inequality—rich countries with unequal income distribution scored lower than some sub-Saharan African countries. The index soon proved influential in UN, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund circles.

Sen (who is now Master of Trinity College, Cambridge) has in recent decades “made his peace with the market,” Desai told Steele, “though on his own terms and without going all-out for a free market.” Sen himself denies ever having been antimarket. As for globalization, Sen maintains that it is “neither particularly new or a folly,” and that the real problem is not free trade but the inequality of global power.

SOCIETY

How Mothers Find Time

“Maternal Employment and Time with Children: Dramatic Change or Surprising Continuity?” by Suzanne M. Bianchi, in *Demography* (Nov. 2000), Carolina Population Center, Univ. of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Univ. Sq., CB#8120, 123 W. Franklin St., Chapel Hill, N.C. 27516-3997.

Even though many more American women with children have gone off to work in recent decades, today’s mothers

still spend about as much time—an average of five and a half hours a day—with their offspring under 18 as mothers did in 1965. So