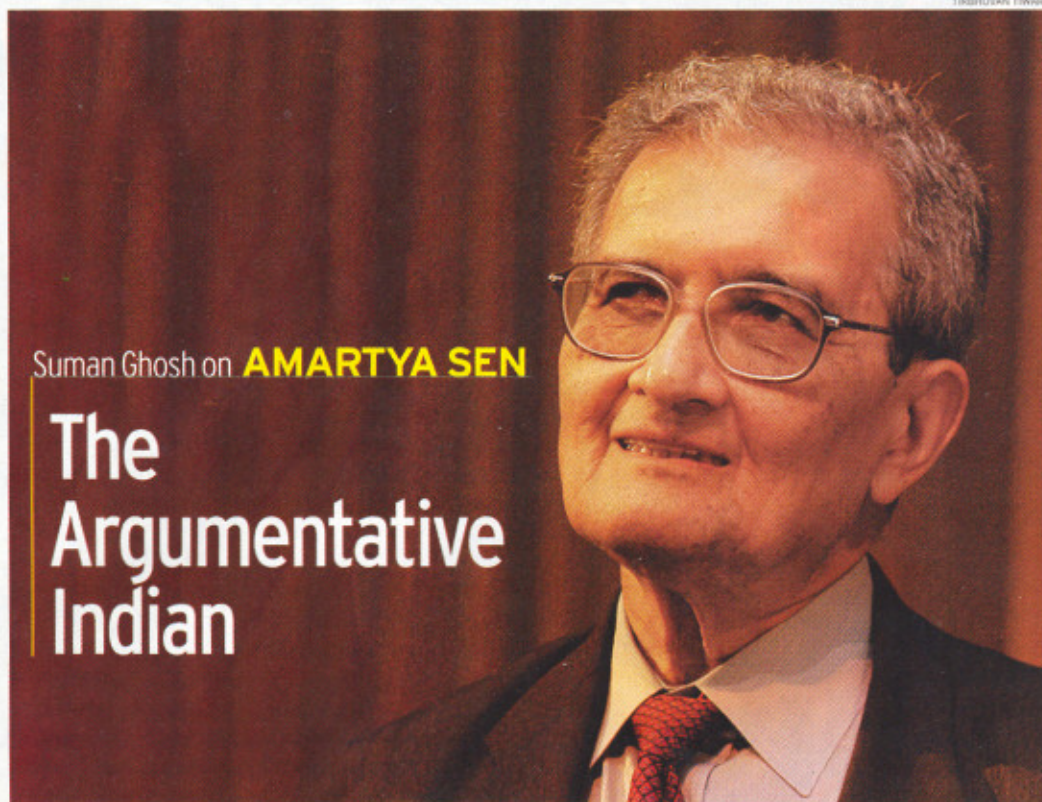


TIRSHUVAN TIWARI

Suman Ghosh on **AMARTYA SEN**

The Argumentative Indian



In ancient Greece, Stoics developed the image of *kosmou polites* (world citizens), arguing that each of us dwells, in effect, in two communities—the local community of our birth, and the community of human argument and aspiration, in which “we measure the boundaries of our nation by the sun”. This image of the world citizen has been the source of Kant’s idea of the “kingdom of ends”, and more recently in the writings of Rabindranath Tagore.

This trait is exemplified in Amartya Sen, economist, philosopher, social commentator—or world citizen. As Sen forcefully argues, it does not preclude him from his identity as a Bengali, as an Indian or an Asian. I’ve seen him at close quarters and find that he is as much at ease at his home at Shantiniketan as he is at the Masters Lodge at Cambridge—the home and the world.

As a scholar, he has been as variegated as his personality, constantly probing his argumentative trait, starting from his brilliant thesis at Cambridge, “Choice of Techniques”, in 1960, and continuing unabated till 2005 when he wrote the equally brilliant, *The Argumentative Indian*. Through the years, his range of scholarly achievements have been amazing, to say the least. In the words of the great economist Kenneth Arrow, “He is a scholar of wide interests in an era in which most economists have become highly specialised.”

His work on social choice theory, for which he won the Nobel Prize, tries to analyse the ag-

gregation problem arising from the fact that society consists of different individuals. He tries to find how we can talk cogently about what is good or bad for the society. The solution provided by Sen is useful in analysing issues of underdevelopment such as famines and poverty. Unfortunately, given his focus on welfare economics, he has often been misconstrued as an opponent of globalisation. On the contrary, he has always been supportive of the liberalisation process in India and showered encomiums on Manmohan Singh when he started the process as finance minister in the early 1990s.

What he opposes is the sole reliance on markets as a mechanism for development. He has gone on record to criticise the World Bank “as the institution which is responsible for a lot of evil in this world” because of its excessive reliance on market mechanism, and has also criticised Manmohan Singh on his reforms for the same reason. His work and views on Indian economic policy have been controversial, especially his early work in the 1960s with another brilliant economist, K.N. Raj.

As a person, he has a great sense of humour and wit. To a phone operator in the US, Sen tried spelling his surname, without success. Finally he said, “S for somebody, E for everybody and N for nobody.”

(The writer is an economist and producer of the documentary, *Amartya Sen: A Life Re-examined*.)

BIO

Born at Shantiniketan, West Bengal, in 1933

Won the Nobel Prize in 1998

Best known for: *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*



Economics is also concerned with the underdogs of society.



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Did you Know?

He was christened by Rabindranath Tagore at Shantiniketan.

65

per cent is the pay cut he took to teach at Cambridge