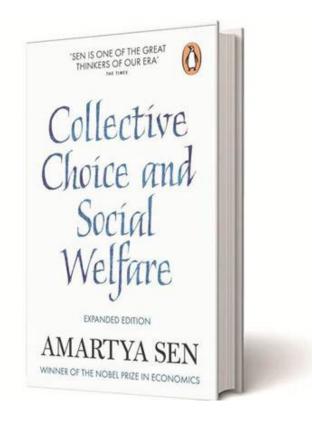
The Problem of Choice

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Collective choice and social welfare: Expanded edition Amartya Sen Penguin 544 pages `599

There are many books that qualify as good, but it is a rare book that can be described as transformative. Straddling economics, philosophy and logic, Amartya Sen's Collective Choice and Social Welfare is widely recognised as a transformative and seminal work that shaped modern welfare economics.

I still have my dog-eared, read-and-re-read copy of the original 1970 edition, and have long felt it deserves a new edition because, though it is not meant for mass readership, it has the status of a collector's item. Further, the book is organised in an unusual way, alternating between chapters written in ordinary English and meant for all, and technical chapters using mathematical logic and algebra.

The publication of this classic after so many years, in an enlarged edition, is an occasion for celebration. And I am glad it was decided not to touch the original text but to instead add a new introduction (41 pages) and 11 new chapters in the end (204 pages). The new chapters cover topics and research in which Sen has been engaged since 1970, such as the idea of justice, notions of rights and the relation between democracy, public discourse and debate.

The central problem of social choice theory is also the central concern of democracy. Given that individuals in any society will hold diverse preferences, ranking policies differently for example, how should society as a whole rank those policies? Given that people may have different preferences concerning whom they want as their political leader, how should society aggregate these diverse preferences and select a leader? While inquiry into these questions goes back over two centuries and engaged colourful characters like the Marquis de Condorcet, the late eighteenth-century French philosopher and mathematician, and Lewis Carroll — yes, the author of Alice in Wonderland — the big breakthrough occurred in 1950, when Kenneth Arrow, a graduate student, proved a stunning theorem that is now called the Arrow Impossibility Theorem (Arrow died on February 21, days after this review essay was written). He wrote down some simple axioms that any process of aggregation of individual preferences into societal preference ought to satisfy and proved that there is no way of satisfying all these few elementary axioms.

This is one of the most astonishing theorems because it is, in principle, so simple. Its proof does not require any special mathematics or prior theorems. All you need is the ability to reason, but the reasoning is so long and sustained that most people find it hard. I still wonder how Arrow hit upon this theorem in what was then virtually barren terrain.

One of the fascinating stories one learns from Sen's book is his discovery of Arrow's theorem. The year of publication of Arrow's book, 1951, was also when Sen joined Presidency College, Kolkata, as an undergraduate. His classmate Sukhamoy Chakravarty, a voracious reader, "borrowed Arrow's newly-arrived book from a local bookshop with an indulgent owner," and told Sen about the book and this bewildering theorem. This fuelled Sen's emerging interest in democracy and justice, and social choice went on to become a life-long interest.

There was no looking back once he began teaching at the Delhi School of Economics in 1963, after finishing his PhD from Cambridge. Sen published a string of papers in top journals and became the leading authority on the interface between moral philosophy and economics.

The Delhi School of the late 1960s described in the book was an astonishing place. It had a number of economists doing cutting-edge research. Sen talks of his "student from Orissa, Prasanta Pattanaik," and how he "took my breath away as he showed his ability to solve new analytical problems — however difficult." Delhi became the world's pre-eminent centre for social choice research. I remember in the early Seventies, soon after I joined the London School of Economics as a graduate student, the celebrated Japanese economist Michio Morishima meeting me in the corridor and asking me if I planned to do my PhD in social choice theory, adding, "India's subject."

The late Sixties was also the time when Delhi School's Economics department counted among its faculty Jagdish Bhagwati, Sukhamoy Chakravarty, KN Raj and Manmohan Singh. Outside of the United States and Britain, it is difficult to think of too many places that compared with Delhi of that time. This is something to be celebrated.

For that reason, the hate trolling that Sen has received in recent times, especially after his CNN-IBN interview where, before the last general election, he said, "As an Indian citizen I don't want Modi as my PM", is particularly sad. It should make Indians proud that their country is a democracy where people can freely express their preferences and disagreement with any leader, be it Narendra Modi or Manmohan Singh. Debating and contesting Sen's ideas would be welcome — I myself have had differences. In fact, a vibrant culture is one where people feel free to dispute any person or any book. But the hate mail and the effort to silence, even though we know it comes from a very small number of people pretending to be many, are regrettable.

On the other hand, Sen has also received an immense amount of appreciation for his contributions to economics and philosophy. I had been told that, since 1998, the year in which Sen got the Nobel Prize, a disproportionate number of babies in India have been named Amartya. Thanks to <u>Google</u>'s outstanding search engines, the power of which is illustrated well in the recent film, Lion, it is possible to check this claim. So, I went to look at the frequency of the name Amartya among India's younger crop. And indeed, it is true. Not only do we have the Amartya Chatterjees and Amartya Ghoshes, there are also Amartya Singhs and Amartya Patels, and even — and I know I risk making two enemies now — Amartya Modi.