

## Arguing with Sen

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Prof. Amartya Sen, as usual ["Is Nationalism a Boon or a Curse?" EPW 16 Feb.2008], is right in many of his thoughtful assertions. Undoubtedly we all have several multiple identities, undoubtedly we can and do privilege at times one identity over others, and many of the more thoughtful amongst us see the valid viability of the other identity-relationships even in times of conflict. If 'the contingent variability of the role of nationalism' is to be seen in a reasonable perspective, Sen argues, we need to see that identity as 'one identity among many,' and that we should 'examine' whether such an emphasis would add to divisiveness or otherwise. This is an extremely reasonable statement, but the main point is whether a choice of functional identity can ever be made in a reasonable manner in times of conflict, and the importance of this argument rests on whether anyone is free to make civilized reasonable choices at such times.

Sen's article gives some examples of heart-wrenching choices people have made. Wilfred Owen chose the identity of the gentlemanly English combatant in World War I instead of declaring himself a conscientious objector and taking the consequences. Subhas Chandra Bose chose to collaborate with Japan, though he had accused that nation of militant aggressive imperialism. Why did they do so? While human beings are capable of 'critique, assessment and judgment,' periods of violent crises cripple our ability to exercise these faculties. World War I was a savage imperialist war, and yet its two major autocratic proponents, the Tsar and the Kaiser, linked together through blood and friendship, were helpless to prevent their own destruction. Most visitors to Tito's Yugoslavia were repeatedly informed that their society was the most cosmopolitan, with Croats, Serbs, Bosnian Muslims, Montenegrins, all living together bound through friendship, ideology, and marriage. The genocidal catastrophe that followed is seen by many of them as an un-understandable carnage that has deluged helpless peoples.

And why have Neo-Nazis sprung up in Russia, despite the savage war unleashed by Hitler, and why are dark-skinned students being killed in Moscow on a daily basis despite 70 years of communist ideological indoctrination?

Let us turn to a trivial but significant side of the issue. The BJP-led States of Rajasthan and M.P. have banned the showing of the film *Jodhaa-Akbar*, though till now no Hindutva person ever objected to the older *Mughal-e-Azam*. When Mani Ratnam's *Bombay* was released after the Bombay riots, many liberal Muslims refused to see it, and a few even said the film might have been acceptable if the hero had been a Muslim and the heroine a Hindu. Such unreasonable attitudes even towards commercial films shows the development of nascent and recruiting communal [read 'nationalistic'] identities, the 'Hindu' and the 'Muslim,' within the Indian Union.

There seems to be no reasonable explanation for the silliness of such posturing, or the horrific genocides we have witnessed in Rwanda, Yugoslavia, and Darfur, or even in Modi's Gujarat. Sen appositely quotes Tagore: "the bondage of dejection, which keeps men hopelessly chained in loss of faith in themselves." Could the un-reasonable upsurge of a communal, ethnic, or nationalistic identity be the long-term consequence of a people's refusal to accept this 'loss of faith in themselves,' which itself was attempted to be brought about by State-directed de-politicization and marginalization of people? Could the branding of immigrants to

Britain as 'British Muslims' not be 'an inadvertent nurturing of religion-based communal identities,' as Sen politely puts it, but a rather well-thought strategy to keep all Muslims identified, separate, and vulnerable, as Jews were in Europe for a thousand years?

In such circumstances, the act of disempowering identification strips choices from communities and individuals, and thrusts upon them a lonely label, a singular identity through which they are perceived by the powerful, and such an identity is not accepted out of any individual or community choice, but out of necessity. The repeated refusal by the powerful of equitable participation in societal processes, of the rewards of citizenship, however well covered up by formalities of governance, is ultimately seen as only vulgar jeering, and this brings out a savage response from the Hindu poor, the Muslim poor, from European youth or African peasant, turned perhaps on each other rather than on the invisibly powerful. A reasonable appeal like the one Sen makes first of all needs as a precondition for acceptance civilized reasonableness among the rich and powerful.

Vithal Rajan  
Hyderabad