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'In conversation with Amartya Sen' at the LSE

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Professor Amartya Sen. LSE Archives.

By Leila Nasr*

Engaging, composed, and timeless: these are the words that come to mind when reflecting on Professor Amartya Sen's most recent public lecture at the LSE on 6 November 2015. Well publicised and highly oversubscribed, the talk – chaired by Professor Nicholas Stern, IG Patel Professor and Chair of the Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment at LSE – attracted a range of students, professionals, academics, and media personnel who came together to get a glimpse of one of the world's most prominent development thinkers.

Born in 1933, Professor Sen is an economist, philosopher and recipient of the [1998 Nobel Prize in Economics](#) whose career has been dedicated to the examination of pressing issues, including the [economics of welfare and justice](#), [social choice theory](#), [rationality and collective choice](#), [economic freedom](#), and more. He is Thomas W. Lamont University Professor and Professor of Economics and Philosophy at Harvard University, and has previously held positions at Jadavpur University Calcutta, the Delhi School of Economics, Oxford University and, of course, the London School of Economics and Political Science, where he remains an honorary fellow. Accordingly, he concedes almost humorously that he has never held a serious non-academic job in his lifetime. As his words begin to flow through the auditorium, one gets the feeling that he wouldn't rather have it any other way.

The topic of the event was Professor Sen's newest publication, [The Country of First Boys](#): a collection of essays in which he discusses some of the most fundamental issues facing India, and the world, today, including illiteracy, hunger, freedom of speech, inequality and exclusion. The conversation took shape around four key themes that Professor Stern drew out from his most recent book as well as his life's writings.

The first of these themes was the notion of **multiple identities** – i.e. the notion that an individual is made up of various characteristics and components that work in unison to create the whole being. Cautioning against those who may selectively emphasise an individual's or people group's particular characteristics over others for their personal or political gain, Professor Sen said that we should remain aware of the 'politics of partition', which serves to divide and alienate minorities (citing the examples of refugees and Islamophobia). In light of this, he went on to stress the importance of a better understanding of the multiplicity of identities, so as to foster improved social cohesion and inclusivity in the long term.

Following on from this, the discussion focused on Professor Stern's next question: **what should drive and guide us when thinking about development policy?** In response, Sen remarked that policy makers should remember that inequality is relative. Specifically, he noted that income inequality is less systemically problematic than the education and freedom inequality that often underpin this. Professor Sen went on to explain that inequality and deprivation are not universally

understood but, rather, these concepts are contextually dependent (e.g. poverty in Canada, for example, is not understood or manifest in the same way as poverty in India), and should be dealt with accordingly.

Moving on to a question about **the role of growth and human development in making policy**, Sen replied: “The distinction that is presently being made between growth and human development is a ‘fake horse race’.” Here, Professor Sen concisely articulated his view that investing in people is not only a story of economic growth, but is also an equally important story of individual and social progress. He went on to offer the example of Japan where, upon realising that they lagged behind the United States in terms of national development, invested considerable resources in education, healthcare, and market support throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, enabling them to arrive at a point whereby the country now produces more literature than anywhere else in the world. On a more personal note, Sen added that this changed his own thinking and engagement with predominant lines of economic thought, leading him to appreciate this notion of critical human development as economic freedom.

The conversation ended with a sharp yet warmly welcomed change of direction, turning to **a reflection on Professor Sen’s personal life**, provoked by a question concerning his early engagement in schooling, and the role that his father played in teaching him Sanskrit, as well as teaching him about the Bhagavad-Gita (one of the most foundational texts of Hinduism). Sen nostalgically remarked that this period of his upbringing allowed him to gain an important independent understanding of how to essentially determine ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ for himself, external of any need to prove the existence or non-existence of a deity upon which to found one’s ethical behaviors (as is has been common throughout mankind in one way or another).

Following the one-on-one conversation with Professor Stern, the discussion was opened up to the crowd. Questions focused broadly on Indian nationalism and the changing tide of Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, as well as the most controversial topic in Europe at present, refugee policy. Professor Sen gave meaningful responses to each question, despite the limited amount of time, noting that to confront these crises head-on, there needs to be a fundamental recognition our global identity (this tied back into the first theme regarding multiple identities and their potential to comprise a force for good). Such recognition, he said, will better equip us to treat such people groups with respect and dignity.

While Professor Sen is not physically imposing, it is clear that he remains one of the foremost development thinkers in the business, offering the packed auditorium critical and ultimately practical reflections on identity and development, with a healthy dose of humour and personal insight.

The conversation was one not to be missed, however, if you were not able to be there in person, be sure to listen to the [LSE podcast](#) of the event.

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