

Democracy, News Media, and Famine Prevention: Amartya Sen and The Bihar Famine of 1966-67

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In much of his writings on poverty, famines, and malnutrition, Amartya Sen argues that Democracy is the best way to avoid famines partly because of its ability to use a free press, and that the Indian experience since independence confirms this. His argument is partly empirical, but also relies on some a priori assumptions about human motivation. In his "Democracy as a Universal Value" he claims:

Famines are easy to prevent if there is a serious effort to do so, and a democratic government, facing elections and criticisms from opposition parties and independent newspapers, cannot help but make such an effort. Not surprisingly, while India continued to have famines under British rule right up to independence ...they disappeared suddenly with the establishment of a multiparty democracy and a free press.

One reasonable interpretation of this passage is that the multiparty democracy and the free press of India are together the sufficient condition for India's prevention of famines since independence. Similar statements can be found elsewhere. In his *Development as Freedom*, he argues that "a free press and an active political opposition constitute the best early-warning system a country threaten by famines can have," and "potential famines have been prevented from occurring in India since independence."

The purpose of this article is not to prove his arguments wrong, indeed I agree with most of them and there exist a fair amount of evidence that support the claims. However, I will argue, in light of some recent experiences, that the political rights Sen is mainly concerned about (i.e. free press, freedom of speech) are not sufficient for preventing famines. That people starve to death in several electoral democracies is not disputed, not even by Sen, so the focus in this article will be on *famine*, not on hunger, or malnutrition.

My claim is two-fold:

- (1) The statements made above are partly misleading because, according to Sen's definition of famine, there have been several occasions (I will concentrate on the Bihar Famine), both in India and other electoral democracies, which can be classified as famines.
- (2) There are other mechanisms than the democratic ones (i.e. free press, freedom of speech) which contribute to famine prevention.

I will first outline a weak definition of the term 'democracy' and a discussion of the definition of 'famine' as used in this article. I will then go on to present some empirical evidence, mainly related to post-independent India.

Democracy

I will here only present a weak definition of democracy, since no detailed analysis is necessary for the line of reasoning in this article.

Multiparty, representative, frequent elections, and some civil and political rights (especially related to freedoms such as freedom of speech, free press etc.) are aspects which most people identify with democracy. Economic equality is important for democracy as well, but here we shall focus on more constitutional aspects, that is: There are more than one political

party that can be elected to power; the party/parties in power reflect(s) the political beliefs of the majority of the population; there are frequent elections, i.e. the party/parties in power can be re-elected or out-voted after a certain period; there exist a real freedom to organize and to form parties or unions, or other expressive units; there exist a real freedom to express different views, referred to as “the freedom of speech”. In this sense, India is a democracy, and its history since independence is of special interest in this context.

Famine

One of the main deficiencies in Sen’s writings is that the term ‘famine’ is never really formally defined. Where a weak definition exists, as in his *Poverty and Famines*, the usage of the term is either insufficient for denoting incidents as famines, or it is too wide, i.e. it will classify too many incidents as famine. Consider this often-cited passage:

Famines imply starvation, but not vice versa... Starvation is a normal feature in many parts of the world, but this phenomenon of ‘regular’ starvation has to be distinguished from violent outbursts of famines.

Even though this binary relationship between famine and starvation seems reasonable, this passage seems hardly enough to clarify the notion. In the same chapter, Sen goes on to list certain common characteristics of famines related to declines in food consumption (i.e. the ‘time contrast’) and disparities in food consumption between different groups (i.e. the ‘group contrast’). This is very helpful indeed, but can only serve as a taxonomy because these characteristics need not be true for all famines. Merely listing characteristics inherent in recent famines is not to provide a definition.

Leaving this discussion aside for a while, I will now discuss the Bihar drought and famine. Let’s start with some facts about India following its independence in 1947.

The Indian Experience

India has been a democracy since independence in 1947. Although welfare-state-like aspirations from time to time, the overall poverty reduction is not by any means astonishing. About 47% of the Indian population lives below the international poverty line. 53% of the children under age 5 are malnourished, and life expectancy at birth is about 62 and 64 years for males and females respectively. Even though the tendency has shown a slightly decreasing trend since the years of British rule, these indicators speak for themselves; poverty is widespread and affects half of the population.

With its last great famine in 1943, and, as I will argue below, tendencies in Bihar 1966-67 and Maharashtra in 1972-73, the development planning started in 1948, and the growth rate has been low, but stable around 2,3. Poverty is widespread to almost all regions, but is particularly bad in the rural areas. However, the state of Kerala has done remarkably well with respect to life expectancy which is estimated to about 67,6 and 63,5 for females and males respectively. The achievements of Kerala have nothing to do with greater successes in implementing civil and political rights, but rather to successful land reform and educational programs. The leftist political coalition responsible for these policies, who was actually defeated in the last assembly elections, 10 May 2001, gaining only 40 seats out of 140, has been quite successful in distributing scarce resources. The land reforms, where redistribution of fertile cultivated land played a crucial role, made it possible for many peasants, who typically lived in extreme poverty with little incomes from local landlords, to cultivate their own land. Additionally the educational programs of Kerala have reduced the illiteracy significantly. These two factors contributed

largely to *poverty* reduction in Kerala, and reflect the efficiency of support-led and direct economic policy. The case of Kerala does not threaten Sen's claims, since his approach is to be considered as a famine theory, not a guide to poverty reduction. However, there are at least two cases of famine tendencies in India since 1947, the Bihar drought in 1966-67 and the Maharashtra drought of 1972-73, and these incidents show little support for Sen's argument. I will here only concentrate on the former.

The Bihar Drought and Famine

The Bihar famine has by many authors been characterized as evidence in support of India's successful famine prevention efforts. However, Jean Drèze expresses clear concern with this view, stating that "[t]here is precious little evidence to support the self-congratulatory statements that have commonly been made about the Bihar famine." He also acknowledges the fact that "food deprivation led to acute and widespread malnutrition." The level of calorie intake per day was less than 1800 for 26,5 % of the population in drought-affected areas. While daily calorie requirements vary greatly and are notoriously difficult to estimate, the FAO figure of 2450 per day for the average person seems reasonable to use. These estimates suggest *a sharp abnormality, though not necessarily a decline in aggregate food consumption during the drought*, accompanied by massive nutritional damage. Excess mortality is always difficult to measure, but the *Annual Report on Vital Statistics of Bihar 68*, suggests a death rate of 13,9 per thousand in 1967, compared with a normal of about 10 per thousand. S. K. Singh suggests an even higher death rate of 16,9 per thousand in the last part of 1966, but there is some inconsistency in his estimates. However, as measured by registered deaths, probably the most reliable source, the death rate in Bihar in 1967 was 34 % above its 1968 level. Famine was declared on 20 April 1967.

Taking these facts into account, let us turn to some definitions of famines listed in Sen's *Poverty and Famines*, and see if the Bihar incident ought to be classified as a famine. In a footnote on page 39, Sen lists some definitions which all emphasize extreme or widespread deprivation. G. B. Masfield states:

On balance it seems clear that any satisfactory definition of famine must provide that the food shortage is either widespread or extreme, if not both, and that the degree of extremity is best measured by human mortality from starvation.

Food shortage in the state of Bihar was significant in 17 out of 17 districts, with 9 districts, namely Patna, Gaya, Shahabad, Darbhanga, Hazaribagh, Ranchi, Palamau, Dhanbad, and Singhbhum producing less than 50 % of normal output. Five of these districts produced less than 30 % of normal. However, if we acknowledge Sen's entitlement approach, these figures can not tell us whether the Bihar incident counts as a famine or not, especially since there was much less food scarcity during the Great Bengal Famine, among others. So we need to shift the focus, and concentrate, as Sen correctly does, on consumption, rather than availability. Sen notes that:

In analyzing starvation in general, it is important to make clear distinctions between three different issues: (1) *lowness of the typical level* of food consumption; (2) *declining trend* of food consumption; and (3) *sudden collapse* of the level of food consumption. Famine is chiefly a problem of the third kind, and while it can – obviously – be helped by the first two features, it often does not work that way.

The All-India Institute of Medical Sciences suggests that there was in fact a significant decline in calorie intake in several regions of Bihar between 1966 and 1967. According to their survey,

the calorie intake dropped from 2200 per capita per day to nearly 1200. A more moderate survey conducted by the Nutrition Research Laboratories (The Indian Council of Medical Research) suggests a calorie intake of 1450 per capita per day in the severely affected areas, and 1510 in the moderately affected areas. The same survey suggests that 30 % of the population in the severely affected areas, and 20 % of the population in the moderately affected areas consumed less than 1300 calories per capita per day.

If we take these measures seriously, there is no doubt that the Bihar incident of 1966-67 qualifies as a famine. However, Sen is concerned with one more aspect, namely the group contrast:

While Famines involve fairly widespread acute starvation, there is no reason to think that it will affect all groups in the famine-affected nation. Indeed, it is by no means clear that there has ever occurred a famine in which all groups in a country have suffered from starvation, since different groups typically do have very different commanding powers over food, and an over-all shortage brings out the contrasting powers in stark clarity.

There are many famines which confirm this. Looking again at the Bihar incident we find a very similar pattern. The consumption of calories in drought-affected areas in Bihar in May 1967 varied significantly between different groups. For instance, the calorie intake per day among cultivators was 1840 in the severely affected areas, whereas only 1210 for labourers in the same area. Similarly, the cereal intake per day among cultivators was about 453 grams in moderately affected areas, as opposed to only 312 grams for labourers. The calorie intake in these areas was estimated to 1740 and 1280 for cultivators and labourers respectively. Even more interesting is that the differences between these two groups were smaller in the least affected areas; the cereal intake per day among cultivators was 573 grams, whereas 545 grams among labourers. That is only 28 grams difference as opposed to 141 in the moderately affected areas. This suggests that when scarcity becomes present, class differences in food intake increase. This was also the case in the Great Bengal famine where rural destitutes trekked in to prosperous Calcutta and dropped dead in front of local restaurants.

There is indeed fairly good reason to treat the Bihar incident in 1966-67 as a famine. Nevertheless, Sen seems not inclined to do so. The case of Bihar weakens the claim that "potential famines have been prevented from occurring in India since independence." According to his own definition of famine, as outlined above, this is not the case. Additionally, if we isolate the death rate among some groups in e.g. the Bangladesh Famine of 1974, it does not significantly differ from the death rate in the Bihar famine. For instance, the death rate among service occupants in the former was about 16 per thousand, as compared to 13,9 or maybe even 16,9 in the latter if we take Singh's measures into account.

Sen's famine theory is, of course, a highly sophisticated notion in which capabilities, entitlements, and a set of constitutional aspects form a general understanding of the nature and the causes of the human misery famines represent. The Famine in Bihar does not in general undermine the attention Sen has given to entitlements and capabilities, but can be seen as a counter example to the view that democracy and a free press in particular, two features of post independent India, will typically alleviate famines. The functions of the press in this context are, as I will argue, probably more complex than just a set of political pressure and public information mechanisms.

The Freedom of the Press

By and large, a free press may be able to keep a threatening famine at bay for a number of reasons. There are at least two central instrumental features that contribute to this:

(1) A free press can have an informational function. This aspect is really two fold: (a) it may inform the government about the current food situation, allowing for response to availability decline; (b) it may inform the opposition (if the system yields political plurality) about the current food situation, allowing them to challenge those in power.

(2) A free press may also have a direct function of political pressure. Consider the passage from the Daily Times, 20 December 1973, during the famine in Nigeria:

The way our journalists are maltreated nowadays makes me to doubt the claim that our press is free. Freedom of the Press should be respected in the interest of all. The Press, among other things, informs the governed of the activities of the Government. It exposes corruption in our society and thus helps to curb it. Through the help of the press, the drought affected areas of the Northern states of the country have received help from many Nigerians. The freedom of the press should, therefore, not be interfered with by those in power.

It is clear that, the relatively free press of Nigeria played a crucial role in helping to combat the 1973-74 famine in northern Nigeria. However, stating that the political climate of Nigeria was particularly pluralistic would be an excessive exaggeration. The nature of the Nigerian experience indicates that an authoritarian regime may also have a press apparatus sufficient for putting pressure on the rulers. Of course, as Sen argues, a democracy is more likely to have such mechanisms, indeed they are important parts of the democratic constitution itself, but one might argue that there is an incentive for an authoritarian regime to maintain a free press because the people may feel they are less oppressed, since they are allowed to express critical views. After the failure of the 'Great Leap Forward' which partly contributed to the Chinese famine that raged on for three years in 1958-61, Mao Zedong noted the absence of a critical apparatus through local democracy:

If there is no democracy and ideas are not coming from the masses, it is impossible to establish a good line, good general and specific policies and methods... Without democracy you have no understanding of what is happening down below; the situation will be unclear; you will be unable to collect sufficient opinions from all sides; there can be no communication between top and bottom; top-level organs of leadership will depend on one-sided and incorrect material to decide issues, thus you will find it difficult to avoid being subjectivist; it will be impossible to achieve unity of understanding and unity of action, and impossible to achieve true centralism.

Neither the public nor the political elite of China was aware of the famine that killed between 16,5 and 29,5 million people. However, the somewhat 'democratic' aspirations of Mao Zedong show the acknowledgement of an independent adversarial journalism even in the absence of minimal democracy as defined above.

The Nigerian and the Chinese experience show the adequacy of an independent press in famine situations. This confirms Sen's notion. However, there are several mechanisms that need further discussion before we can draw the conclusion that "a free press and an active political opposition constitute the best early-warning system a country threaten by famines can have."

The Functionings of the Press

The capacity to use a press, whether it is free or restricted, is very much limited to the various

functionings a person holds. The level of literacy in a community is one of the most important determinants of the nature of the press. This is easy to understand because the lack of incentives for journalists whose work is never read. On the other hand, a critical press seems to correlate with a high literacy level. Consider the case of Kerala, *one of the poorest Indian states in terms of GNP per capita*. Despite its low economic output, it has achieved a remarkably high level of life expectancy, even higher than the richest states like Punjab and Haryana. The 1981 measure of life expectancy at birth was 67,6 and 63,5 for females and males respectively, compared to 52,1 and 52,5 for India as a whole. Strikingly, these figures seem to correlate closely with the high level of adult literacy rate in Kerala. The 1981 measures display an adult literacy rate of 71 and 86 % for females and males respectively, as compared to 26 and 55 % for India as a whole. What conclusions can we draw from this correlation? It is not unreasonable to state that a more educated people will have more ability to express their views and current living conditions. Moreover, the news media will have more incentives for producing reliable *and* important news about the social and economic status of a community, since these news will certainly be read and criticized. Consider Sen and Drèze's claim that:

The high literacy level of Kerala is also a major asset, especially in making people more eager and more skilled in seeking modern remedies for treatable ailments. It may also have a role in facilitating public participation in social change and in generating public demand for social security.

So, the social achievements of Kerala must be seen in light of a high literacy rate of the population, and a capability to use this functioning accordingly. This may be part of the explanation why Kerala has never experienced a famine like the one in Bihar since independence. There is an interesting flip-side to this coin, however. Sen's argument is that extreme situations like famines always get more attention in the press than do the quiet endemic undernutrition. Hence, the achievements of Kerala with respect to the latter must be attributed to other factors than just the critical press. True they have gone through vast institutional changes especially connected to land reform and wage legislation. One might argue, of course, that these factors, the press and literacy on the one hand and the economic reforms on the other, are closely interlinked, i.e. that the former contributes to the latter or vice versa. But as Jagdish Bhagwati points out, it is not the freedom of the press that is significant, it is which views are expressed the rulers or the ruled? Somehow, democratic Sudan, which possessed a free press and competitive elections, suffered an exceptionally severe famine in the south in 1986-89. The southern Sudanese were underrepresented in the National Assembly and largely disregarded by the press. Marx's notion of false consciousness would certainly apply here. It might be argued that false consciousness, or according to Sen, objective illusions, exclude a genuine public opinion because either lack of objective knowledge about the world, or a lack of the capability to express different views. Pluralism is scarce these days, especially when it comes to covering different class interests. Even though the Indian Press is widely regarded as the most pluralistic in the Third World, coverage of the population is not impressive, even after making allowance for the relatively low literacy level. As N. Ram argues:

An attempt to evaluate and analyse the role of the independent Indian press in anti-hunger strategies must take into careful, balanced account the considerable historical and current strengths of this press, and also the constraints of its influence and 'powers', *vis-à-vis* public opinion and the making of official policy.

Stating that public opinion and the views expressed by the press are compatible would be at

least misleading. It is not unreasonable to argue that the public opinion in India is to get rid of the non-acute regular starvation that one half of the population suffers from. Nevertheless, these 'events' get less attention in the newspapers. Somehow, it seems not newsworthy. The same freedom the press has to criticize governments for making wrong decisions, makes it also inclined to print news irrelevant to the social and economic situation. The latter regards numbers, that don't even change. A static situation has *eo ipso* no new features. That's what makes it static. There are, as N. Ram notes, two aspects to this criticism:

At one level, [it] is obviously valid, although – for what it is worth – the Indian press is inclined increasingly to wrestle with the enormous challenge of discovering and doing something about the phenomenon of poverty and hunger in a country that has, for all its advantages, a greater mass of it than probably any other. From a sensitive or progressive social science standpoint, however, this coverage does appear 'low-key' or 'tame', aside from proving frequently incompetent.

So we might say that the quality of the coverage of endemic hunger and undernutrition is part of the reason why responding to it is so difficult. Additionally responding to it requires much more from a government than famine relief programs generally do. Poverty is a complex issue that also requires intellectual and methodological resources and competence beyond the press' current capability or competence. It is no accident that journalism deservedly carries a reputation for being superficial. The coverage of the Bihar Famine confirms this. In his 1986 article, P. R. Brass argues how the press "turned the Bihar Famine of 1966-67 into a political drama in which many of the principals self-consciously played their roles on the public stage." There were also several occasions in which the press gave inadequate reports of the situation. Even more serious was the fact that:

The Bihar newspapers did not or could not see through official attempts to explain the major crisis in terms of [...] drought induced crop failure that led to a further food availability decline [FAD] in an already food-deficit State [...] whereas the evidence, including official statistics, clearly argued otherwise.

So far there are two general conclusions to draw: First, a free press can only serve as an instrumental factor in alleviating famines. Without an adequately educated population, there are no incentives to speak the poor man's case. This is well illustrated by the case of Kerala. Second, diversity in belief sets are probably the best way a press can avoid displaying subjective knowledge. As the cases of Bihar and Sudan suggest, neither a free press nor an electoral body is sufficient for alleviating a famine if certain groups are suppressed.

In the final chapter of this article I will suggest that if we take Sen's entitlement approach into account, and I think we should, attention to fluctuations in prices may serve as a very reliable source to a famine threat.

Sen's Entitlement Approach and Food Prices

The traditional explanation of the occurrence of famines has primarily focused on food availability decline (or FAD for short), due to factors such as climate, demographic structures, and decline of natural resources. Although this may partially explain why some people go hungry, it is certainly not an exhaustive explanation. Consider the Great Bengal famine of 1943. The total food availability in Bengal was not particularly bad (considerably higher than two years earlier when there was no famine), and yet three million people died, in a famine mainly affecting the rural areas, through rather violent shifts in the relative purchasing powers of different groups, hitting the rural labourers the hardest. Sen argues that famines are, in fact, best

explained in terms of failures of entitlement systems. The entitlements here refer to legal rights and to practical possibilities, rather than to moral status, but, despite the differences between these, the laws and actual operation of private ownership economies have many features in common with the moral system of entitlements analyzed by Nozick and others. Although Sen and Nozick both speak of entitlements, these function in very different ways. Nozick sees entitlements as grounding (or being) inviolable rights, especially the right to property, while Sen sees them as capturing the array of rights and arrangements that affect an individual's ability to obtain food. So entitlements in Sen's terminology typically refer to the set of resources one has for private use, that is, one's ability to achieve the commodities necessary for basic needs (including food and shelter), either through income-generating work or from direct production of these goods. The size of one's entitlement determines the amount of food (and other commodities) one can command.

It is easy to see that if we take the entitlement approach into account, shifts in relative prices will typically affect one's entitlement set. Although, higher food prices may lead to a larger volume of aggregate food production, it may drastically reduce the poor's ability to buy and consume the required amount of food necessary for livelihood. Consider Sen and Drèze's observation that

[t]here is a real issue of conflict involved between the positive production incentives and the reduced affordability associated with high food prices. Which way the balance of advantages would lie is not just a matter of being either a hard-nosed 'productionist' or a soft-hearted 'distributionist', but also of knowing precisely how the different groups of consumers would be affected by the new equilibrium with higher food prices.

It is no accident that some groups are more severely affected by a famine than others because of the differences in relative purchasing power. A rise in e.g. the price of wheat will reduce the entitlements of groups consuming wheat, and increase the entitlements of wheat producers, leaving others unaffected. While there are many causes to shifts in prices, the rise of food grain prices in famine situations are most commonly associated with decline in production, i.e. the supply side. However, the increase in rice price in Bengal was essentially related to demand factors; supply was exceptionally high in 1942. Leaving causes aside, there is, almost invariably, an increase in food prices when a famine is present. Consider the cereal prices in North India by August 1967. In Bihar the price (Rs/quintal) was 288 for rice, 163 for wheat, and finally 125 for maize, whereas it was 83-89, 99-100, and 55-63 respectively in the much more prosperous state of Punjab. This was of course due to the "success" of zoning policy that prohibited trade of food across different states, and thus affected the food entitlements. Trade would clearly have equalized prices and made the purchasing power in Bihar much stronger. However, the dispersion of wheat prices reached its peak precisely during the 1965-67 droughts. As Drèze notes:

Price differentials of this magnitude between States are quite abnormal, and there undoubtedly existed a big untapped potential for advantageous food reallocation within the country in 1966-7.

Similarly, the price of foodgrains in Bengal in 1942-43 was almost four times the price in 1939-40, even though aggregate output was about identical.

Attention to fluctuations in food prices will often be a reliable source in determining which groups are hardest hit by entitlement failures. Whatever the cause of such fluctuations is,

hoarding, production decline, inflation, etc, a distortion of relative purchasing power, i.e. a shift in the price/income relation, is likely to result. The failure of the Indian government to consider the extremely high prices of food grains in Bihar made famine coping strategies and relief programs even harder to carry out, and may have caused a worsening of the famine situation.

Conclusion

It is common to argue that regardless of the economic situation of the country, a democratic constitution will at least prevent the disastrousness a famine represents. Although, Amartya Sen is highly sceptical towards the combat of endemic hunger by the Indian democratic government, he acknowledges its ability to avoid famines. However, the Bihar famine of 1966-67 demonstrates that famine prevention in India is not so successful after all. I have argued, partly that there is no reason why we should not treat the Bihar incident as a famine. Every measure Sen uses to define a famine situation also applies to the Bihar famine. Sen's theory of famine, strong as it is, concludes that the freedom of the press is one of the most important reasons why democracies don't experience famines. Nevertheless, the free press of India has not proven sufficient for keeping famines at a distance. On the other hand, where non-instrumental means for combating hunger, such land redistribution, education, public health services etc, has proven successful, famines do not occur. Of course, a free press may be worth having for its own sake, and also for its instrumental values, but we must be careful about drawing the conclusion that the latter is sufficient for eliminating famines. There are several aspects of the press that simply don't work that way. Attention to economic relations and relative prices may be a more reliable measure of famine proneness than the superficial view of the news media.

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