Arguments for a Better World: Essays in Honor of Amartya Sen, Volume 2: Society, Institutions, and Development
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Print publication date: 2008
Published to Oxford Scholarship Online: May 2009
DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199239979.001.0001

Democracy and Its Indian Pasts

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DOI:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199239979.003.0027

Abstract and Keywords
Amartya Sen has argued powerfully against narrow conceptions of democracy, that restrict its meanings to elections and state forms, and see it as a unique acquisition of the West. He has urged a more historical conception, which sees democracy as rooted in everyday capacities associated with voice and familiar to most societies: discussion, debate, public deliberation. In this perspective, India's remarkable contemporary democracy can be seen as rooted in long historical traditions of argument and pluralism. While noting this important expansion in our points of view, this chapter seeks to raise some specific questions about: i) Sen's account of Indian traditions of public deliberation and reasoning and their relation to current Indian democracy; ii) the notions of tradition and argument which Sen deploys; and iii) the relationship between democracy and public reasoning. This relationship is more tenuous that Sen perhaps allows: because democracy installs politics as sovereign, Sen's attempt to establish ‘the sovereignty of reasoning’ may have real limits.

Keywords: democracy, India, politics, history, argument, reasoning, heterodoxy, traditions
I. Introduction
IN a discipline that on the whole has scant concern for its own history, let alone for history more generally, Amartya Sen is distinguished by his interest in connecting the concerns of the present to the past. A sense of the past characterizes both his work within the discipline of economics and his wider inquiries into our present conceptions of ethics, politics and modern identities. It has given him a perspective on the efficacy, the power, and ultimately the limits of economics—and the need for other forms of knowledge and reasoning to step forward at the point where economics has to get off. There are parallels between his intellectual trajectory and that of his friend, the late Bernard Williams—both masters of the tools of their discipline, who with increasing clarity and force have established the limits of what those tools, and indeed their discipline, can do for us.

The concern for historical perspective, for the expansion of our points of view which this can bring, has enabled Sen to reveal to us both a more imaginative conception of our current values—freedom, secularism, human development—and a broader range of means to pursue them. It sets Amartya Sen apart. An economist at the summit of his profession, he also himself belongs to a tradition of Indian intellectuals and political figures, often not professional historians, who over the last century have interrogated the past to enrich our understanding of future possibilities. Whatever their ideological persuasion, these intellectuals sought to discover antecedents for their favored idea of the political community, and for their vision of a future India. Tagore and Gandhi extensively discussed the relation between the past and present, and Nehru was almost obsessively fascinated by this relationship. In what respects did India need to break away from an oppressive past, and what continuities might it seek to sustain as it worked to build a just society?

The immediate context for Amartya Sen's own interest in the Indian past has been set by developments in India and abroad over the past two decades. Three of these developments are worth noting: the rise of the Hindutva movement, with its ambition to redefine the Indian nation and its founding values; the emergence of post-modern attempts to dismantle national subjects and stories in favor of more fragmentary and particular ones; and the political currency of crude civilizational stereotypes, with their predictions about the
inevitably conflictual outcomes of civilizational encounters. If there is one common theme that joins these disparate developments, it is the idea that values like secularism and democracy, and their associated practices and institutions, are uniquely possessions of the West and Europe—that have had to be transplanted or imposed elsewhere. Thus there is little reason to expect—let alone want—them to succeed in non-Western locations.

In a stream of essays and public interventions during the 1990s and 2000s, whose main themes have been gathered into books such as *The Argumentative Indian* (2005) and *Identity and Violence* (2006), Amartya Sen has developed his dual perspective on India and the world. In the first instance, these writings amount to an impressive defense of the founding values of the Indian republic—secularism, cultural pluralism, democracy. But Sen has sought also to demonstrate that these values, or at the very least recognizable analogs to them, have deep roots in India's past. They long precede the emergence of the modern state during the colonial era, he has argued, and continue to provide a resource of norms and criteria by which to judge the performance of contemporary Indian democracy. Sen sees the Indian past as containing a plurality of traditions and viewpoints: those that stress orthodoxy, spirituality and mysticism have received the greatest attention, and yet modern India is equally heir to intellectual traditions that celebrate dissent, skepticism and disputation. And these latter traditions, he claims, have a direct influence on contemporary Indian democracy—making it possible, sustaining it, and potentially offering criteria by which to improve it. In that sense, Indian democracy is not simply a Western graft: the institutions of parliamentary democracy are certainly a legacy of British rule, but these could succeed because of a more general historical tilt towards the valuing of argument and discussion—and agreement based on this.

The relative success of India's contemporary democracy, unprecedented in its scale, has been quite justly celebrated. The fact that the country has, since 1947, held 14 national elections and many more in its regional states; that dozens of peaceful changes of government have occurred; that Indians participate in elections at impressive and growing levels; that the country has been able to deal with the practical issues involved in summing, within a few hours, the ballots of around 400 million citizens into a collective choice:
all of these achievements support the conclusion that India's political system has succeeded in institutionalizing uncertainty—a crucial criterion of any democratic success. That is a significant achievement. It is, however, a partial one—particularly when seen from the point of view proposed by Amartya Sen.

For elections, and their associated practices and results, do not exhaust our sense of what we wish democracy to be—and do—for us. Sen urges a broader view of democracy that looks beyond the capacity of Indians to operate with and through political parties, elections, and the institutions of a democratic state—a view that focuses on social practices (of reasoning, argument and deliberation), and so gives democracy an important life outside the structures of formal politics associated with the state. “Discussion and argument”, Sen has insisted, “are critically important for democracy and public reasoning” (2005: p. xiii). This is an important perspective in the Indian context, where, after all, the representation of political power in the form of the state began much later than in Europe, and is associated with the coming of British colonialism. Sen’s move thus enables us to speak of democratic forms and practices even prior to, and apart from, the modern state. India’s sixty-year-old constitutional democracy, he suggests, can draw on the historical potential of a millennial tradition of heterodoxy and multivocal exchange. By reinstating the centrality of voice to democracy, he reminds us immediately of the classical idea of isegoria, and points to a more expansive conception of politics—seeing it rooted, beyond the formal structures of the state, in everyday practices of dialog. Sen might be seen here as reformulating a distinction made by Alexis de Tocqueville—between democracy conceived as a general idea or principle (whose presence one can discern even in the European Middle Ages—and, Sen argues, in many other locations at different points in history) and, more narrowly, as a set of institutions of government that developed in parallel with the rise of the modern state.

While Sen turns back to India’s history to identify democratic resources, equally he looks outward, seeking to place Indian political ideas and experience in a global context. This is in part because those ideas have of course developed in contact with other civilizations, above all China and Europe (cf. Goody 1996), and also because today, with India’s consolidation as the largest, most unusual democracy in human history, we
need to see how its inherited intellectual traditions connect to the current, global challenges of politics. India, Sen insists, should not be set apart as exceptional. It needs rather to be integrated into a global view of the history and future possibilities of democracy and democratic argument.

Sen’s view of democracy as rooted in voice and public discussion allows for new possibilities of conceiving of “global democracy”. He recognizes the impossibility of (p.491) a “global state” or of a single “world government”; in that sense, global democracy is a chimera. On the other hand, it is possible to identify forms of what Sen has called “borderless public reasoning”—about international justice and rights—which can reach across the limits of state institutions, and establish the possibility of public debate across national and other boundaries. Such a global debate, in which a wide range of voices could participate, would increase the points of view that require consideration in determining how to act to improve levels of justice, or the register of rights, across the world.

This possibility of a more global conception of democracy today must in turn be rooted in a more global history of the sources of democratic politics. Such a history would track the presence of practices of public deliberation and reasoning in a wide range of historical societies, and not see them as unique to the West. Such an approach to the diverse histories of democracy would have an inspirational value to many outside the West who are struggling to establish democracy in their societies; and it would also have a real political dimension. It would help to resist what Sen has called “civilizational partitioning” and “confinement”—a viewpoint that both denies civilizations their internal diversity, and freezes them in a structure of unequal power relations.

II. India’s Democracy and its Past Traditions
In the fraught global political climate of the early twenty-first century, Sen’s humanistic approach—his willingness to take history in the round, to ask large questions and see large patterns, and his expansion of our sense of democracy beyond both the Western inheritance and the modern state—is profoundly compelling. Equally convincing is his insistence that we cannot have adequate understandings of what democracy is and means today unless we have a richer
understanding of its non-Western experiences—among which India's stands out in particular.

His perspective also raises two large sets of questions. First, how should we think about the relationship between India's past history and its present politics? How exactly is the persistence of India's democracy, which defies classical theoretical precepts, related to the long history of the country's political ideas and institutions? Beyond the usual dichotomies associated with imperialist or nationalist positions, which see Indian democracy as simply a legacy of the British Raj or, contrarily, as rooted in age-old village republics, does a focus on what Sen sees as India's historical traditions of dialog and discussion help to explain the character of India's contemporary democracy? Or is Sen's purpose somewhat different: namely, (p.492) to remind us of these traditions of disputation and dialog, show us some of their achievements, and thereby provide us with criteria by which to assess and improve India's actually existing democracy?

Second, how can we pursue the task of conceiving the history of democracy and democratic politics within a more globalized framework—one that can expand on and modify the tenaciously held perspective that democracy is purely an achievement of Western history? And what would be the place, within this more globalized view, of India's democracy—which, each time it holds a national election, is engaged in the largest such act of free choice in human history?

This twin intellectual project—namely, to devise an understanding of India's democracy that integrates it into the country's own deep history, and in turn to locate this understanding within a global view of democracy—suggests the ambition and challenge of Sen's writings on India's past and its current democracy. It is a task that we are still far from meeting. It pursuing it, however, there are several difficulties, and I would like now to consider three of them, beginning with some brief remarks about the range of materials out of which to construct a history of political ideas in India. Second, I shall suggest some difficulties surrounding the idea of a continuous Indian “argumentative tradition”—and particularly, how we might assess the significance of this idea for India's modern
democracy. And finally, I shall raise some difficulties with the conception of democracy that Sen deploys.

Sen's claims about India's intellectual heritage provokes the following question: what is a useful, appropriate way to conceive the long-term historical relationship between the intellectual traditions and the political ideas and practices that have created contemporary India? Is there in fact any meaningful connection between what Sen has called “the long history and consummate strength of our argumentative tradition” (2005: p. vii), and the practices and possibilities of Indian democracy today? He is of course fully aware of the range of opposed, non-democratic resources which are also available in Indian traditions—the deep potentials that run in the opposite direction (his point is exactly that strands of orthodoxy and heterodoxy are in argument with one another).

Sen quite explicitly and self-consciously sees his alternative genealogy of the Indian past, which lays emphasis on the presence of heterodoxy and multivocal discussion in India's high Sanskrit, Buddhist and Mughal past, as highly selective. That selectivity has drawn the ire of critics who, while sharing his liberal values, remain skeptical of the soundness of his lineage of precedents for India's modern, electoral democracy. Sen, however, has a rationale and defense for his approach—which he has demonstrated in a number of significant pieces on the methodology of the social sciences (Sen 1981, 1982, 1993). Our interest in the social or historical world is driven by practical reason. The kind of knowledge we want is the kind that will be in some way useful to us, whatever our purposes happen to be. The ambition of an absolutist conception of knowledge, the view from nowhere, is simply an inhuman one: all views are views from somewhere. But it does not follow (p. 493) that all views are equally valid. What constrains the perspectives of what Sen calls “positional objectivity” is a commitment to epistemic standards of evidence and truth—themselves constrained by criteria of relevance.

Sen's interest in the past is not, of course, primarily that of an historian—it is purposefully partial, designed to bend the stick the other way, to counter what he sees as a one-sided view of India’s “real heritage” as purely a religious one. He has an explicit, justified criterion for selection—to suggest the extent of India's intellectual heterodoxy. But one might still note some
limitations with his selectivity, particularly if we wish to understand more generally the history of political ideas and practice in India.

Recent scholarship on the pre-colonial Indian languages of politics and good government has widened the scope of materials that merit consideration. The conventional accounts of Indian political ideas customarily begin with Kautilya's _Arthashastra_ (a text about whose context and reception in fact we know rather little), and then leap over several thousand years to Ram Mohun Roy, the founder of modern Indian political thought. It is as if one told the history of European political thought by beginning with, say, Plato or Aristotle and then leapt straight to Bentham or Paine. It remains difficult, within this perspective, to see continuities in anything except very broad terms. In effect, we are given a choice: either we accept very general connections between contemporary political practice and ideas and pre-colonial traditions; or we see the entry of colonialism as having produced a total rupture, replacing earlier spiritual and religious traditions with Enlightenment values, which contemporary Indian democratic life seeks to approximate.

The more precise historical reconstruction that is required in order to embed India's modern democracy within its longer historical and intellectual lineages is still in its very early stages. We know too little about the varieties of political thinking and debate in India: we need still to establish the linguistic identity of these ideas (whether in Sanskrit, Persian or vernacular traditions), the genres in which they were expressed, the audiences to whom they were directed—and their actual social effects. And without a fuller picture, it is hard to assess the dialogic or democratic potentials in India's past, or to gauge their relative importance and effects.

One significant bias in our understanding has been excessive attention to the high Sanskritic traditions (as embodied for instance in the Dharmashastric texts). This bias towards examples from Sanskrit traditions is evident in Sen's own work, which stresses the "quintessential 'Indianness' " of Sanskrit (2005: 82). Yet, as is becoming apparent from the work of scholars on Persian sources as well as vernacular languages, there may be significant resources in India's other linguistic cultures to support ideas of moderated power and good political judgement (Alam 2004; Subrahmanyan and
Narayana Rao 2007). Some of this work in fact shares some of Sen’s general corrective intentions, originating, for instance, in studies of southern (p.494) Indian practices of historiographical and history writing, which were designed to show that, contrary to British insistence, there are developed conceptions of history and historical time within India’s traditions (just as Sen wishes to show the presence of dialogic and deliberative elements in classical and pre-colonial India). Extending their earlier work, which was designed to show the availability of a concept of history in “early modern India”, Subrahmanyam and Rao have argued that conceptions of politics can also be found in the vernacular traditions of the Deccan and of southern India, conceptions that are distinct from those found in the Sanskritic traditions. They and others have identified a line of Niti texts in regional languages (especially Telegu and Marathi), produced in the early modern period. These texts offered practical precepts and guidance in political matters, and dispensed moral advice (about, for instance, moderation in power or cultivating good judgement) which contrasted with the social conservatism of the Dharmashastric texts. And they were consciously “this-worldly” or secular in character. The Dalit leader and constitutionalist B. R. Ambedkar himself drew a contrast between what he called the “secular law” of the Niti tradition and the “ecclesiastical law” of the dharmic tradition—which suggests a connection with modern Indian secularism worth exploring. Such work (and there are other examples) is beginning to trace historical filiations and continuities between past and current politics.

Beyond the actual content to be found in India’s diverse linguistic cultures and its relevance to ideas of moderate and consensual power, there is also a larger, theoretical point at stake. Arguably, it is the very fact of India’s linguistic multiplicity that has helped to foster positive attitudes towards pluralism and diversity—both within and between different linguistic cultures. This second-order diversity has itself encouraged heterodoxy and the “dialogic heritage” to which Sen has drawn our attention (2005: 44 inter alia). As Sheldon Pollock has demonstrated in his remarkable study of the cultural and political role of Sanskrit in pre-modern India, one of the notable features of India’s cultural pluralism is that political power did not seek to mobilize linguistic difference and particularism for its own purposes: “No language in
southern Asia ever became the target of direct royal regulation; sanctions were never imposed requiring the use of one and prohibiting the use of another”, Pollock writes; “At the time when episodes of vernacular extermination were occurring in Europe, kings in Karnataka were issuing royal records in Kannada for the core of their culture-power desa, in Telugu for the eastern sector, and in Marathi for the western, and in their courts these kings were entertained with songs in these languages as well as Avadhi, Bihari, Bangla, Oriya, and Madhyadeshiya—producing, in fact, a virtual cosmopolitanism of the vernaculars” (Pollock 2006: 573). This developed historical capacity for living with linguistic heterogeneity has encouraged the tolerance of cultural diversity—which in turn has been a vital condition for the possibility of Indian democracy.

(p.495) III. Tradition, Contexts, and Meanings of Argument

Yet, even if we did have an adequate historical map of the histories of India’s classical and vernacular political languages, there would still remain questions about whether it is possible to identify a “long history of the argumentative tradition in India”, and about the conception of democracy which Sen upholds.

Beyond the quite substantial familiarity that Indians now have with electoral democracy, Sen has reminded them that they also have other inheritances which can support and expand their democratic practice. Indians are heir to argumentative resources, embodied in philosophical and literary traditions, which can support reasoned debate—about the ends of democracy, about what social values to promote. Such debate is vital to enhancing and improving the practice of Indian democracy, and it serves to expand the range of voices and points of view that define India’s democracy—and the goals it chooses to pursue.

But in what sense can one speak of an argumentative tradition in India? The examples and episodes that Sen collects do testify to the presence of skeptical, rationalist and critical currents in Indian thought. But do they collectively yield a continuous line of reflection? Or are they in fact simply sporadic episodes, connected retrospectively through the lens of a liberal sensibility—Sen’s own?
The examples Sen cites—among others, Ashoka, Lokayatta disputations, Kalidas, Akbar—have indeed had a persisting imaginative presence in India. During the twentieth century, for instance, India's intellectual elites quite often also invoked these examples and the norms they suggest, in order to legitimate their vision of India as a pluralist, tolerant culture. Yet these examples cannot be said to have sustained a continuous tradition, nor to have diffused the effects of such examples across a wide social space (cf. Guha 2005). Unlike, say, the idea of the Ancient Constitution in seventeenth-century England, which both propagated and relied upon a sense of England as an historically continuous entity, with a persisting legal tradition—an idea whose reach was widely felt across society (Pocock 1957)—the examples drawn from the Indian case represent at best little oases, isolated pockets in what otherwise is the history of a society that kept democratic and dialogic options well suppressed. They are oases in two senses: they have cropped up sporadically over time and also within their societies, restricted to small circles.

Can we at least speak of them as having yielded normative concepts or principles which have carried a stable meaning across Indian history? Even here one has to be circumspect. Such episodes of argumentation neither initiated nor sustained a continuous, self-conscious reflection on the values of justice, equality or liberty. A tradition implies some notion of self-reflection and self-consciousness: a sense of itself as a tradition, a cumulative chain of thought and practice. Bernard Williams, (p.496) in his studies of Homeric literature, could argue for continuity between the ethical ideas of ancient Greece and modern Europe: “we are linked to the past by a self-conscious set of traditions. We reach the past by a route each step of which, in the favourable case, stands in explanatory relations to the steps before and after it” (2006: 61). But it is not clear that we can speak in a similar way of an Indian “tradition”, or traditions, of heterodoxy and public discussion. Such a notion invites several questions—not least, in what sense can we refer to a “tradition” of argument or public reasoning? Does the mere sporadic presence in Indian history of certain episodes which, from the point of view of liberal values, look attractive and recognizable in liberal terms, constitute a “tradition”—one which is in genuine need
of historical recovery? Or is the term “tradition” being used more loosely?

A further set of questions turns on the role and effects of these episodes in India's intellectual history. Why has this manner of thought, strong as it might have been, remained so ineffectual in actually changing anything in the Indian social order? Sen draws a picture of widespread debate and argument both within and outside religious circles—among exponents of Buddhism, but also among scholars of the Lokayatta, Carvaka and Nyaya philosophies. Yet we have little sense from his account of the ends and purposes of such arguments. All argument is motivated, driven and shaped by interests. Much fuller exploration is needed of why there was such a level of debate within India. Were these, in general, largely formalist arguments—scholastic disputations with an internal focus, and not intended to grasp the social world or directed at changing it? Sen does claim, for instance, that the Buddhist councils, held between the fifth century BCE and the second century CE, displayed “a commitment to discussion as a means of social progress” (2005: 15). And yet on the whole these instances of public deliberation left very little mark on the wider society. Max Weber, in his sociology of Indian religions, had also noted the presence within Hinduism of highly sophisticated rationalist traditions. But he also pointed out that somehow these remained unconnected to any projects of social transformation, or to systematic inquiry about the natural world (Weber 1958). Indeed, one might draw an analogy between the effects of the caste system and the examples of intellectual heterodoxy Sen invokes: just as the caste system was able to accommodate many forms of social difference, and integrate them into an order of immense stability, so one might see the acceptance of intellectual heterodoxy as a way of disarming practical criticism. In India, intellectual heterodoxy seems to have long co-existed with great social orthopraxy (Kaviraj 2002). One is reminded here of Herbert Marcuse's once-famous thesis of “repressive tolerance”—a peculiarly Californian condition, but perhaps also one found in pre-modern India.

By clarifying the various motivations of these arguments—and how these might explain their variable effects—we can better understand how insulated these debates and arguments were from the wider social order. They neither developed nor fed into a wider belief that thought, intellection and public
reasoning could actually effect change in the world. That view can be contrasted with examples (p.497) drawn from the twentieth century. Gandhi's extraordinary daily dialog and argument with fellow Indians (and of course also with the British and others), through the medium of his newspapers, weeklies and correspondence, was a form of argument clearly designed to achieve change. So too were the debates during what is perhaps India's most remarkable moment of deliberation and discussion—the constitutional debates of the Constituent Assembly in the mid-twentieth century. These debates represent the most focused, motivated episode of public reasoning in Indian history, quite explicitly aimed at remaking the social and political world—by breaking with the past (Austin 1966). By comparison, it is hard to detect anything like a similar will to change the world in the earlier forms of public reasoning noted in The Argumentative Indian. Here one might in fact question the virtue of continuity, and the effects of “long traditions”. For it may be that a self-conscious rupture with the past is actually necessary to redirect argument towards action.

If the notion of tradition itself poses questions, ambiguities also surround the concept of “argument”. While many advocates of the virtues of democracy have emphasized the aspect of public debate, discussion, and argument, what exactly is meant by such terms varies. One might for instance distinguish between disinterested discussion and interested argument—where the latter is more like haggling or bargaining (Manin 1997). Or again one might distinguish between argument which aims at an all-or-nothing outcome, which seeks a kind of full-scale conversion to another point of view, and argument which seeks more partial success; or, temporally, between argument which seeks to justify a course of action already performed, and argument which seeks to persuade others to do something. The meanings of arguments are also defined by the types of audience to whom they are directed. Interlocutors may direct arguments at each other, or towards a third party (as in a courtroom)—and seek to convince this third party, rather than each other, of their cause. That is to say, argument may be designed to encourage impartiality, as against adversarial negotiation—and this will often depend to a large extent on the context and institutional structures within which the argument takes place. (In a different context, Sen 2006c draws a distinction between the
model of “fair arbitration” associated with Adam Smith’s idea of the impartial observer, and Rawls’s contractarian idea of “fair negotiation.”) Arguments might be made in order to exchange information or to make it public. And arguments may appeal to self-interest or to universal principles, they may invoke threats of immediate sanction as against long-term consequences, and so on.

Different types of argument will stand in differing relations to democratic politics. Notions of deliberation and public reasoning often appeal to more universal, non-contextual principles. But political argument is characterized by its heavily contextual character: it is often motivated by intensely local interests, and appeals to others on the basis of local interests. In a brilliant essay, the literary scholar and poet A. K. Ramanujan described the “inexorable contextuality” of Indian thought—the fundamental role within it of contextual reasoning and argument (Ramanujan 1989: 54). Paraphrasing Ramanujan’s question, one might ask: “Is there an Indian way of arguing?” And one might have to conclude that discussion in Indian democratic politics today more readily approximates to haggling than to appealing to rational principles. In fact, one might want to say (if trying to identify an Indian “national character”) that the great talent of Indians is not so much argument, but rather compromise: the ability to share the spoils, moral or material. Instead of the “Argumentative Indian”, one might speak of the “Compromising Indian”.

IV. Democracy and its Content: The Sovereignty and Limits of Reasoning

“Important as history is,” Sen has written, “reasoning has to go beyond the past” (2005: 120). Authority, for Sen, lies of course not in tradition or the past, but in reason and the conclusions which reasoning supports. So let us put aside questions of whether historical traditions might sustain democracy in India. Sen asserts the “sovereignty of reasoning”—reasoning unbound by the legacy of past traditions, and which reigns presumably over the possibilities for democracy as well. On this view, it is public reasoning which must scrutinize and assess democracy wherever it is practiced as an institutional form, and which must (wherever it can) assign democracy its content. There is, it would seem, some circularity here. Public reasoning requires the condition of free inquiry, which democracy sustains; and in turn, public reasoning enables democracy to pursue and achieve optimum outcomes. What is the conception of democracy, and its relationship to rationality, that seems to be implied by Sen’s account?

An enduring tension within the idea of democracy is that between the authority ascribed to number, and the claims of reason. This is of course a far from purely theoretical tension. Indeed, it has animated Indian politics over the past 60 years, and has if anything sharpened as India’s democracy has expanded to an unimaginable scale, drawing in hundreds of millions of citizens, the vast majority of them without significant formal education. This tension is also dramatized in the political career of the single individual who perhaps did most to establish a space for public reasoning and democracy in independent India: Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru certainly had some imaginative impact on the young Amartya Sen (a copy of Nehru’s *Discovery of India* was among the small number of books Sen was able to take with him when he first left India for Cambridge). The case of Nehru is interesting from this point of view because he did have a strong sense of what the appropriate content of democratic choice should be (he certainly had his own (p.499) conception of the public good), and yet was also committed to respect the authority that democracy assigns to numbers (Khilnani 2007).

Sen himself has devoted a great deal of thought to the unstable relationship between rationality and democracy. What have been termed the aggregative and deliberative
strands of democratic theory are both present in his thinking about democracy (they relate to his distinction, mentioned above, between democracy as an idea or principle, and as a set of institutions and a form of government). The aggregative perspective sees democracy as a problem in social choice (is there a rational collective ordering of myriad individual choices?), as against one that sees democracy as a form of collective deliberation and discussion for the proposal and selection of justifiable choices. Sen's own career was launched by his work on the central problem in the field of social choice theory, the aggregative dimension of democratic decision-making; and so far his most enduring theoretical contributions have been in this field. In recent years, exponents of social choice and public choice theory have been increasingly concerned with the content of choices—the processes whereby choices and values are formed, and the role of reasoning in this— which has led them to a view of democracy as "government by discussion". Sen himself has extended his analysis of democracy to more detailed consideration of the deliberative aspects.

What links these two dimensions of democracy in Sen's own imagination is his abiding concern with choice itself. It is this aspect of human existence that seems to fascinate him most, both at the individual and social levels. Perhaps uniquely amongst all creatures, humans make reflective choices. How are we enabled to choose? What are the bases of our choices? What impediments stand in the way of making them? Above all, Sen is interested in the rationality of our choices—both in the sense of what sorts of reasons we give for our choices, and to what extent our individual choices can yield collectively rational outcomes.

Yet, one of the oldest and deepest criticisms of democracy is that it is a profoundly unreliable method for arriving at well-judged claims or views about the public good—for identifying choices which really are worthwhile to pursue. Rhetoric, demagoguery, caprice, weakness of will, the grip of self-interest: all are much more likely to prevail in public decision-making processes than the claims of rationality. If deliberation is valued because it delivers good epistemic outcomes, then democratic deliberation is a very indeterminate and unlikely method to achieve this. Democracy, understood as the dispersion of collective judgement across a citizen body (that is, the abolition of any division of labor in the production of
political rationality), has the clear advantage over any other system of minimizing the exclusion of voices. But this offers no assurances about the formation of well-judged choices—and this is the aspect of democracy that has attracted the most skepticism and adverse criticism, even from those who are sympathetic to democracy.

There have been two (linked) strategies of response to such skepticism. One has been to set out elaborate formal procedures of public argumentation and reasoning, designed to excise all irrational and self-interested considerations, and to discount the operations of power, and thereby insure rational content to public deliberation: the method of Rawls, with his veil of ignorance, or Habermas and his ideal speech situation. A second, more classical strategy has been to hope for the diffusion of rationality across society through public instruction. From Condorcet via John Stuart Mill and on to John Dewey, education has been the favored instrument for achieving this effect. Yet democratic theory has not (and cannot) devise any reliable way to ensure that its deliberative practices yield determinate cognitive outcomes.

Consider Sen's example of the Mughal emperor Akbar, and his commitment to rational discussion of different religious viewpoints. What attracts Sen to Akbar is that Akbar's practices chime with Sen's own liberal values. But Akbar of course was hardly a democrat, let alone a liberal. The implied converse of this equally holds: there is nothing about democracy itself which can guarantee the production of the values of liberal pluralism.

As India's recent political history bears out, electoral democracy can result in governments that have little interest in, or taste for, liberal values. This was the case with the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP)—and contrary to what Sen has suggested (2005: 70–1), it is far from clear that the BJP was defeated in 2004 either because of a nationwide rejection of their values, or as a result of a more enlightened understanding among the populace of the values of pluralism and secularism. The 2004 electoral outcome was in fact a national verdict composed of a series of local electoral results, reflecting particular issues and contests. It is above all the institutional structure of Indian democracy, a complex federal political system, which makes it difficult for monolithic ideologies to dominate for long spells at the national level.
This same system, however, can allow such ideologies to dominate India's regional states—the BJP, in a particularly extreme form, has dominated the politics of the state of Gujarat for over a decade now. The BJP is perfectly likely to be elected nationally again at some point. There are no democratic safeguards against that possibility; nor is there anything in the Indian past that might help—for example, traditions of pluralism or heterodoxy (not least because, as Sen himself recognizes, there are plenty of counter-traditions that can also be invoked). The phenomenon of the BJP, and its electoral successes, do pose questions for Sen's conception of democracy. He has sought to explain the exclusivist politics of a party like the BJP as essentially an intellectual error—the result of “obscurantism”, propaganda and lack of education. Yet, some of the strongest and most extensive support for the BJP comes from quite highly educated social groups, in India and abroad. The political appeal of parties like the BJP and of the broader movement associated with it, the Sangh Parivar, and the complex psychological chains of identification which link its supporters to the party and its leaders, cannot necessarily be dissolved by the focused beams of rationality.

Amartya Sen has of course reflected deeply and with profound insight on the persistence of intolerance and the violence often associated with it: from his direct, bewildering encounter as an 11-year-old boy with the murderousness of religious identities during India's partition, to his most recent work on the perils of “solitarist” understandings of identity (Sen 2006), he has championed a more supple conception both of the individual self as a choosing agent, and of our cultural and civilizational affiliations. His instrument has been reason, a faith in public deliberation and in reasoning; and when the full flare of his own mind is on display, problems do seem to burn away. Sen has always sought to increase the space for reasoned discussion and debate, resisting both theoretical absolutisms and “impossibility” theorems, as well as political absolutisms and civilizational imperialisms.

The special potency of democracy, though, lies not in its virtues as a cognitive method for producing public reason, but in its unmatched capacity to delegitimate existing structures of power: its ability to deauthorize regimes, to throw governments out. The relationship between democracy and public deliberation is a tenuous one. It rests largely on the classical idea of isegoria: not merely the right of all to enter
into political deliberation, but the actual effective opportunity to do so. Yet in modern democracies, there is not in fact any such equalization of power. Modern democracies do recognize the normative entitlement of all to participate, and the cognitive efficiency of bringing into consideration a greater range of voices (and so reducing the danger of excluding relevant concerns) in deciding about a particular issue. This normative claim lends legitimacy to democracy; but in practice, no democracy does (or can) achieve anything of the kind, given the political division of labor that exists. Modern democracy, as John Dunn has insisted, “does not envisage the structuring of public deliberation as a causal field, but instead dissolves it into an aspect of political authorization” (Dunn 2007). It therefore cannot be relied on to produce any particular determinate positive outcomes.

Democracy displaces the sovereignty of reasoning, and installs politics in its place—which necessarily implies a complex moral psychology, in which, apart from reason, there are many other elements that struggle for dominance. Democracy can be seen as a recognition of the limits of reasoning—and in that sense a more appropriate conception of the space and limits within which humans have to live their lives. The achievement of a democracy, the test of its durability, does not ultimately lie in its ability to deal with the rational claims and arguments that are produced within it. It lies in its ability to deal with, to absorb, the claims of the irrational, the self-interested—those who for many complex reasons (fear, despair, cruelty) refuse the injunctions of public reasoning.

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