

Book Review: The Country of First Boys by Amartya Sen

*In **The Country of First Boys**, Amartya Sen offers a collection of thirteen essays that could be read as a 'best of' set of his reflections on Indian society, economics, culture, policy and intellectual thought. Writing on Sen's defence of the importance of reasoned argument and plurality, Rishita Nandagiri praises this clarion call against injustice for its accessibility, dry wit and engaging conversational style.*

If you are interested in this review, you may also like to listen to [a podcast](#) of Professor Amartya Sen in conversation with Professor Lord Nicholas Stern at LSE, held on 6 November 2015.

The Country of First Boys. Amartya Sen. The Little Magazine and Oxford University Press. 2015.

When [Dr Mukulika Banerjee](#), Director of the LSE South Asia Centre, welcomed [Professor Amartya Sen at the recent 'In Conversation...'](#) public event, she likened him to a rock star in need of no introduction. His latest book, *The Country of First Boys*, is a collection covering – in a sense – a 'best of' of his essays on Indian society, economics, culture, policy and intellectual thought.

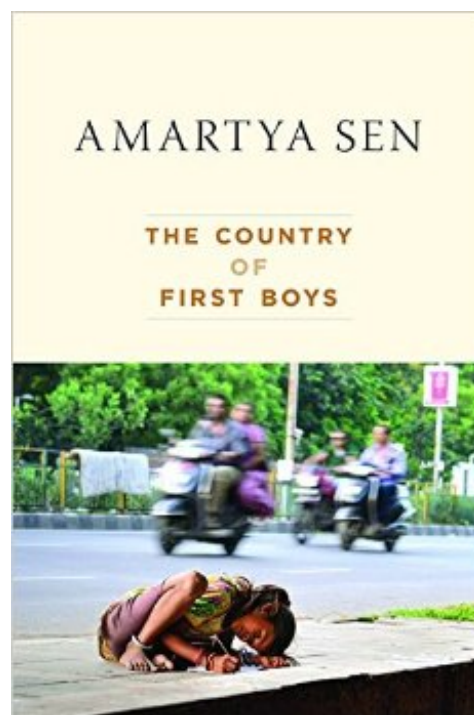
The Country of First Boys contains thirteen essays in chronological order, mainly published in *The Little Magazine* over the last fifteen years. As India and the world grapple with increasing intolerance and violence, the essays presciently tackle concepts of plurality and identity, justice and inequity. An excellent primer on, or introduction to, Sen's ideas, the essays push for a more nuanced, reasoned approach to policy, economics and development (and where notions of justice sit within these conversations).

The essays are immensely accessible, sparkling with a dry sense of humour and fostering a sense of engaging in conversation. Sen relies on his deep love and vast knowledge of history, literature, language and poetry to challenge a dominant set of ideas (such as in 'India Through Its Calendars'), and to stitch together a rich tapestry of our world (in 'The Play's The Thing' and 'What Difference Can Tagore Make').

On *Niti* and *Nyaya*

It is both apt and telling that the book is dedicated to 'schoolteachers and health workers', given the weight Sen accords to educational and health reform in India in these essays and in his wider work. Sen attacks the smug complacency and 'weakness of will' around India's abysmal food and education records, incensed by the continued neglect of India's children and most vulnerable populations (see 'Hunger: Old Torments and New Blunders' and 'Sunlight and Other Fears: The Importance of School Education'). In the titular 'The Country of First Boys', Sen's biting sarcasm and deep disappointment with the inequities embedded in the Indian education system are on full display. Sen baldly states that 'the most foundational issue is, of course, one of injustice'. By holding the lack of educational opportunities as 'basic unfreedom', he highlights the compounding nature of deprivation and its impact not just on people's lives, but also on the concepts of democracy and development themselves.

This crusade against inequity and injustice is what should, as Sen points out, keep us awake at night. He posits larger questions on the nature of justice, and how exactly we navigate this concept in the vastly inequitable world in which we live. By drawing on the concepts of *niti* and *nyaya* from classical Sanskrit, Sen delineates between



organisational or behavioural correctness (*'niti'*) and realised justice (*'nyaya'*). He positions *nyaya* as 'not just a matter of judging institution and rules, but of judging societies themselves'. In his recommendations and suggestions for policy reforms, seemingly it is this understanding of *nyaya* that drives Sen.

The Smallness Thrust Upon Us



Image Credit: LSE

In cautioning against the dangers of a single identity, Sen asserts that '... the propagation of a singular identity, based – respectively – on nationality, or religion, or race, or caste, has been responsible for a great deal of violence in different parts of the world, including massive bloodshed'. Having expanded upon this idea at length in his excellent book *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny* (2007), Sen decries attempts at imposing one 'pre-eminent identity' over others, particularly the 'privileging of nationality', and calls for us to resist 'the smallness thrust upon us'.

Given the current global discussions on terrorism, refugees, the rise of Islamophobia and, in India, the grave concerns around rising intolerance and violence against minority groups, Sen's contention that 'identity choice has a strong bearing on global justice' feels especially relevant. His championing of plurality as an indelible aspect of democracy is essential for today's fraught times.

On Integrity

While the majority of the essays remain preoccupied with addressing inequities, as well as the plurality of identities, they are built upon a staunch belief in rationality and love of debate and reasoned argument. The last (and latest) essay in the collection, 'On Nalanda University', is remarkably forthright for its firm defence of academic freedoms and independence. Coming at a time when [Indian intellectuals across the political and academic spectrum](#) have raised grave concerns over governmental interference in academic, scientific and cultural institutions, the essay outlines how crucial academic freedoms are to a functional democracy, and how urgently their integrity must be guarded and protected.

The timing of this book is important. As India grapples with a right-wing government whose focus remains singularly on economic development, there is a vital need for nuanced reasoning to challenge not just the imposition of singular

identities and ideology, but also the suppression of dissent. Sen's voice is a clarion call for reasoned arguments and for an upholding not just of India's proud history of plurality, but for a celebration of it. Sen has always maintained that a plurality of viewpoints is essential to a functional democracy, but that this is predicated on a). an environment conducive to debate; and b). employing rational arguments to present these multiple viewpoints.

It is remarkable that the majority of these essays were written fifteen years ago as they remain as hugely appropriate and significant for the state of the world today, showcasing not just the enduring nature of Sen's thought, but also containing clear commentary on our current realities and challenges. While the editors (rightly) eschewed updating these essays, the text could have done with some stringent editing to avoid repetition and to ensure a more cohesive narrative.

By drawing on ancient texts and reflecting on the past to explain our present in *The Country of First Boys*, Sen unpicks – with a seemingly unshakeable faith in humanity and rationality – harmful rhetoric, injustice and 'the weakness of will'. Gopalkrishna Gandhi, in the foreword, describes one of the essays as a 'sound fist raised by a secular hand', which would be an entirely appropriate way to describe this set of essays – and what Amartya Sen argues for through them.

Rishita Nandagiri is an MPhil/PhD Candidate at LSE's Department of Social Policy. Her research is on [factors affecting women's abortion decision-making in India](#). When she isn't reading for her PhD, she's usually tweeting about nothing in particular on [@rishie_](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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